

Growth Out of Conflict:

Opening WELS Missions after the Synodical Conference Dissolved

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It was 1962. The outlook for Confessional Lutheranism in America looked bleak. One could say that the Synodical Conference was in its death throes. Doctrinal disputes over fellowship, ministry, and other teachings threatened the very foundation of this confessional Lutheran confederation. Splinter groups had already gone their own way. The Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod were on general speaking terms, but to those who knew all the details, a split seemed inevitable. In 1961, the Wisconsin Synod voted in convention to leave the Synodical Conference for doctrinal reasons and broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The small Wisconsin Synod was now on its own, without the resources of the much larger Missouri Synod. But in spite of all this, the WELS was on the cusp of an explosion of growth as had never been seen before in this small synod's history. Pastor Walter Beckmann describes the situation:

The 1962 WELS Statistical Report shows that our synod had 846 congregations in 18 states and one church in Sault Ste. Marie, Canada. These churches were divided into 9 districts. We had just recently broken fellowship with the LCMS and were beginning to realize the responsibility of mission outreach which we were facing. In our enthusiasm we developed a mission battle cry, 'every State by '78.' Actually by 1978 we were, with God's blessing, serving congregations in 46 states. It took us 5 more years to enter West Virginia, Vermont, Maine, and Mississippi.¹

How did such a small church body achieve such statistical growth? Obviously, this is a story of God's grace at work in the hearts of people. But what events did God use to spread the good news of the gospel in these tumultuous years? Surprisingly, God used the Synodical Conference break up to open the door for WELS to plant dozens of new churches around the country. In the process, God worked incalculable blessings in the hearts of the pastors and laypeople who were on the front lines of the conflict. Covering the story and origins of all these mission churches goes far beyond the scope this paper, but two aspects of this mission explosion fit well together. The roots of key congregations in the

¹ Beckmann, W. F., *The First Decade of What Eventually Became "The North Atlantic District of the WELS" 1963-1972* (unpublished essay, 2003) p. 1

South Central and North Atlantic districts² will serve as a foundation for discussing the advantages these missions enjoyed as a result of their unique beginnings. Each of these congregations and their leaders interviewed for this paper would in themselves provide a fascinating study. It is my hope that this paper will inspire others to further study of these fascinating Christian people who played such an important role in this portion of our history.

The story begins in Texas. The Missouri Synod had maintained a strong presence in Texas for years. German enclaves in well populated areas like north Houston created a strong German-Lutheran heritage in parts of Texas. But when the doctrine of the Missouri Synod started to stray from the Bible, many of these staunch confessional Lutherans were rightly distressed. Sadly, the Missouri Synod was the only confessional Lutheran church body with a presence in Texas, so when it started to stray from the Bible, confessional Lutherans were left with no other option than to strike out on their own. But God had other plans. It all started in Dallas, where God worked through a series of seemingly coincidental events to bring several confessional Lutheran families together. The members of Calvary Lutheran church have posted the history of their congregation, which describes this series of events:

In August 1962, Ruth Hanson, of Oak Cliff, persuaded by her sister, Mrs. Joseph Lakas, wrote to President Oscar Naumann, of the Wisconsin Synod. The Lakas family and Miss Hanson were hoping that the WELS would see fit to begin a church in the Dallas area. At about this same time, the Ted Burgdorf and the Carl Doepel families were becoming increasingly aware of false doctrine that was spreading throughout their Northeast Dallas Lutheran church. Mr. Doepel had written multiple letters to the leadership of their Synod, but their replies did nothing to allay his concerns. The two families were looking for alternatives. They could hardly anticipate how God would bring the alternative to their doorstep.

A postman mistakenly delivered a bundle of Northwestern Lutheran magazines (the WELS news periodical) to the Ted Burgdorf family. The Burgdorfs had been receiving one copy of this journal as a gift subscription. Upon receiving their unexpected package, Mrs. Burgdorf contacted the other subscribers. These historic conversations led to a meeting, on November 5, with Pastor Walter Diehl and Pastor Immanuel Frey of the

² Both the South Central and North Atlantic regions were recognized as districts in 1983. Their founding congregations were established in 1964 and 1965 respectively. And most significantly, both of these districts saw extensive statistical growth as congregation after congregation was founded around core groups of former LCMS members.

Arizona/California District Mission Board of the WELS. That evening, the two ministers met with the original nucleus of Calvary: the Ted Burgdorfs, the Carl Doepels, the Joseph Lakases, the Ray Swensons, Ruth Hanson, and Louise Streckfuss. Less than a week later, on November 11, 1962, the General Board for Home Missions of the WELS granted permission to proceed with a mission in Dallas.³

Things progressed quickly for this small group of Lutherans. By 1964, Calvary had called Pastor Robert Neumann and held its first worship service at Crane Funeral Home Chapel. By 1968, Calvary had its own building and had attained “self-supporting” status as a congregation.⁴

The events at Calvary were not isolated happenings. In 1964, St. Paul’s (LCMS) in Edna, Texas was home to confessional Lutherans who didn’t like the direction their synod was taking either. In a phone interview, Eleanor Meador explained that members of St. Paul’s knew that false doctrine was being taught at their seminaries, and many people were concerned about it. For almost a year, these faithful Lutherans wrote letters to the seminary and held meetings to decide if their church would remain with the Missouri Synod. When it was apparent that the Missouri Synod was not planning on changing and that St. Paul’s had no intention of leaving the Missouri Synod either, Eleanor Meador and about half of St. Paul’s membership left the church. Suddenly, a group of almost 100 confessional Lutherans contacted WELS and asked to start a WELS mission in Edna. Services were held at a country home, and WELS pastors drove all the way down to Edna from Dallas for Sunday services and stayed Monday for visitation. Eleanor says, “The WELS had taken really good care of us.” In June, Pastor Vilas Glaeske was assigned to serve this young congregation called Redeemer in Edna, Texas.⁵

³ Calvary Lutheran Church. *A History of Calvary Lutheran Church and School Wisconsin Synod 1964-2004*, <http://www.calvarydallas.org/home/140001924/140005682/files/Growing%20in%20Christ%20-%20Calvary%201964-2004.pdf> (accessed November 29th 2010) p. 1-2

⁴ Ibid p. 3-4

⁵ Noted in telephone interview conducted with Eleanor Meador on November 29th, 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Meador 2010.”

1964 also saw tensions at the boiling point among confessional Lutherans in Houston. Earl Hildebrandt was a member at Trinity (LCMS) in the Klein suburb of Houston, Texas. A teacher in the Lutheran Elementary school and personal friend of the Hildebrandt family, Jack Carpenter, informed Earl and his wife Dorothy of the doctrinal problems that had been surfacing in the Missouri Synod schools. At the time, Earl and Dorothy had a daughter in eighth grade who was about to be confirmed and two sons on the grade school, so this revelation was even more troubling than it would have been anyway as Earl and Dorothy considered the spiritual future of their children. Earl remembers asking for a meeting with the Board of Elders to discuss these doctrinal problems. He recalls this conversation with an elder in front of the pastor after a mid-week Lenten service:

Elder: "Earl. I heard you wanted to meet with the board of Elders."

Earl: "Yes, that's right."

Elder: "Well, if you've got a personal problem, we'd be glad to meet with you. But if all you want to do is argue religion, we don't have time for you."⁶

Obviously, the leadership of Trinity was not interested in discussion about the doctrinal problems at the seminary.

But Earl is not the type of person to give up that easily. If the leadership wasn't interested in discussing doctrinal problems, maybe other laymen in the congregation would be. Sometime later, Trinity had a voters' meeting one Sunday afternoon. After all the regular business had been dispensed with, the floor was open for other items needing discussion. Earl raised his hand, was recognized, and was given the floor. When he had spoken his piece, a church leader made the motion that the Earl Hildebrandt family be released from membership and the matter not be discussed any further. The motion passed by about two-thirds. In the end, Earl and Dorothy stayed at Trinity until their daughter Barbara was confirmed and graduated from grade school, but their plans to leave were already in place.

⁶ Noted in telephone interview conducted with Earl and Dorothy Hildebrandt on December 1, 2010. Hereafter, cited as "Hildebrandt 2010."

They made contact with WELS Missionary Vilas Glaeske, who was working with the Lutherans in Edna, Texas at this time. After Barbara graduated, the Hildebrandt family gathered with their friend Jack Carpenter (teacher from Trinity) and other disgruntled LCMS members for worship in a Knights of Columbus lodge in South Bellaire on the southwest side of Houston. This location was some thirty miles from the Hildebrandt home. Pastor Glaeske served as the leader for this fledgling group. After three years, Christ the Lord congregation was established in Aleif, a southwestern suburb of Houston. As soon as Christ the Lord finished building their church and dedicated it, Earl and Dorothy joined forces with some other former LCMS members from the north side of Houston to start the congregation known today as Abiding Word on the north side of Houston, several miles from their former congregation, Trinity (LCMS).⁷

The city of Houston was virtually surrounded by similar situations to these. Christ the Lord had started on the southwest, and Abiding Word was founded to the north, and at the same time, there were similar discussions going on at Hope Lutheran Church (LCMS) on the south side of Houston. LaVerne Baylock described false doctrine not just at the seminary and schools, but in actual practice at Hope. Hope had “veered off” on things like women’s role in the church and closed communion. LaVerne and others from Hope Lutheran didn’t even hear about the problems at the schools until they joined WELS, but were distressed in their own right about what they saw going on at Hope. LaVerne and her husband left Hope in 1969 and joined the Hildebrandts and others at Christ the Lord under the leadership of Pastor Glaeske. It seemed as though new mission churches for WELS were appearing out

⁷ Hildebrandt 2010

of nowhere left and right.⁸ In September of 1970, Lord of Life Lutheran church officially organized in the Friendswood suburb of south Houston.

More than a dozen other WELS congregations appeared in Texas and the surrounding states over the next few years, and the majority of them had their roots in the WELS/LCMS split.⁹ But such exciting church-planting opportunities were not limited to the south. The East Coast, like Texas, had a strong LCMS presence but no WELS churches. This was not due to a WELS lack of mission zeal, but was part of an agreement within the Synodical Conference to avoid wasting resources by founding “competing” churches in the same mission field.¹⁰ But when the Synodical Conference dissolved, WELS saw a mission field that was remarkably similar to the ripe harvest fields in Texas, complete with confessional Lutherans who had left the Missouri Synod for doctrinal reasons and needed to be served.

In 1963, a group of confessional Lutherans in Virginia asked WELS to consider founding a mission congregation near Washington DC. This group was made up of an interesting combination of LCMS natives and former WELS members who had moved out east. Before the break-up of the Synodical Conference, WELS pastors had encouraged their members who moved out east to attend the closest LCMS congregation. But after the Synodical Conference dissolved, this was no longer an option. The faithful Missourians and the WELS-turned-LCMS members didn’t want to tolerate the false doctrine anymore than their mother synod did, so requests for WELS missions on the East Coast poured in. Pastor Walter Beckmann was installed as pastor at Grace Lutheran church in Falls Church, Virginia in

⁸ Lord of Life had to wait in line behind Christ the Lord, Abiding Word, and Christ Our Savior in Angleton, Texas to get synodical permission to organize. Fortunately, the Board for Home Missions realized need and moved quickly to give these young mission cores the men and money they needed.

⁹ Gaertner, Joel. *The Cry from the Mid-South: The Beginnings and History of the South Central District*. Unpublished essay, 1990)

¹⁰ Naumann, Andrew. *Rediscovering the New World: The Years Preceding the Formation of the North Atlantic District*. Unpublished essay, 2007, p. 1)

September of 1963. He described the core group as “a nucleus of about five families (of former WELS members and life-long LCMS members) from the LCMS church in Arlington, VA.”¹¹

Similar events happened up and down the East Coast. Ed Boehling was one of the founding members of Our Savior’s in East Brunswick, New Jersey, a daughter congregation of Grace in Falls Church, VA. Ed relates his reasons for leaving Christ Memorial Lutheran Church (LCMS) with his family to join Grace: “I was in the Walther league, the LCMS youth group. The pastor would drive a bunch of us. He talked about the flood and said it was a myth. I told my dad...he was unhappy with the answer he got from the pastor. We stayed unhappy for a year. Our Savior’s started [organizational meetings] in 1964. We started in 1965.” As happened in so many cases, the path Ed’s family followed to the WELS mission clearly shows God’s hand at work. Ed describes how he and his father found out about the Our Savior’s mission: “I looked in the paper and there was a 1x2 inch ad in the paper for Our Savior’s Lutheran Church at Maple School in East Brunswick. I said, “What is Wisconsin Synod?” He [dad] said, “Your grandfather¹² would approve of them.” We went, and we heard what we wanted to hear. No stories, but just God’s Word... they didn’t advertise every week, so it was God’s hand at work that we saw the ad at all.”¹³

In general, mission development on the East Coast followed a pattern remarkably similar to what was going on in Texas at the same time. Pastor Karl Gurgel started a WELS mission congregation in Connecticut and describes the mission opportunities that came about as a result of the WELS/LCMS split: “God well might have found other ways. However, [the WELS/LCSM split] was one catalyst God used to spread His Truth on the east coast. So often the confessional LCMS members who came to us

¹¹ Noted in a written survey with Pastor Walter Beckmann conducted in October 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Beckmann 2010”

¹² Ed’s grandfather was a confessional Lutheran pastor in the Missouri Synod before it went astray.

¹³ Noted in a telephone interview with Ed Boehling on December 14, 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Boehling 2010.”

had contacts in other parts of New England which sometimes lead to another nucleus being formed.”¹⁴

Over the next ten years, more than twenty new congregations were added to the WELS numbers on the East Coast, including two entire congregations that left the Missouri Synod with their pastors to join the WELS.¹⁵

Obviously the number of disgruntled LCMS members scattered around the country provided a perfect platform for the WELS to start new mission congregations. But these former LCMS members brought a lot more to the table than just their numbers. Pastor Bill Gabb describes the former LCMS people he had the privilege of serving with: “New WELS missions received often the cream-of-crop from the LCMS...the people who had been regular in church and bible class attendance, and were generous givers. They knew the bible well.”¹⁶ Pastor Glaeske adds,

These people were the “All Stars” of the congregations from which they came. They knew the Truth and were determined to follow it, which required them to find a confessional church. In many instances, they were the people who lead others to the organization of the mission congregation. They were also well trained in Christian stewardship.¹⁷

This stewardship training was as evident in the founding members of Abiding Word as anywhere. Earl and Dorothy Hildebrandt recount a number of wonderful service opportunities they had in the early years. Before Abiding Word was founded, Earl and Dorothy and their family attended the Christ the Lord mission. At that time, Earl was running a dairy farm. He had about two hundred acres of pasture. Before the Aleif dedication, Earl and his two sons rented a sod cutting tool for their tractor and shaved an entire truck-load of sod off the pasture so Christ the Lord would have a grassy lawn for the

¹⁴ Noted in a written survey with Pastor Karl Gurgel in October 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Gurgel 2010.”

¹⁵ North Atlantic District. *North Atlantic District: History of Congregations*. Unpublished report, 2000. p. 4

¹⁶ Noted in a written survey with Pastor Bill Gabb in October 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Gabb 2010.”

¹⁷ Noted in a written survey with Pastor Vilas Glaeske in October 2010. Hereafter, cited as “Glaeske 2010.”

dedication.¹⁸ Perhaps the most amazing aspect of this story is that the Hildebrandt family was not even planning on making Christ the Lord their permanent church home. They just saw a need, and they addressed it. As soon as Christ the Lord was off to a good start, the Hildebrandt family helped start Abiding Word on the north side. Earl says, "I haven't been back. No sooner than they had the dedication, we started out in North Houston."¹⁹ Yet he didn't mind in the least putting in back-breaking labor to ensure that Christ the Lord would have a beautiful campus for her dedication.

This hands-on service continued at the Abiding Word mission. Once Abiding Word moved out of Bammel Elementary school into a synod "mobile sanctuary,"²⁰ Abiding Word's members pooled their resources to build a parsonage for their new pastor, Bill Gabb. Abiding Word member Vic Bailey, Sr. and his crew framed the house. Earl Hildebrandt and his boys, the Baumgartner family, and Pastor Gabb roofed it. Years later, a permanent sanctuary and day school were also built, mostly with hands-on service from Abiding Word members. Dorothy Hildebrandt recounts those early days: "It was hard, but it was very very rewarding. It was hard on our kids too. They worked really hard. They taught Sunday School. We never skipped a day in 3-4 years." When asked about the biggest challenge early on, Earl showed his hard working attitude: "I'll be quite frank with you. I can't put my finger on it. It might sound unusual, but I never wearied or tired of it. It knew it was my baby, and if anything had to be done I had to do the biggest share of it. I cannot say that I wearied of doing it."²¹

¹⁸ Hildebrandt 2010

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The Synod experimented with mobile sanctuaries to help missions get their start. Basically, it was two mobile homes bolted together. There was a kitchenette and bathrooms in the back. There was an open space for worship, education, and fellowship, and a little organ. The idea was that once a mission could build its own facility, the mobile sanctuary could be towed to another church in need. The synod only built 5-6 of these mobile churches, because they had problems with leaking, among other things. (Hildebrandt 2010)

²¹ Hildebrandt 2010

In addition to high energy and excellent stewardship, these former LCMS Lutherans brought lots of experience to these small mission congregations. Dorothy Hoeting left Prince of Peace (LCMS) and joined Grace Lutheran in Falls Church, Virginia five years after Grace was found. She described the hard-working attitude these mission congregations embraced: "Everyone has to work extra hard when the church is small. As soon as it gets larger, it spreads out. You have your core group that does most of your work."²² LaVerne Baylock relates her experiences in helping found Lord of Life in Friendswood, Texas in 1970. She served alongside former LCMS Lutherans from a number of different LCMS congregations: "We didn't have to stop and teach them what synod was all about. The others were all active. We had a SS teacher and two organists from the start. We seemed to work really well together. When something needed to be done, someone was always willing to help. Lots of hands on participation."²³ Not only did these churches have sizable numbers to start with, but their numbers were made up mostly of experienced church leaders. A nucleus containing teachers, musicians, and willing servants, all completely dedicated to the truth of God's Word. What more could a church-planting pastor possibly desire?

Most significantly of all, the confessional Lutherans who had the gumption to leave an established church and strike out on their own shared powerful convictions about the truth of God's Word. They loved God's Word, and they were eager and excited to share it with their neighbors. Pastor Beckmann describes his members in Virginia: "The former LCMS members realized that sometimes you have to stand up and contend for the truth. They also loved the East Coast and wanted to see WELS

²² Noted in a telephone interview conducted with Dorothy Hoeting on December 15, 2010. Hereafter, cited as "Hoeting 2010."

²³ Noted in a telephone interview conducted with LaVerne Baylock on December 2, 2010. Hereafter, cited as "Baylock 2010."

expansion into it. Many also had a better feel on the various geographic areas than our officials in Milwaukee.”²⁴ Pastor Gabb describes the faith of his members in north Houston:

They had a high regard for the authority and infallibility of scripture, and the need for the church to remain faithful to the word without compromise. Most if not all of the core members had to endure personal courage [sic] in trying to get their pastors to address unscriptural issues that were surfacing as [sic] the St. Louis seminary and in many regions of the LCMS, but their pastor would not do so. As the “concerned” members tried to share their concerns with members of their congregations, they were not believed, labeled as fanatics, unloving, unchristian, slanderous, trouble-makers, legalistic, and the like. It took a lot of courage to stand up against this opposition, which include [sic] opposition from family members. Families were divided, family members were offended and embarrassed by their “overly-concerned” kin.²⁵

Perhaps the biggest blessing these confessional Lutherans brought to the new mission churches was their God-given strength of faith and trust in the Word. They had seen false doctrine; they personally experienced how damaging it could do to the church, and they were firmly committed to avoiding those mistakes in their new churches.

But even in the most ideal of settings, starting a new congregation is not a an easy task. Even the biggest blessing the former LCMS members brought – their conviction to their beliefs – sometimes caused some problems. Pastor Gurgel describes how this problem showed itself in his Connecticut congregation:

Sometimes, because of the struggle for the Truth, they were more in a mode of preserving the Truth than presenting the Truth to others. However, often their love for the Truth would encourage them and others to share the Truth. I well remember one of these strongly confession gentlemen who built his own sign for display at the entrance to the school where we were meeting. One line read, The One True, Orthodox, Confessional Lutheran Church. Now all of those words were true. You might have hoped, however, that people would have come to appreciate how true they were by hearing and studying the Word with us rather than seeing the sentence as they drove by. Yet, in the end even this man, appreciated there might be other, better ways, of sharing the Truth...Because of the potholed roads along which they had been traveling, with Truth so often compromised, they sometimes got lost in peripheral matters like the King James Translation issues. It was so important that we stress Biblical Articles of Faith,

²⁴ Beckmann 2010

²⁵ Gabb 2010

contrasting them with adiaphora. Once this was clear, they journeyed happily along God's Highway of Truth, avoiding the unnecessary and unproductive detours into human opinions.²⁶

Pastor Glaeske adds, "For the most part, these people had been leaders in the congregation from which they came. Sometimes, the personalities had to be managed to keep them all moving in the same direction."²⁷ Pastor Gabb writes about the challenge he saw in different Texas congregations during his years as circuit pastor:

Sometimes, however, [the former LCMS Lutherans] did come with legalistic tendencies that had to be dealt with. There were some "junior theologians" who thought that because they had gone through the struggle of leaving the LCMS for confessional reasons, and had done a lot of reading to inform themselves regarding the doctrine of scripture, fellowship, et al., they knew it all and would try to impose legalistic practices onto the new WELS group. They also did not hesitate "telling" their new and often youthful pastor how to do his job...Dick Frey, the District President of the A/CA district, of which Texas was a member...told me once that the District Presidents of the salt water districts (where new WELS missions were popping up and [sic] with new sem grads as the pastors) were all having to deal with internal problems because too many of these LCMS transplants "thought it to be their divinely appointed responsibility to drive some of our finest young pastors out of the ministry." Usually the problems were personality conflict issues...²⁸

But God blessed these mission congregations in spite of such growing pains. There were some who were prone to being strong willed, but by and large the core members were scripture loving people who wanted nothing more than to hold fast to God's Word and share it with others. Pastor Gabb continues:

Nonetheless, the Lord used this group, whatever its makeup, to establish a WELS mission with the result that even though some of those malcontents ended up leaving the group, it had grown to be large enough to stand on its own and survive to this day. Most of the folks...were wonderful, dedicated Christians who simply wanted to be faithful to scripture and share the gospel with others.²⁹

The advantages of starting a church around such a spiritually mature core are numerous, there are few places where this spiritual strength is more evident than in the concern these confessional

²⁶ Gurgel 2010

²⁷ Glaeske 2010

²⁸ Gabb 2010

²⁹ Ibid.

Lutherans had for Christian Education. In Texas, the new WELS missions aggressively pursued expanding their ministry through Lutheran Elementary schools. Lord of Life in Friendswood, Christ the Lord in Aleif, and Abiding Word on the north side of Houston all started Christian Day Schools within just a few years of their founding. These schools still exist to this day. Pastor Glaeske describes the attitude towards Christ the Lord's school: "At Christ the Lord where I served, the former LC-MS people were 100% for Christian Education. Most of them no longer had children of elementary school age. Never the less, they were committed to beginning a school and we did."³⁰ The Texas churches took a leap of faith and started schools as quickly as they were able, and some times before it seemed they were able, because they were committed to educating their children and reaching out to the lost in their communities. Pastor Gabb illustrates the evangelistic spirit that motivated the members at Abiding Word to start their school:

These folks were also very Christian Education-minded. We started the Lutheran Elementary school at Abiding Word with, I think, 79 communicant members and 20 kiddos in the school. All of the members were willing to provide whatever additional funding necessary, through their offerings, to make the school viable. The Mission Board struggled with whether or not to allow missions to start schools. The thought originally was that a school would be a great mission arm. That proved not to be the case too often, and rather than being a help was a hindrance to growth, financially.³¹

Looking back from the present day, these financial struggles were just growing pains. Today, the Lutheran Elementary schools in Texas are very strong. Abiding Word's school is the largest with nearly 100 students, and the other schools have grown rapidly since those early days, employing multiple called workers and supporting early childhood ministries.

On the East Coast, things developed a little differently because the LCMS tradition was different than it had been in Texas. For whatever reason, the LCMS churches on the East Coast did not have as many Christian Day schools as the Texas LCMS churches did. But even without having been raised in a

³⁰ Glaeske 2010

³¹ Gabb 2010

Lutheran Elementary school culture, the East Coast Lutherans maintained a strong desire for good Christian Education. Pastor Gurgel describes his experience at Messiah Lutheran in Connecticut:

The LCMS churches from which members of Messiah came did not have Lutheran Elementary Schools. However, when Messiah was considering and actually opened a school, they were very supportive of it in every way. Perhaps this was so because they saw it as another opportunity to solidify the Truth for future generations. One elderly, single gentleman, when we were considering a school, deposited his entire social security check every month in the offering plate. That was most encouraging for all of us! They were strong supporters, too, of adult Christian education. I well remember the first adult Bible Study topic they requested, the Formula of Concord. Thankfully, I had my senior notes and could put something together. One man, after completing the Adult Information Class, read the entire Book of Concord before becoming a member.³²

A congregation that desires to grow in its faith and is willing to actively pursue its own education is a strong congregation. But the strength of these mission nuclei was even more visible in the relationship turmoil that so many of these former LCMS Lutherans had to go through after leaving their Missouri Synod congregations. Dorothy Hildebrandt explains her concern for her children:

When we started, it was hard with our relatives and friends. They thought we were mixed up, and we'd regret taking our children out of the big church and isolating them. We were concerned about it, but as you know, it worked out. God really blessed us in that respect, and we're really thankful for it.³³

But the struggles of the Hildebrandt family were not tied only to their relationships with their family and friends at Trinity. Dorothy also recounted the loss of Jack Carpenter, the family friend and teacher at Trinity who had first alerted everyone to the doctrinal issues at Missouri's schools. But one of the teens from the Christ the Lord mission attended an AALC³⁴ college, and Carpenter felt this was tantamount to a break in fellowship, and he pushed the group to join the new CLC³⁵ congregation that has also broken away from Trinity. Pastor Glaeske persuaded the Hildebrandt family that the WELS was on the right

³² Gurgel 2010

³³ Hildebrandt 2010

³⁴ American Association of Lutheran Churches

³⁵ Church of the Lutheran Confession

track and the CLC was legalistic, but Jack Carpenter was on the other side. Dorothy says, “I went back and forth, and finally, I was persuaded that the WELS was the right place for us. We lost our dear friend over it. I found that hard.”³⁶

Eleanor Meador describes similar challenges down in Edna. Her biggest struggle was with family members who remained in the Missouri Synod, but she says, “We had to take a lot of abuse from the people still in the Missouri Synod...God’s going to take care of us. He’s not going to forsake us. That’s God’s promise...I didn’t let that bother me.” She endured lots of persecution because she’d been a strong member at St. Paul’s (LCMS). Things were made even more difficult by the fact that Eleanor was a single mother with five children at that time, because her husband had been killed in World War Two. But in spite of all that, Eleanor says to this day that “It wasn’t hard. We trusted in God. We left with not even a handbook, trusting that God would take care of us.”³⁷ Pastor Glaeske also remembers the tensions in Edna. He wrote:

The LC-MS pastor came to visit me and told me that he was going to visit all my members who had originally been his members. He didn’t ask. He simply said he was going to do it. He only got as far as three homes because our people told him they had a pastor and he had no business calling on them. Besides, they gave him an ear full as to why they had left the LC-MS.³⁸

LaVerne Baylock’s transition was somewhat smoother, perhaps because Hope (LCMS) was publically practicing the false doctrine that was being taught at the Missouri Synod schools. She says that some of her friends at Hope would call and say, “I can’t believe what they’re doing. How does this compare with what WELS does?”³⁹ LaVerne maintained a cordial relationship with her contacts at Hope.

³⁶ Hildebrandt 2010

³⁷ Meador 2010

³⁸ Glaeske 2010

³⁹ Baylock 2010

On the East Coast, similar challenges existed. As was the case in Texas, it really depended on how doctrinally sound the LCMS churches in the area were. Pastor Gurgel remembers differing reactions:

The more conservative LCMS churches seem to appreciate what we were doing though not openly supportive of it. Others were quite defensive, concluding we had invaded their territory. In hind sight, it would have been better if we had spent more time talking with LCMS pastors, assuring them that primarily we were seeking the lost, not the members of their congregations. While we had some experiences with encouraging a confessional approach, we might have had more.⁴⁰

In Falls Church, Virginia, Pastor Beckmann doesn't remember specifically any cases of resentment from the local Missouri Synod congregation. Perhaps the local LCMS pastor's attitude played a large role, since he maintained a cordial relationship with Pastor Beckmann. Pastor Beckmann writes: "He seemed to be understanding of the truth and often called to me for documents and information to re-enforce his scriptural priorities."⁴¹ [Dorothy has similar recollections from when she joined Grace with her family. "We still have friends from there. I can't say they showed any animosity. I suppose most of them wondered why, since they weren't all that strict about their beliefs. We still have good friends who are members there."⁴²]

Ed Boehling experienced no conflict during his move to Our Savior's, primarily because he was a college student at the time and had minimal ties to his home congregation. But Ed doesn't remember his parents facing any serious conflict even in their day to day interactions with members of their former church, Christ Memorial (LCMS). "My mother kept her lady friends and kept in contact with them. I

⁴⁰ Gurgel 2010

⁴¹ Beckmann 2010

⁴² Hoeting 2010

don't recall any problems. My father was very blunt, so he would have had more issues like those. I was in college, so I had a different level of friends at that point."^{43]}

Perhaps more openness about goals and priorities would have helped inter-church relationships both in Texas and on the east coast, but one can only thank God for the strength and conviction he gave to the members of the WELS missions who had to face the hard feelings of family and friends on a daily basis as they went about their lives now as outsiders who had left large established congregations for small, barely starting missions because of their conviction about the truth of God's Word.

None of those interviewed, however showed any trace of regret for leaving their Missouri Synod homes, saying they would do it again without second thoughts if the need arose. In most cases, God blessed the small WELS missions with a unity of spirit that founding members look back on fondly today. Eleanor Meador remembers the Edna, Texas nucleus fondly: "We were real close knit...We were all in one accord. It was wonderful to have people, that many especially (the Edna congregation started with almost 100 people who broke from St. Paul's), that all clung together and stood up for what we believed." She remembers the excitement of holding services for the first time, with a pastor from Dallas who came all the way down to preside and stayed until Monday for visitation. She says, "I have never regretted ever standing up for what we believe and knowing that God was going to take care of us."⁴⁴

LaVerne Baylock remembers fondly the privilege she had when Lord of Life, Friendswood, Texas finally built its permanent worship facility. Lord of Life elected to built "a church and not just a chapel. We built a sanctuary." There were difficulties along the way, but in the end it all fell into place. Lord of Life celebrated its 40th Anniversary this year (2010) and LaVerne had the privilege of serving on the

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Meador 2010

anniversary committee. To this day, she marvels at the blessings God has poured out on her congregation.⁴⁵

Ed Boehling remembers fondly the fellowship Our Savior's, East Brunswick, New Jersey enjoyed:

There was fellowship in that church. When there was a Packer game, there was one family there, the Mckennas, who came from LaCrosse. He was involved in ABC sports. When we went to his house for a Packer game, there were 25-30 people there. Everyone brought something. The last Sunday of the month there would be a fellowship, and you got to know everyone. People liked each other. Other than that fellowship on Sunday there were other things. When my father had his birthday in August, the whole church was invited. People brought stuff. We had a hundred people. A good third to half were family members, and the rest were from church. That knitted and made people bond.⁴⁶

The close bonds of a small congregation made some of the difficulties of very small churches much easier to bear.

Earl and Dorothy Hildebrandt remember joyfully their opportunity they had to help found Abiding Word on the north side of Houston. Dorothy remembers those days as exciting times, in spite of the sadness that came along with losing close friends. Earl and Dorothy recount their memories:

Dorothy: "I'd do it over again. I feel very blessed that God chose us to do this. I think of myself with the disciples, he picked people who were sinful folks."

Earl: "We never questioned it. We just put our hands on and went to work."

Dorothy: "I had a passion for mission work. I was never happy unless I was knocking on doors. I guess I was on fire for Christ. God put that in me. It was hard, but it was very very rewarding...it was such a joy to see new people when they would come...It was our whole life. We spent more time and energy getting this church going than trying to make a living, our own livelihood. God put that in us."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Baylock 2010

⁴⁶ Boehling 2010

⁴⁷ Hildebrandt 2010

At first glance, it may seem as though a confessional Lutheran church body splitting over doctrinal issues could never be a good thing. It is true that plenty of conflict and strife came about because of the WELS/LCMS split. But with closer examination, it becomes clear that the blessings God worked are far greater than the hurt feelings and damaged relationships. The statistical growth of the Wisconsin Synod is a blessing to be sure, but it is impossible to calculate the personal blessings of stronger faith and perseverance that God worked in the pastors and lay people who founded congregations. One can gain a glimpse of how exciting those days must have been from hearing their words and stories. May God continue to work such wonderful blessings out of our struggles and challenges today. To him alone be the glory!

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