

A Decade of Mission Zeal in Minnesota

Church History

Prof. Frederich

April 28, 1978

Neil Varnum

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W

Mequon, Wisconsin

A lot has been written about John Christian Frederick Heyer. And this is to be expected. A man who spent his entire ministry dividing his time between the old far east and the infant, wild frontier of the west, provides an inexhaustible pool of writing material. This paper will restrict itself to his mission efforts in Minnesota, spanning the years 1857 to 1867.

Lutheranism first made its way into Minnesota when the Rev. F.W. Wier organized a Lutheran congregation in St. Paul in 1855. His first services were conducted in German on July 27. This was the old Trinity congregation located on Wabasha Street. Shortly after this, Pastor Wier accepted a call elsewhere. This left the infant congregation without a pastor.

In 1856, the Rev. Dr. William Passavant visited the St. Paul area. Passavant, who was from Pennsylvania and the editor of "The Missionary," persuaded the East Pennsylvania Synod on Oct. 5, 1857, to appropriate \$500 for the support of an English Lutheran mission in St. Paul. Passavant also persuaded the Synod that Heyer was the man for the job. Two weeks later, Heyer, who had just returned from India, was on his way.

Heyer was 64 years old when he arrived in St. Paul on Nov. 16, 1857. He was eager to begin his work and immediately set out to establish some contacts. The old Trinity congregation had practically disappeared without a trace. The members of this young congregation had "all but dispersed under the blows of the financial panic of 1857."<sup>1</sup>

But Heyer was not discouraged. He immediately set out to gather together the English-speaking Lutherans in St. Paul. He had been sent to this area to organize a Lutheran congregation among the English-

---

<sup>1</sup>Continuing in His Word. p. 100.

speaking settlers. Again, he ran into problems. He could find practically no English-speaking Lutherans in St. Paul. With this avenue blocked, Heyer concentrated on the German-speaking Lutherans. He began holding German services. His first services were attended by from 30 to 50 people. But by Christmas Day, 1857, there were 100 people in attendance. "It was a blessed Christmas in Heyer's estimation, and soon thereafter the congregation was incorporated as Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church."<sup>2</sup> By Feb. of 1858, the congregation had purchased a lot at Tenth and Wabasha for \$1,500. The lot was in an excellent location near the new state Capitol.

During this relatively short period of time, the congregation grew rapidly. In March of 1858, while the congregation was still holding services in the courthouse, there were from 50 to 60 people in attendance for the morning English service and from 100 to 200 for the afternoon German service.

Because of this encouraging growth, Heyer decided to go back East to raise money for a church building. He was only half as successful as he had hoped to be. He managed to collect enough money to build a basement. But at last the congregation had a place of its own to worship in. The first services were held in the newly constructed basement on Oct. 17, 1858. Within two months, the communicant membership reached 100.

Heyer was also concerned about educating the children. He began a parochial school and enrolled fifty some children. Since the communicant membership of his congregation was made up of both English and German-speaking people, he found it necessary also to teach both the

---

<sup>2</sup>E. Theodore Bachmann. They Called Him Father. p. 245.

English and the German-speaking children in their respective languages.

As more Lutheran settlers poured into Minnesota, the more requests Heyer received to bring them a message from God's Word. Heyer recognized the needs that these people had and always made an effort to serve them. One such group of Lutheran settlers was in Scott County, sixty miles from St. Paul. When these people asked Heyer to come and visit them in March of 1859, he went. The journey was a difficult one, averaging under two miles per hour at times. But it was worth the effort. Heyer was able to commune 50 people and baptize 9 children.

The following year, from May to November of 1860, found Heyer once again back in the East raising more money for Trinity congregation. The goal was to collect enough money to finish the rest of the church building. He managed to collect the sum of \$1,200. To this sum, Heyer added \$1,000 of his own money.

He explained to the members that \$500 was money saved because he never used tobacco. He figured he could have smoked for 50 years, starting at an age when others began to use tobacco. At \$10 a year for tobacco, this amounted to \$500. The other \$500 was saved because he had never used liquor, thus saving another \$500.<sup>3</sup>

The main reason for the rapid growth at Trinity was immigrants. But by 1860 the number of immigrants arriving in St. Paul took a drastic drop. As a result, Trinity in St. Paul showed no decided increase. But Heyer had worked hard. From Nov. 1859 through Nov. 1861, he had baptized 112 and had confirmed 23. And now he felt that it was time to move on.

But before leaving, Heyer saw to it that Trinity would not be left without a shepherd. He recommended George Fachtmann to the congregation as his successor. Fachtmann was the pastor of the Lutheran church

---

<sup>3</sup>Adolph Ackermann. "Pioneer Pastor and Lutheran Missionary: J.C.F. Heyer." Concordia Historical Institute. p.37.

at LaCrosse, Wisconsin. Heyer resigned his call in May, 1862, explaining to the people that now "with God's help I have attained the objective for my coming to St. Paul, namely, to gather a congregation and to build a church."<sup>4</sup> On July 13, 1862, George Fachtmann was installed as the new pastor at Trinity. Heyer was on hand to preach the sermon.

Heyer had it in the back of his mind that he would now retire. After all, he was 69 years old, and the frontier was not exactly an office job. But this was not to be. Lutheran settlers continued to ask for pastoral care. Heyer felt compelled to do what he could. During the summer of 1862, Heyer made plans to make a missionary tour of the newly settled areas of Minnesota.

Before he departed on this tour, he spent some time in Red Wing. St. John's had just recently been organized and he served the congregation throughout the latter part of the summer. On his last Sunday there, Heyer communed 34 and baptized 3. Again, Heyer saw to it that this flock would be taken care of. He arranged for the Rev. Eric Norelius, who was the Swedish pastor in Red Wing, to watch over the congregation.

With this taken care of, Heyer prepared for his tour.

He stocked his covered mission wagon with supplies, and made friends with the blind horse which was to pull him over the trail. These blind horses were rightly dubbed 'old plugs,' Circuit riders preferred them because they shied less and obeyed their driver's reins better in precarious situations, such as the fording of a stream or the crossing of a shaky bridge. To many a home missionary his blind horse was a perfect illustration of faith.<sup>5</sup>

On Thursday, Sept. 11, 1862, Heyer left on his tour. This tour took him to such places as Cannon Falls, Northfield, Dundas, Brush

---

<sup>4</sup>E. Theodore Bachmann. They Called Him Father. p.251.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.253.

Prairie, East Prairie, Owatonna, Rochester, Marion, Chatfield, Hamilton, and Caledonia. By late October 1862, Heyer returned to Red Wing.

Heyer remained in Red Wing for only two months. During this time he made plans to visit the areas in the northeast, north along the Mississippi River to Stillwater and farther on.

It was the dead of winter. The last day of December dawned late and gray over Red Wing. A sparse, little man of ruddy complexion, hawk-eyed and clear-voiced, wearing a beaver cap, and wound up in muffler, greatcoat, and buffalo robe, bade good-by to his friends who clustered around the wagon to see him off.

Heyer moved slowly from one settlement to another along the west bank of the Mississippi. By the end of Jan. 1863, he reached Stillwater. From there he moved on to Wyoming, Centerville, and Columbus. A typical visit on this tour by Heyer consisted in staying in the home of one of the Lutheran families. Using this as a base, he would spend several days visiting with the Lutheran settlers in the area. Then, on Sunday, he would conduct a service and move on.

After he finished his work in Columbus, Heyer headed back toward Red Wing. He got as far as St. Paul, where he had a short visit in the middle of Feb., and then headed into the area north and west of Minneapolis, into the Crow River area. Then on to Monticello.

Heyer was now on the last leg of his tour, which nearly ended in tragedy.

The old missionary was urging his nag over a frozen lake about ten miles from Hastings. It was near the middle of March, and the ice was beginning to break up. As he neared the opposite shore there was a sickening crash. His horse had broken through the ice! In the contortion the shafts ripped from the wagon and the horse settled on its side. As Heyer jumped out, another crash resounded, as his wagon went through. It settled in about three feet of water. There was no use to halloo for

---

<sup>6</sup>E. Theodore Bachmann. They Called Him Father. p.259

help, but fortunately the water was shallow. So the old missionary jogged back over a mile to the nearest farmhouse. Here he found 'nothing but women and children, and they, of course, were not available.' At the next house he got help. The good man ran on ahead of the Reverend, and then both together extricated the dripping nag. While the man repaired the shafts, Heyer exercised his horse to keep it from freezing. After two hour's delay, he was on his way again, 'Thankful to the good Lord that I had been rescued.'

The Spring of 1863 saw Heyer's mission tours in the Minnesota area come to an end. He was pushing 70 and desired to rest. He returned to Somerset where he built a cottage and there he lived with his daughter and two grandchildren.

But Heyer was to make several short trips to Minnesota during the next several years. In Aug. of 1863, there was a congregational dispute which called for his attention. Then in 1866, New Ulm, which Heyer considered a very fertile mission field, needed his services. He worked there until June 17, 1866, when a new brick church was dedicated.

Heyer made his last trip to Minnesota in 1867 for the Synod convention in mid-June. For the remainder of that summer, he remained in St. Paul where he served Trinity congregation while George Fachtmann went on a home missionary tour of his own. The time finally came for Heyer to bid farewell to Minnesota for the final time.

It was autumn, 1867, and he bade farewell for the last time to this captivating territory. In November, just ten years after his first arrival, he departed. Accompanied by his<sup>8</sup> loyal friend, Fachtmann, the two set out for Fort Wayne, Indiana.

John Christian Frederick Heyer was 74 years old when he left Minnesota for the last time. At an age, when most men are settling into a comfortable retirement, Heyer was zealously going about the work he dearly loved. His work, which may have seemed insignificant at the

---

<sup>7</sup>E. Theodore Bachmann. They Called Him Father. p.265.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p.291.

time, laid a foundation for a solid Lutheran foothold in Minnesota.  
The story of Heyer in Minnesota, truly is an inspiring story for  
any would-be missionary.



## Bibliography

- Ackermann, Adolph. "Pioneer Pastor and Lutheran Missionary: J.C.F. Heyer." Concordia Historical Institute. Vo. XXXIX, April 1966.
- Bachmann, E. Theodore. They Called Him Father. The Muhlenberg Press, 1942.
- Continuing in His Word. Northwestern: Milwaukee, 1951.
- Frederich, Edward C. "The Minnesota District's First Fifty Years." 1968.
- Koehler, John Philipp. The History of the Wisconsin Synod. Sentinel Publishing Co.: St. Cloud, Minn., 1970.