

WELS OUTREACH TO THE POOR: THE FOUNDING AND EARLY HISTORY OF
NORTHSIDE LUTHERAN MINISTRY

by

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OUTLINE

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WELS Outreach to the Poor: The Founding and Early History of
Northside Lutheran Ministry

On a sweltering July day in 1988, two inexperienced evangelists from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary parked their car in one of Milwaukee's worst neighborhoods and began to introduce themselves to the people who lived there. As they worked their way up and down the streets and casually chatted with those on the sidewalks and front porches, they were getting their first taste of mission work in an unfamiliar culture. Their work in these neighborhoods marked the beginning of a new and unique attempt on the part of the Wisconsin Synod to bring the gospel to those trapped in urban poverty. This outreach effort, now known as Northside Lutheran Ministry, was different because of both the people who were being sought and the methods which were employed. (Of course, it was also very similar to other outreach efforts because the people who were being sought were sinners and the methods which were employed served the proclamation of law and gospel.) Here is an attempt to chronicle the first years of this ministry and demonstrate how it added a new chapter to Wisconsin Synod evangelism.

Background

The WELS Mission to the Economically Deprived, as it was originally called, was the brainchild of Pastor Rolfe Westendorf. Pastor Westendorf is pastor of Siloah Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, one of our largest cross-cultural congregations. Like several other inner city congregations, Siloah was successful in integrating with the new residents of the

surrounding neighborhood as that neighborhood shifted from white to black. This was largely due to God's blessings on Siloah's use of its Christian Day School as an outreach arm of the church coupled with an aggressive evangelism program.

But in nearly two decades of work at Siloah, Pastor Westendorf began to recognize that there was a group of people in his neighborhood that seemed beyond reach. While Siloah had integrated, it didn't seem to be able to reach those who were well below the poverty line very effectively. As Pastor Westendorf shared this observation with other inner city pastors and Pastor Roger Sprain, who was doing outreach work among Hispanics, he found that others, too, were finding it difficult to reach the very poor. After close observation of Siloah's attempts to reach the poor in its neighborhood and of one poor family which had joined Siloah in particular, Pastor Westendorf developed a list of reasons that the Wisconsin Synod was not doing a better job of reaching America's underclass and that poor people seemed so hesitant to join Wisconsin Synod churches. In September of 1985 he incorporated his observations into a paper entitled "Ministry to the Poor--A New Frontier," which he presented to the Multi-Cultural Missions Committee of the Board for Home Missions.

"Ministry to the Poor--A New Frontier" outlined five main reasons that our churches had made only minimal efforts to reach the poor. First, there is the obvious fact that the poor have no money. Since our church body generally expects missions to become self-supporting, and since its own budget rarely has any

fat in it, the poor are a less-than-appealing target group for our mission efforts. Secondly, there is the problem of our existing congregations reaching the poor because the poor generally live in distant neighborhoods. Most Wisconsin Synod members are solid members of the middle-class who earn a decent living and live in middle-class neighborhoods. The poor can't afford to live there. Thus the geography of the matter makes it less likely for us to reach poor people. Thirdly, there is a stigma which has been attached to poverty. Many feel that people are poor because they deserve to be poor. They are willing to help those who are poor through no fault of their own, but less willing to help the poor who are responsible for their poverty. In the fourth place, there is general ignorance about the reasons for poverty, and ministry to the poor requires a change of attitudes. Finally, methods for spreading the gospel among middle class people must be changed in order to bring that same gospel to the poor.¹

Pastor Westendorf also proposed the following as reasons that the poor are unlikely to join existing WELS congregations:

To begin with, the poor must feel uncomfortable in a typical WELS worship setting, in spite of earnest efforts to welcome them. They cannot conform to the dress code, the offering expectations, to say nothing of unfamiliar hymns and liturgy. But never mind that. The poor will probably never get to church in the first place, because they don't have bus fare or gasoline. The poor will not complete the adult instruction class, because that moves at a regular schedule which is entirely out of synch with their lives. Keeping appointments is an ability that the prosperous have learned. If the poor had learned it, they would not be poor. Even the canvass offers little help in reaching the poor. By the time you return to the address, someone else will be living there. The poor have moved elsewhere to avoid creditors, or perhaps the police.²

With this as a background, Pastor Westendorf proposed a new mission endeavor specifically designed to reach those in the clutches of poverty. This new mission would have a different set of objectives and a different program than existing missions or congregations. In order to tailor the mission to the needs and culture of the poor, Pastor Westendorf suggested these objectives:

- To contact individually 200 low-income persons per month;
- To conduct daily Bible classes for 20 low-income people;
- To conduct Sunday school weekly for 40 persons of all age groups;
- To conduct adult instruction classes for individuals who show significant interest and dependability;
- To commune those who complete instructions and confess their faith, although it is not expected that a congregation with communicant membership will be formed through this effort;
- To provide personal assistance in procuring food, clothing, housing, and counseling services.³

Meeting these objectives also called for a unique program.

Originally, Pastor Westendorf suggested this nine-point program:

1. Identify 6-block area of low income houses as target area.
2. Locate a 2-room facility in area for group meetings.
3. In January recruit 3 Seminary juniors to serve as evangelists to low-income citizens.
4. Train recruits in May, covering evangelism, the culture of poverty, and catechetics.
5. Canvass area in June for VBS.
6. Conduct 2-week VBS in July, using volunteers from inner-city program, if necessary.
7. Continue to make contacts and conduct classes through middler year.
8. As veterans return to the Seminary as seniors, one of them should replace one of the juniors on the team so that team consists of 1 senior and 3 (sic) juniors.
9. Area to be expanded or additional areas added as opportunities appear.⁴

After several changes were made for practical reasons, this is the program which the Mission to the Economically Deprived

followed in its efforts to evangelize the poor.

Implementation

At the next Multi-Cultural Mission Committee meeting on January 18, 1986, it was resolved that the idea of a mission especially designed to reach the economically deprived be presented to the Board for Home Missions.⁵ Subsequent meetings of the committee in May and November continued to discuss and develop the project. In its February 14, 1987 meeting, the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee was ready to ask Pastor Westendorf to draw up a grant request so that funding could be obtained from an outside source, since there was not room in the budget of the synod at that time to take on such an "experimental" mission effort.⁶ Aid Association for Lutherans was first contacted but turned down the project. Siebert Lutheran Foundation was contacted next with a request that they contribute \$22,140.00 of the proposed budget of \$26,532.00.⁷ Siebert Lutheran Foundation agreed to underwrite \$10,000.00 of the cost of the program.⁸ Since full funding for the project was not able to be obtained, some changes had to be made in the program. At the February 13, 1988, meeting of the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee meeting, the Mission to the Economically Deprived Committee proposed that the program be implemented immediately with the following revisions:

1. two seminary vicars instead of three
2. start June 29 instead of June 1
3. eliminate Sunday school, VBS, and facility from pilot program
4. employ R. Westendorf as project director, 10 hrs./wk. summer; 5 hrs/wk school year.
5. designated area - vicinity of 27th and Lisbon (sic)⁹

Later that same month invitations went out to about a dozen seminary juniors for supper at Pastor Westendorf's home and an informational meeting on an opportunity to do evangelism work in a new mission project in Milwaukee's inner city. Pastor Westendorf's decision concerning whom to choose as new evangelists was made easy--only three attended the meeting, and only two, Brian Ewings and John Vieths, were interested in taking the job.

Training began in May and stretched into the first week of June. Through classroom lectures and a video taped PBS special on the decline of the black family, Pastor Westendorf provided an introduction into American black history, black culture, the culture of poverty, and a guided tour of the target neighborhood and inner city WELS churches past and present. Meetings were held once each week. In order to make sure that Ewings and Vieths were familiar with the neighborhood in which they were working, they also toured it with James Dorsey, a black policeman and member of Garden Homes Lutheran Church, and James Johnson, a black member of Siloah and a member of the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee. Jeff Smith, at that time the senior vicar at Siloah, provided the evangelism training. After some initial classroom work, Ewings and Vieths each accompanied Jeff on several evangelism visits to the homes of prospects in the neighborhoods near Siloah. By the end of the 1988 Independence Day holiday the two seminarians were ready to plunge into the new world of outreach to the poor.

During the first few days on the job, Ewings and Vieths took

care of some preliminary business. They obtained bright orange badges which identified them as church workers. The possibility of wearing clerical collars had been discussed, but neither felt comfortable with them at the time. The badges were to ensure that those whom they met could easily identify them as church workers and not as policeman or simply visitors to the area. Where there is poverty, there are muggings, drug deals, murders, assaults, theft, prostitution, and a host of other crimes. This called for the two evangelists to do everything practical to avoid becoming victims of the crime and vice of inner city life. The badges which they wore were one way to make them less appealing targets of crime. Since they also helped to remove the suspicion that they were plain clothes policemen, the badges made it possible to approach those who were in trouble with the law for one reason or other.

Part of the first week was also spent researching various community social services and resources. Since Ewings and Vieths would be dealing with impoverished people, they were certain to be faced with families in desperate need of some of life's basic necessities. The location and phone numbers of area food pantries, shelters, thrift stores, and hospitals were found. A few weeks later they also began purchasing food vouchers from a corner grocery store in the target neighborhood for distribution to those in need.

Evangelism Strategy

At the outset the Mission to the Economically Deprived did have a core group of one middle-aged woman who was a member of

Siloah Lutheran Church and her three adult daughters, to whom Ewings and Vieths were to teach a Bible Information Class. Beyond these four, it was up to the new missionaries to find prospects and disciple them. On Pastor Westendorf's advice, Ewings and Vieths did not take a formal survey and canvass of the neighborhoods in which they were working. One of the unique features of inner city life is that the population is highly transient. The average family probably moves twice a year. Some families may move a half-dozen or more times each year. For this reason it was very possible that by the time a canvass of the area, which had now expanded to 120 square blocks (15x8) with 27th and Lisbon as the center, had been completed, some of the prospects would be lost because they had moved. A "cold canvass" also didn't fit the cultural situation too well. Pastor Westendorf felt that a more casual and friendly introduction to the neighborhood was better. If Vieths and Ewings could be seen as regular faces in the area, could gain a reputation as friendly, helpful people, it was felt that they might have a better chance of gaining an audience with people who lived there. Accordingly, they began by strolling the sidewalks and introducing themselves to others on the sidewalk or to those sitting on the front porches of their homes. In this way they perhaps met as many or even more people than they would have if they had set out ringing doorbells. During the hot summer months, the front porches of the old Victorian homes in Milwaukee's inner city are the center of social life. Having the opportunity to talk to people on their porches was like

being invited into the living rooms of those who live in the suburbs.

As the two evangelists engaged the people in conversation, they casually asked about whether those they met had a home church. They memorized the addresses of those who did not and wrote them down on a note pad when they got to the end of a block. Rather than waiting until the entire area was canvassed, they followed up on prospects within a day or two. Sometimes, if the occasion seemed right, they would offer a brief law-gospel witness the first time that they met people. This was to avoid losing the chance to share the gospel with people who might disappear next week.

Another way that the two contacted people was through the services they were able to offer other than sharing the gospel. When people learned that they had food vouchers to give away for those in need, they would sometimes seek out the evangelists. One individual even became a sort of "food voucher evangelist" for the seminarians by telling many of the people that he met that they could obtain vouchers from the two men. This point of contact with people was often the first step in gaining an opportunity to share the gospel. When the monthly supply of vouchers ran low, Ewings and Vieths also had access to the food pantry at St. Marcus Lutheran Church. Borrowing an idea from Walther Memorial Lutheran Church (LC-MS), when someone needed a trip to the food pantry, Vieths and Ewings would deliver the food to their home and use it as an excuse to get a foot in the door and witness. As much as possible, they tried to make sure that

those who were given food for the body also received some spiritual nourishment.

In addition to the food resources they could offer, Ewings and Vieths were also able to offer rides in their cars to those in need of transportation. That could be a bit risky (both of them had naively given rides to prostitutes before the year was over), but it was greatly appreciated by those who needed it. They could offer phone numbers for people to get in touch with shelters or legal help. All these services not only served as points of contact, but also helped build their reputation in the neighborhood. It showed that these two were there to offer sincere help and not to get something for themselves. This was important, because inner city ministers (especially those without formal theological training) are often the richest people in the neighborhood and don't always have the reputation of being trustworthy.

Yet another way of meeting people was through Roger Stock, the owner of the North Avenue Smokeshop at the corner of 26th Street and North Avenue. Roger, a member of Grace Lutheran Church, was an adult convert with a heart for evangelism and an understanding of inner city life and people. Roger's store sold beer, tobacco, and a limited supply of basic groceries. Through his business he had come to know many people in the neighborhood. It was in connection with the North Avenue Smokeshop that Ewings and Vieths set up their first food voucher program. Through Roger, they also learned of people in the area who might seem likely candidates for a Bible class or who especially needed

help.

There was one method for obtaining names of prospects which Ewings and Vieths explored but never used. That was to hold a revival. Pastor Westendorf brought up the idea. The Missouri Synod churches in inner city Milwaukee had obtained quite a number of names from a revival-style tent meeting they had held some years before, but the congregations didn't do a complete job of following up on the names which they received. Since no one could think of a WELS pastor particularly suited to preach to an inner city audience in a tent meeting setting, they also considered having Tom Hall, a black WELS member and kick boxing champion, give a karate demonstration followed by a testimonial. Neither idea was ever used.

By the beginning of September, the Mission to the Economically Deprived had contacted about 250 families. There were sixty-seven names on the prospect list, fourteen adults in home Bible studies, and sixteen children in Bible classes.¹⁰

Bible Classes

As mentioned earlier, the Mission to the Economically Deprived was not expected to produce a new self-supporting WELS congregation, but it did offer home Bible study to those who received the gospel message. While having people assemble for Bible study would have saved more time for evangelism work, the conditions of poverty and the situation of the ministry made such a hope unattainable. There was no Wisconsin Synod church within two miles of the neighborhoods which the Mission to the Economically Deprived was serving. Bethel Lutheran, once located

in the heart of this neighborhood at 24th and Vine, had closed its doors in the 1970's and was now Corinth Missionary Baptist Church. Because of the lack of funding, there were no rented rooms for this mission to work out of either. Bible classes would have to be taken directly to the homes of the individuals.

Getting into the homes did give Ewings and Vieths a clearer view of the lives of the people whom they were serving, though they didn't always provide the ideal environment for learning. The houses themselves were usually infested with cockroaches. Too many people usually shared one apartment, which could work both to the advantage and disadvantage of the evangelists. Sometimes it meant a larger audience for the missionaries. At other times it simply meant more traffic through the house with more distractions. Televisions were often left blaring during the classes to keep the children occupied, but too often they also distracted the adult student from giving his or her attention to the Bible lesson. Live-in boyfriends who were not interested in the Bible studies sometimes made the evangelists nervous as they held classes with the ladies in the home. Many times classes had to be postponed or repeated because the residents had been drinking all day. It soon became obvious to Ewings and Vieths that they could not expect their students to instantly demonstrate a level of sanctification equal to that of lifetime Christians.

In spite of the obstacles and less than ideal teaching conditions, the Bible classes did thrive and proved to be quite popular. In fact, they became the main drawing card for new

"parishioners" to the ministry. Although the two seminarians had stopped wandering the neighborhoods to concentrate on teaching classes when the school year began, the number of adults taking classes increased from 14 to 30 between September and December of 1988.¹¹ Many of the new students were neighbors or relatives of the first students who happened to be visiting on the day of a Bible class. After participating in a class they asked if Vieths or Ewings could come to their homes for classes also. Although the number of adults involved didn't climb much above thirty during that first year, the number of people taking classes jumped significantly again when Tim Kuske and Tom Kock took over the ministry at the beginning of the summer of 1989. By May of 1990 the number of adults involved in the ministry had again nearly doubled to 58.¹² At this point Bible classes and referrals were keeping the missionaries so busy that they were beginning to find it difficult to contact all the people whose names they were given.

The textbook used for the adult Bible classes was Rolfe Westendorf's adult instruction manual By Grace Alone. This course in basic Christian doctrine proved to be written in a format which the students enjoyed and could understand. Though many people had a reading ability below that of a fourth or fifth grader, and a few were completely illiterate, patience and careful, simple explanations were all that were needed to guide them through the text. Those who completed the book sometimes went through it a second or even a third time. Others went on to study individual books of the Bible (One of the Gospels,

Genesis, or I Corinthians) or a Bible history course created by Tom Kock and Earle Treptow, the fifth seminarian to work for the mission.

One of the original objectives of the Mission to the Economically Deprived was "to conduct Sunday school weekly for 40 persons of all age groups."¹³ This meant that instruction for children was also a part of the program. In fact, based upon the experience of the Palmer Street Mission, a storefront mission operated in Milwaukee's inner city during the 1970's, there was some feeling that outreach to children might be more "successful" than outreach to adults. Early results seemed to confirm that sentiment. By September 1, 1988, there were sixteen children in Bible classes, compared to only fourteen adults.¹⁴ However, that was the last time that children who were taking classes outnumbered adults. By December of that same year there were nineteen children in classes and thirty adults.¹⁵ Over a year later, the gap had widened to twenty children and fifty-eight adults.¹⁶ As more and more adults became interested in studying with the seminarians, less and less time was devoted to teaching the children. Since it is doubtful that much progress can be made among the children without the support and good example of their parents, this was not completely discouraged. However, in order to bring back some balance, attempts have been made to get parents involved in teaching their children with home devotions, Luther's Small Catechism, and Bible stories. These have met with limited success.

Gathering

Throughout the Autumn months of 1988, the regular parishioners questioned Brian and John about their churches from time to time, asked how they might get there, and expressed the wish that those churches were closer to their homes. By January it seemed possible that some sort of congregation might actually be formed out of those who were taking Bible classes. When Roger Stock offered the use of an empty apartment above his store on North Avenue, there was nothing to prevent them from holding worship services in the neighborhood. Folding chairs were obtained from Siloah Lutheran, and a makeshift lectern/free standing altar was set up in the large front room of the apartment. The neon "Miller High Life," "Pabst Blue Ribbon," and "Bud Light" signs in the windows did not contribute to a worshipful atmosphere, but Roger wouldn't allow them to be taken down. Most of them were able to be covered with curtains.

Since none of the people who were in Bible classes were familiar with the Lutheran church or its liturgy, and since there was no musical accompaniment, a simplified service was used. The service consisted of an invocation, confession of sins, Scripture readings, singing of a hymn, sermon, singing of a second hymn, prayers, and the benediction. The first service was held on January 22, 1989, with two ladies, three children, Vieths and Ewings in attendance. That was the last time any adults attended. Services were continued for the next three weeks, but each week the same three or four children from the same family were the only ones who came. After four weeks of

services, Pastor Westendorf, Ewings, and Vieths decided that those children could be served as well in their own home as in the room above Roger Stock's store and the services were discontinued.

At this point the Mission to the Economically Deprived mission team was unsure whether the venture had not drawn more interest because of the spiritual immaturity of its "parishioners" or because they had started it in the coldest part of the winter. This question was answered the following summer when Tim Kuske and Tom Kock took over the ministry. In July of 1989 they also tried to hold services in the room above the North Avenue Smokeshop. After three attempts they also discontinued the services, for once again the only people in attendance were the same three children from the same family.

These attempts at worship services did have one side benefit for the ministry. Through the first year the only office that Ewings and Vieths had was the office of Siloah Lutheran Church, which was nearly two miles away from the neighborhood they were serving. Besides the distance, there were other distractions involved with this set-up--limited access to the phones, other people in the church office--which made their work less efficient. When Roger Stock discovered that he could get along without the space of the rooms above his store, he offered to rent it to the ministry for \$1.00 per month. This gave the mission a full time presence in the neighborhood and allowed them to have at least some of the facilities that were called for in the original proposal. Kuske

and Kock moved into the office in June of 1989. At about the same time as the change of address came a change of name. Since Mission to the Economically Deprived did not sound too positive, the name was changed to Northside Lutheran Ministry in the spring of 1989.

Although the first opportunities for worship were not utilized by those studying the Scriptures with Northside Lutheran Ministry, Pastor Westendorf still felt that it was important for these new Christians to experience Christian fellowship. Therefore, a less formal approach to getting people together was tried. On Saturday, July 29, 1989 Kuske and Kock held a picnic in Washington park for those who were studying with them. Northside Lutheran Ministry provided hamburgers and hotdogs and everyone else brought some sort of dish to pass. Rain forced the group to move to the home of Dorothy Craine, a member who lived just a block away. Three families attended. A devotion and hymn singing followed the supper.

Encouraged by the success of this meeting, Kuske and Kock invited additional families to two similar picnics in August and September. At Thanksgiving time the families of Northside Lutheran Ministry were again gathered at Siloah Lutheran Church for a turkey dinner. Still more picnics with devotions were planned the following summer.

At this point it remains to be seen whether the fellowship which has been nurtured at these gatherings might lead to joint worship or joint Bible classes. An incident involving theft and a broken window at a members home in the summer of 1990 seems to

be a step backwards, but more attempts at gathering people for fellowship will be made in 1991.

Conclusion

Today this ministry is a one-of-a-kind, but because of the way that the Lord has blessed this attempt to share the gospel with Milwaukee's poor, plans for Southside Lutheran Ministry are already in the works. The Multi-Cultural Mission Committee has also suggested that the Board for Home Missions adopt a policy requiring that one in fifty mission openings be directed at the economically deprived.

Northside Lutheran Ministry is different. The people whom it serves are not typical WELS members. The methods it uses are not always typical methods. It also measures success differently. Over the course of three years only two people have become communicant members, and no one has formally joined a WELS congregation. However, three years since its founding it counts 160 souls in its spiritual care and has served well over 200 people with the gospel.¹⁷ In the culture of the transient urban poor, a premium must be placed upon this kind of gospel sharing. Northside Lutheran Ministry has opened a new chapter in WELS home mission work.

Endnotes

1. Westendorf, Rolfe, "Ministry to the Poor - A New Frontier." Paper presented to Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, September 14, 1985. pp. 1-4.
2. Westendorf, Op. Cit., p. 5.
3. Proposal accompanying "Ministry to the Poor - A New Frontier."
4. Ibid.
5. Minutes of the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee meeting, January 18, 1986.
6. Minutes of the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee meeting, February 14, 1987.
7. Proposal submitted by Rev. Norm Berg and included in a letter from WELS president Rev. Carl Mischke to Siebert Lutheran Foundation president Jack Harris.
8. Multi-Cultural Mission Committee report to the Board for Home Missions, submitted by Rev. Howard Kaiser on January 25-26, 1988.
9. Minutes of the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee meeting, February 13, 1988.
10. Mission to the Economically Deprived report to the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, December 3, 1988.
11. Ibid.
12. Quarterly report of the Mission to the Economically Deprived, May 1, 1990.
13. Proposal accompanying "Ministry to the Poor - A New Frontier."
14. Mission to the Economically Deprived report to the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, December 3, 1988.
15. Ibid.
16. Quarterly report of the Mission to the Economically Deprived, May 1, 1990.
17. Quarterly report of the Mission to the Economically Deprived, March 12, 1991.

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