

THE FOUNDING OF OUR SHEPHERD, POLTIMORE, QUEBEC - *Canada*

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By the grace of God the WELS has become a world-wide church. Much has been said and written about the synod's expansion throughout the U.S., South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. In recent years, some attention has been given to the WELS in the country to the north, Canada. Many members of the WELS are aware that the synod has a small number of churches in Canada. Most WELS pastors could list the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Alberta, and most recently Saskatchewan as places where WELS churches are carrying on their gospel ministries. But practically unknown is a tiny congregation of confessional WELS Lutherans in the French-speaking Canadian province of Quebec.

Our Shepherd, of Poltimore, Quebec, Canada has been a member of the WELS since 1970. Prior to that the members of that congregation had been members of a Missouri Synod church in Poltimore. This paper will relate the history of these staunch Christians as they struggled to uphold doctrinal purity and confessional Lutheranism.

Poltimore, Quebec is a tiny town in southern Quebec. (see maps in back) The town is set among rolling hills (called mountains by the locals) and numerous lakes. The topography of the area resembles that of west-central Wisconsin, the area between Eau Claire and Tomah. The town itself of Poltimore also resembles a number of little towns

in Wisconsin - a few churches, a gas station, a grocery store/post office, tavern, and a small park and community center.

But Poltimore's resemblance to any town in Wisconsin ends there. Paved roads are a recently constructed luxury. Many of the area's roads remain gravel or dirt covered. Indoor plumbing is a rarity in the homes around Poltimore. Farmers' fields are small and they keep few cattle. The growing season is short. Lack of modern machinery, favorable weather, and land which can be cultivated restrict most of the area's residents to being little more than subsistence farmers. Local business is primarily carried on in French, the official language of Quebec, although English is the primary language for the people of Our Shepherd Lutheran Church.

It was in that setting that a small group of people of German decent took a stand for the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions.

Doubts regarding the Missouri Synod surfaced in 1966 when Judy Mallon, the daughter of Otto and Salome Mallon, had decided to attend the Missouri Synod College in Bronxville, New York. Inspired by a slide show on Lutheran colleges presented at a Walther League meeting, Judy decided to enroll in the deaconess course at Bronxville. Salome

Mallon relates,

"Otto and I were very happy that Judy had such a strong Christian faith to be ready to dedicate herself to the work in the church. In the meantime, her father and I worked extra hard to save enough money for her first year at college. We also had a son, Bruce, who was two years older that was already enrolled in a college in Ottawa. Because our farm income was not substantial enough to support two children at college at the same time, we decided to move to the city. Farm prices were at a low ebb. It was at that time, 1966, that we joined St. Paul's congregation in Ottawa."¹

The Mallons' move to Ottawa was very significant. Having transferred their church membership from St. Paul, Poltimore to St. Paul, Ottawa the Mallons were now under the spiritual care of Pastor Thomas C. Pfothenhauer.

The Pfothenhauer name is prominent in Missouri Synod circles. Thomas Pfothenhauer's father was also a Missouri Synod pastor. Pfothenhauer's grandfather, Johann Friedrich Pfothenhauer had been president of the Missouri Synod from 1911-1935. In spite of his strong historical ties with "beloved Missouri," Pastor Thomas Pfothenhauer did not allow his senses to be dulled. For many years he had heard and seen things in the Missouri Synod which concerned him. All was not well in "beloved Missouri." When Pfothenhauer arrived at St. Paul, Ottawa in August of 1964, he alerted the members of his new church as to the problems going on in Missouri such as the liberal interpretation of the Scriptures. Pfothenhauer's own staunch confessional witness would play a big role in the eventual establishment of Our Shepherd, Poltimore.

In the fall of 1966, Judy Mallon left for her first year of college at Bronxville, N.Y. When Judy returned home to Ottawa at Christmas, she told her parents that she had learned that such biblical accounts as the parting of the Red Sea and Jonah in the great fish were fairy tales. "She was confused and expressed so many doubts concerning the truths of Holy Scripture."² Otto and Salome were, of course, shocked. They had sent their daughter to Bronxville with the expectation that there her faith would be further nurtured and instead found that her faith had been battered by the very professors with whom they had entrusted their daughter's spiritual care.

The Mallons brought their concerns to the attention of their pastor, Pfothenhauer. Pfothenhauer shared in the Mallon's disgust and sent a letter to Bronxville inquiring about their first year Bible History course and the demythologizing that was being taught. ^WThe reply came back saying that they did not teach these things as fact, only theory.^{#3} The reply did not contain a clear statement about the Bible being the inerrant word of God. Judy Mallon withdrew from Bronxville before finishing the first year's studies.

The confusion and debate about the Missouri Synod continued to grow over the following two years (1967-68). The next big debate centered on the resolution for Missouri to join in altar and pulpit fellowship with the A.L.C.

At the time, the A.L.C. was in fellowship with the L.C.A., with whom Missouri did not feel it could fellowship.

Pfotenhauer stated, "It was poor ecclesiastical arithmetic."⁴

"On February 4, 1969, the voters' assembly of St. Paul, Ottawa, adopted a resolution asking the Missouri Synod not to accept altar and pulpit fellowship with the A.L.C."⁵

This confessional stand along with a number of others demonstrated by St. Paul Lutheran Church, Ottawa would serve as support and encouragement to a number of members at St. Paul, Poltimore as they would take their own confessional stand. Even though Poltimore is about 45 miles from Ottawa the Poltimore people were able to follow closely what was going on at St. Paul, Ottawa as a number of families had members at both churches.

Following the February 4th resolution by St. Paul congregation in Ottawa, Pfotenhauer continued to speak out against unscriptural fellowship. On April 6, 1969 an interchurch meeting including three Ottawa Missouri Synod churches was convened. The meeting was held at St. Luke Lutheran Church and featured a dialogue between Pfotenhauer and the liberal pastor of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Jon Keekly. The pastor of St. Luke, also the Ottawa-Poltimore circuit pastor, Rev. Kuhl, served as moderator. About 175 people attended. In his address Pfotenhauer categorically stated that Missouri's move for fellowship at that time with the A.L.C. would compromise scriptural

doctrine and practice.

Two days later the St. Paul voters' assembly met again. They drafted another resolution regarding Missouri-ALC fellowship. It read, "Resolved, That if the 1969 convention of the LCMS declares altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC in Denver this July, then in obedience to Holy Scripture we will withdraw from the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, and, God-willing, join an orthodox Lutheran Synod or Conference."⁶

The LCMS decision at its 1969 convention to join fellowship severed St. Paul's Ottawa membership with the LCMS. Again, their confessional stand served as an example and encouragement for some people in Poltimore.

Having lived in Ottawa for a year, I know that spring comes a few weeks earlier in Ottawa than in Poltimore, but it does come. So also with the confessional stand - it would come earlier in Ottawa than in Poltimore, but it would come in Poltimore.

Certain members of St. Paul, Poltimore had been carefully observing the St. Paul, Ottawa congregation. They also kept tabs on what others had to say about the Missouri Synod by reading Christian News and the Lutheran Witness.

It became increasingly clear to some of the Poltimore flock that the problems of the Missouri Synod needed to be addressed. In January of 1970, St. Paul, Poltimore held its annual meeting. The meeting turned into a debate as Rudolph Cheslock and Oscar Mallon accused LCMS seminary

professors of false teaching. Mr. Cheslock is not well-educated but he has deep love for the Holy Scriptures. He recalls, "I stated that Missouri Synod professors were teaching young pastors liberal statements of the Holy Bible. Professor John Tietjen said he didn't believe in the true word of the Bible. He said there was errors through the whole Bible."⁷ Cheslock and the pastor, named Victor Schroeder, debated the verity of Cheslock's accusations. Oscar Mallon stepped in and recounted the aforementioned Bronxville college experience of his niece Judy. The meeting was recessed until the following Sunday.

Rudolph Cheslock spent the week gathering as much information as he could find for the meeting. Apparently Victor Schroeder did his own preparation. Cheslock recounts, ". . . what we didn't know was that during the week Schroeder had a meeting with the women. He told them they had full right to talk and vote in the meeting. You should have heard the shouting and yelling . . ."⁸ Cheslock sought to restore order to the meeting by having Schroeder read I Cor. 14:34,35. Schroeder obliged. The women marched out of the meeting. How the meeting ended is not known. There are no extant minutes of the proceedings and memories have faded. According to Cheslock a few subsequent meetings were held but he cannot recall the dates.

The most notable meeting of early 1970 (precise date unknown) was a meeting of the St. Paul, Poltimore congrega-

tion, circuit pastor Howard Kuhl, and District President Fiess. Prior to that meeting Rudolph Cheslock, Ralph Lange and his wife Louise, Oscar Mallon, Erhard Lange (brother of Ralph Lange), and Raymond LaSalle went door-to-door to tell the congregation's members that false doctrine was being propagated in their church. They also polled the members to see how many were in favor of breaking from the LCMS.

For the meeting the "conservatives" chose Louise Lange to speak for them as she was the most well educated of the group. Mrs. Lange's basic question for Fiess was, "Who has changed so that this LCMS-ALC fellowship could result - Did the LCMS become more liberal or did the ALC become more conservative?" Fiess did not answer Mrs. Lange's question to her satisfaction.

A few days after the meeting Ralph and Louise Lange drove to Ottawa to speak to Pfothauer about the situation. Now Pfothauer had been careful not to interfere with what was going on in Poltimore. He told me, "I was very careful not to go up there. I didn't even cross the Ottawa River for a whole year so I could not be seen or perceived as interfering in an internal matter in another congregation."⁹ But Pfothauer's confessional stand was known to the Langes and they sought his counsel. In Pfothauer's words, "Louise was quite vocal."¹⁰ Pfothauer encouraged them to stand

on Holy Scripture. Again, it should be said that the support and encouragement of Pfothenhauer and St. Paul's of Ottawa played a large role in the eventual foundation of Our Shepherd, Poltimore.

The final clash with St. Paul, Poltimore occurred on May 3, 1970. Oscar Mallon presented the signature of 27 members and said that they were leaving if the congregation would retain membership in the LCMS. This band of 27 was only three people short of winning the vote and keeping the church property.

So the 27 found themselves without a church building and without a pastor. On May 5, 1970, a group of about a dozen men held a meeting at the home of Rudolph Cheslock. Cheslock is and was, among other things, a bee keeper. A number of bees managed to get into the house as the men met. In spite of the bees, they organized a new church and extended a handwritten call to Pfothenhauer. Raymond LaSalle and Herbert Adam reported to the group that they could rent the United Church in Poltimore for services.

After receiving permission from the voter's assembly of St. Paul, Ottawa, Pfothenhauer accepted the call from the Poltimore group.

On May 17, 1970, they held their first church service in the rented United Church. Pfothenhauer officiated.

The original elders were Raymond LaSalle, Oscar Mallon,

and Emil Brunke. Herbert Adam was treasurer. Ralph Lange was the new Church's first secretary.

Communion ware was donated by St. Paul Lutheran of Ottawa. The altar cross was donated by the Herbert Adam family.

During the summer of 1970, the congregation was also served by Martin Stuebs who had been called as a summer vicar by St. Paul's in Ottawa.

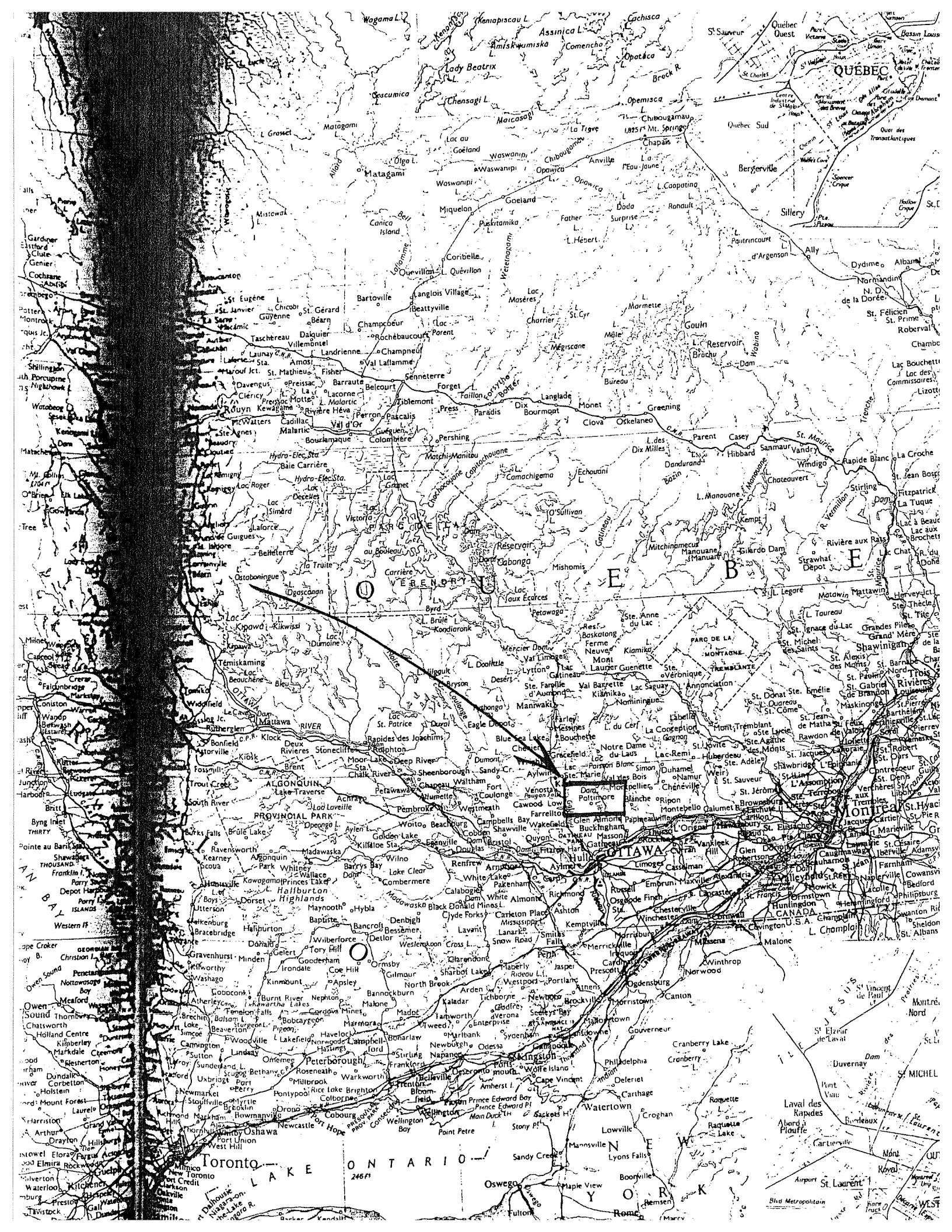
On June 28, 1970, the name "Our Shepherd Lutheran Church" was chosen by the congregation.

This little group of bold confessors had taken a hard stand. They lost their church. They lost their cemetery. Many of the other locals were openly hostile to them. Herbert Adam was, for a time, not permitted to cross another's land to enter his field for planting. Adam had previously enjoyed free access to the field for years. Pfothenhauer, in spite of the fact that he was careful not to interfere, received a death threat from a Poltimore man.

In spite of the many obstacles, hardships and losses this small band of Lutherans remained true to the Word of God. They were willing to sacrifice much, but they would not sacrifice one jot or tittle of God's Word.

Today, Our Shepherd congregation continues to hold fast to the Word. Their numbers have not significantly

changed - there have been a few deaths and a few births since the congregation's founding. They continue to hold services in the United Church in Poltimore where they held their first organized service. Pfotenhauer is still their pastor. And Our Shepherd is still a congregation true to the Word and the Lutheran Confessions.



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ENDNOTES

¹Otto and Salome Mallon, Correspondence, March 11, 1989.

²Mallon, Correspondence.

³Mallon, Correspondence.

⁴Pastor Thomas Pfothauer, Telephone Conversation, December, 1988.

⁵"Canada Comes to the Wisconsin Synod," by John Schuetze, (paper), 1981.

⁶Schuetze, "Canada Comes . . .".

⁷Rudolph Cheslock, Correspondence, March 25, 1989.

⁸Cheslock, Correspondence.

⁹Pfothauer, Telephone.

¹⁰Pfothauer, Telephone.

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