

# **History of the Southern Conference of the Nebraska District**

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## **Introduction**

When the first congregations which became part of the Southern Conference of the Nebraska District were organized in the 1880's, the state of Nebraska was the frontier. Nebraska was part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 (bought at 4 cents per acre) and remained mainly unsettled until after the Civil War. The Homestead Act passed in 1862 was one of the reasons people came to Nebraska. The Homestead Act made government land available to settlers without cost. The head of the family would be able to obtain 160 acres of land by living on it and making improvements for five years. Under the Preemption Act of 1841 a settler could purchase an additional 160 acres at \$1.25 per acre and the Timber Culture Act of 1873 allowed another 160 acres if the settler promised to plant trees on a portion of it. Another important reason people came to Nebraska was the railroad. The government provided subsidies to build the railroads which took away the isolation of being in Nebraska. Towns were built along rail lines and it made it possible to ship grain back to the markets in the east and to bring in supplies. The railroads had been given about 16% of the land in Nebraska. They would sell that land to offset their construction costs. The railroads established towns, often about 10 miles apart so that a person with a team and wagon could go to town and back again in one day. The railroads helped settlers dig wells and provided cheap credit especially during the depression of the 1870s. Promotional pamphlets and railroad agents were sent not only throughout the United States but also to Europe urging people to settle in Nebraska. But Nebraska was still the frontier. There were battles with Native Americans in Nebraska even into the late 1870s. Jesse James, who had spent some time in Nebraska, was shot to death in 1882. The Dalton gang was gunned down in the streets by the citizens of a Kansas town in 1892. Early settlers in Nebraska lived in sod houses, dug deep wells for water, buffalo or cattle chips were used for fuel. There were blizzards, drought and massive grasshopper invasions and many other things that made life difficult. The winter of 1880-1881 found snow on the ground from mid-October to mid-April. And there was the depression caused by low prices in the 1870's. But the 1880's brought prosperity and an increase of 500,000 people living in Nebraska. Among them were many Lutherans from Germany and also those of German descent who had been living in other states. It was during this time the first congregations that formed the Southern Conference were established.

## **The Beginning of the Southern Conference of the Nebraska District**

The first congregation to come to the Wisconsin Synod in what would become the Southern Conference was Zion of Clatonia, Nebraska. Before they organized as Zion congregation they were served by a pastor from the Missouri Synod for five years. It was not uncommon in those days for pastors to arrive in an area and start to preach. In Clatonia, a man from the Iowa Synod came to preach. (The Iowa Synod would later become a part of the American Lutheran Church which later made up part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). This man evidently won over enough of the members of the congregation so that those who held to the truth had to leave the congregation. According to an 1893 account in the "Gemeindeblatt" written by Pastor J. Kaiser, this Iowa Synod man "revealed himself for what he

was and had to move on after hardly one year." The article goes on to explain that the congregation called a Missouri Synod pastor but "the seed this man (the Iowa Synod pastor) had sown, had multiplied. After the Missouri Synod pastor was driven away by worldly minded people, the Iowa Synod sent a preacher who together with these people claimed the church property." (p. 134.) The court eventually awarded the property to those who had not gone with the Iowa Synod pastor. Then on February 5, 1883, 14 men organized Zion Lutheran Church. About half of the members belonged to the Missouri Synod and the other half had ties to the Iowa Synod. But in order to avoid any more division, they resolved to call a pastor from the Wisconsin Synod. In what was to be a continuing problem for the Wisconsin Synod, the Synod had no man to send, so the congregation called Julius Kaiser of Platteville, Wisconsin. He was a member of the Wartburg Synod at the time, which was affiliated with the General Synod. With the approval of the congregation, he soon became a member of the Wisconsin Synod.

Another group of families near Clatonia, at Firth, Nebraska, asked Julius Kaiser to serve them in Firth. He then held services every other week beginning in May of 1885. They organized as a congregation, and Pastor Kaiser accepted the call to serve this congregation in addition to Zion in Clatonia. At the second meeting of the congregation there was some discussion about joining together with the Clatonia congregation to form a single parish. The proposal was defeated.

Another Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church began in 1882 in Shickley, NE. Services were held once a month by Rev. John Meyer, a Missouri Synod Pastor. Soon after the dedication of the church building in 1884 a division arose in the congregation for some now unknown reason. The majority retained the use of the building and called a pastor from the General Synod. The minority continued to be served by Missouri Synod pastors and met in private homes. The two factions were reunited in 1889. They decided to drop membership in their respective synods yet they wanted to remain with a Lutheran Synod who held to the true Lutheran doctrine. So they joined the Wisconsin Synod. In the spring of 1889 Pastor Wolff of the Wisconsin Synod was called as their pastor. The records state that he was serving another congregation near Grafton. This parish had been served by the general Synod. It is unclear which congregation this is. It is possible that this is some unknown congregation whose records have been lost. The other possibility is that this is St. Paul's Lutheran church 4 miles south of Grafton. This congregation became a Missouri Synod Congregation about 1930 and closed in 1959. The dual parish of Shickley/Grafton requested a pastor from the Wisconsin Synod. Rev. Kleinlein was one of our first men in that field and served both Shickley and the rural Grafton congregation. In 1903 Shickley and Grafton each called their own pastor. In the 1940s the congregation in Shickley was vacant and had trouble getting a man from the Wisconsin Synod. The vacancy pastor, from the Missouri Synod, said that if they were a Missouri Synod congregation they would get a pastor easily, so they changed their synodical affiliation to the Missouri Synod and received a pastor.

The first meeting of St. Paul's in Plymouth was held in 1879 with Pastor Th. Seiler serving as chairman. The name of the congregation was "Die Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische St. Paulus Gemeinde Ungeaenderter Augsburgische Confession in Plymouth Precinct, Jefferson County, Nebraska." The congregation issued a call in 1880 to Pastor Klokemeyer of DeWitt Nebraska who served the congregation for a year and an half. There was talk of combining the two congregations but it never happened.

A problem arose in selecting a hymnal. Many of the members owned different hymnals and wanted to keep the ones they already owned. The choice was finally narrowed down to either the Missouri or Canadian editions. As recorded in the St. Paul's anniversary book, the

minutes of 1881 read, "There was almost a 50-50 division of votes and heated discussion took place. Neither side wanted to yield. so the suggestion was made by Pastor Klokemeyer that both sides give up their particular hymnal and in place of them the book of the General Council for public worship be used instead." This idea then prevailed.

It was during this time that the Anniversary book tells us that "the congregation was divided into four classes based on the amount of land a family owned or rented. Each class was then assessed a certain amount of money which became the 'church dues.' Failure to pay often prompted action by the voting members against the individual of family." This system went on for 40 years.

In 1887 the members of St. Petri congregation were invited to join with St. Paul's. The location of St. Petri is unknown. They also then decided to call the first resident pastor and contacted the Missouri Synod for help. The next year Pastor J.R. L. Lange accepted the call and served until May of 1889. In the vacancy there was a great deal of discussion about which Synod to go to for a pastor. The Wisconsin, Missouri, and Iowa Synods were all considered. The majority decided to go to the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Bergholz was sent but due to the health of his wife, he was granted a peaceful release in 1889 and returned to Wisconsin. Pastor E. Strube then was called to be the pastor. He is described as one of the veteran pastors of our Synod, entering the ministry as early as 1860.

Meanwhile God had plans farther north in what would become the Southern Conference. In 1870 Pastor Karl Th. Gruber came to Nebraska to serve Missouri Synod congregations in Lincoln and Middle Creek. He soon reached out and was the first pastor at 5 different congregations that we know of, and assisted in the organization of at least 4 others. He traveled by horse or walking. In 1885 a group of eight men formed a congregation near what was East of Gresham, Nebraska and called Pastor Gruber. He served there until he died in 1890 and is buried in the church cemetery. The congregation was then supplied with a graduate from the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod, Christian F. Duecker. Why this congregation became a member of the Wisconsin Synod when its founding pastor was from the Missouri is not known. Pastor Duecker also began to serve St. John's Lutheran Church, Surprise, Nebraska, in 1893. The church address was later changed to Rising City.

In 1902 Pastor C.F. Gruber and a group of men organized Zion Lutheran Church near Garrison, Nebraska. Pastor Monhardt began serving them in 1903 and he was apparently a Wisconsin Synod pastor or joined the Synod. We also do not know the circumstances of how the congregation came to be a member of the Wisconsin Synod. In 1991 Zion of Garrison and St. John's of Rising City would join to form a new congregation -Faith in Rising City.

Beginning in the 1880's pastors and congregations affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod met in conference once or twice a year. There was a conference in the Norfolk area and a conference in the southern part of Nebraska. These meetings in the southern part of Nebraska are really the beginning of the Southern Conference. The great distance back to Wisconsin made it nearly impossible to send back delegates to the synod convention and meetings with any regularity. The Synod was so far from Nebraska that it was felt that Nebraska needed its own organization. The pastors in these early congregations were doing the best they could to spread the Word, but they had their own congregations to care for. Most, if not all of them also taught the parochial school which was held either four or five days a week. There was no one who could just go out and devote his time to mission work. So there was discussion from the beginning that Nebraska needed its own organization and own mission board. Finally the Nebraska District came into being at a meeting in 1901 at St. John's in Firth. Present were G. Gruber, R. Gruber,

Ph. Hoelzel, G Kirschke, Kluge, M. Lehninger, G. Press, E. Redlin, C.S. Siegler, E. Strube, J. Witt. Five congregations were represented by lay-delegates, St. Paul's of Winside, Trinity of Hoskins, St. Paul's of Norfolk, Immanuel of Hadar, St. Paul's of Gresham. The new Nebraska District then severed its ties with the Wisconsin Synod and applied for membership in the General Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and other States. We entered that larger body as the "Ev. Lutheran District Synod of Nebraska and Other States." We held our first meeting under this new name in Clatonia in 1904. A "Reisepredigt" committee was chosen right from the start to supervise and promote "Reisepredigt" (mission work). Pastor Kirschke of Shickley was chosen to be part-time "Reiseprediger" (In effect a District Missionary) and make mission or exploratory trips in the district. In 1902 E Berg, a seminary graduate, joined the district and was named Reiseprediger. In 1903 he reported working in Sprague, Hickman, Grafton, Geneva, Shickley and Beatrice in the south and Lynch and Niobrara in the north. In 1904 E Redlin was chosen to assist with the Reisepredigt work south of the Platte and G. Press of Winside north of the Platte.

The congregations of the Southern Conference had been started by Synods other than the Wisconsin Synod. The synod entered this part of Nebraska only because God moved Christians to call men from the Wisconsin Synod to be their pastor. Just as Paul went to Macedonia not because he planned to do so, but because of the vision of the man who begged "Come over to Macedonia and help us," so the Wisconsin Synod came to Nebraska because of a call for help. God brought the Wisconsin Synod to Nebraska through the divine call. God made it possible for our synod to be present in an area where it would in future years continue to testify to the truth of God's Word.

## 1905 - 1961

The mission Board for the Nebraska District worked at establishing mission congregations in Nebraska and the Rosebud country of South Dakota. The First World War did bring problems to Lutherans in Nebraska, especially Lutherans who conducted services in German which most, if not all, of our congregations did. But after the war was over, the work continued. Even though there was a mission board, in the beginning much of the mission work was done by individual pastors or people requesting pastors from our synod.

In the Southern Conference St. Paul's in Broken Bow began in 1922 as a dual parish with a congregation in Merna, both holding German speaking services. In the spring of 1925 the Mission Board started a mission in Geneva, Nebraska. There apparently had been earlier attempts to start a mission there. Herman Kuckhahn, who just graduated from the seminary in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, was ordained and installed in 1925. The organization was delayed for almost two years because a number of families were denied their request for release from St. Paul's Lutheran church south of Grafton. Finally the constitution was adopted in 1927. But the constitution was unacceptable to the Wisconsin Synod and the congregation refused to change it. The synod continued to supply pastors, teachers and financial subsidy. In 1951 the congregation revised its constitution and became a member of the WELS.

Also in the late 1920s, a group of Christians in and around Grafton wanted to be served by a Wisconsin Synod pastor. Pastor H. Kuckhahn came to serve them in 1928.

The 1930s of course brought the great depression. During the depression mission work came to a halt, not only in our synod but in other church bodies as well. The Missouri synod, which was strong in Nebraska, also granted no new mission starts in the 1930s. The base salary

received by our mission pastors during the depression was about \$100 per month if they were married with a bonus of \$3.87 per child per month.

The 1940s brought World War II, but it also was the end of the great depression. And we were again opening new missions in the Southern Conference. Actually, even before the depression was over, the Nebraska District Mission Board considered establishing a mission in Lincoln.

Our gaining a foothold in the larger cities began at the first service held in Lincoln on January 14th, 1940. The service was conducted by L. Tessmer at 27th and B St. The first service in the north part of Lincoln was held at a 35th and Vine St. in a basement chapel owned by the Nazarene Church on February 18th, 1940. The service was conducted by L. Sabrowsky. The Nebraska Mission Board decided to open a mission in Lincoln and called Pastor Leo Gruendeman and he was installed on April 1, 1940.

In 1940 a new home mission began in Grand Island, Nebraska. They began meeting in a rented building in downtown, Grand Island. The Nebraska District Mission Board began exploratory mission work in Hastings in the early part of 1943. Pastor L.A. Tessmer of Grand Island and E. A. Breiling of Geneva were directed to visit with the nucleus of WELS members and conducted a canvass. Worship services then began in May, 1943. In 1946 Pastor Habben reported that "the Masons and other churches objected" to our purchase of some property. We later bought a different site.

In 1946 the Nebraska District Mission Board began a mission in Beatrice, NE and Pastor R. F. Bittorf was installed as pastor. In 1947 Emmaus Lutheran Church 8 miles southwest of Beatrice joined with our mission to form a dual parish. Emmaus had formerly been a member of the Missouri Synod. In a 1947 mission board report it was said concerning the congregation in Beatrice "Report not so favorable. Vehement Opposition." The congregation was granted approval for a loan in 1951 but the CEF was depleted. So members of St. Paul's of Plymouth, Zion of Clatonia, St. Paul's Gresham and Emmaus of rural Beatrice loaned the congregation money.

In 1947 the mission board visited Scenaca, Concordia and Bellville Kansas looking for possible mission opportunities.. The congregation in Aurora, NE was established in the same year. In 1948 beginning work in North Platte was discussed. There was no Missouri Synod congregation there and so it was decided to begin work there that September. Olathe, Kansas was also discussed. In 1949 Sutton opened as a preaching station by Pastor Koepsell of Grafton . In 1950 services were begun in Milford, NE. Later the mission was closed.

Canvassing had been done in Lincoln looking where to begin another church. In 1946 Pastor Grundeman reports that out of about 180 homes he found 10 that were unchurched. He adds in his letter to the mission board, "A canvass in itself gives no indication as to future mission possibilities. Services must be first held, We know the people are there but we have no assurance they will come to the services, unless we first have a worship place." A second Wisconsin Synod congregation in Lincoln was begun in 1956 by the mission board in the southwest part of the city. Carl Nommenson was called to be the pastor.

In 1955 the Nebraska District Mission Board extended a call to Rev. Dorn, the chairman of the Minnesota District Mission Board to begin work in Texas. He was sent to the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Dallas was the first WELS Church in Texas and was part of the Southern Conference. The mission board had been told that there were as many as 300 people interested in the WELS coming to them in that area. But those numbers were never realized. The raw mission prospects were also hard to find.

In a letter from Pastor Dorn to Hugo Fritze, chairman of the Mission Board, Pastor Dorn writes that out of 360 canvass calls he recently made "only three families were without any church connection." A chapel was purchased in 1957 but unfortunately, the church closed in 1958.

In 1961 a letter in the district archives indicates that church property was purchased in Osceola, NE where we had services for a short time.

The minutes of the Southern Delegate Conference in February of 1957 held in Grand Island report that a paper on "the history of the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church in the state of Nebraska" was given by Pastor Fuerstenau. Unfortunately, I found no copies of this paper. The minutes report that after the paper was given "discussion ensued regarding the why and wherefore of the fast growth of the Mo. Synod in this state compared to the slow growth of the Wis. Synod in Nebraska." The answer was not recorded for us, but the answer is easily seen. The Missouri Synod came to Nebraska years before the first Pastor came from the Wisconsin Synod. Nebraska was a long way from the state of Wisconsin. The Wisconsin Synod was turning its attention mainly to gathering souls in that state and were not in a position to evaluate what was happening in Nebraska. Missouri is closer to the state of Nebraska and the Missouri Synod considered Nebraska a big mission field. They also had the pastors to send into the state. In 1880, there were already 50 Missouri Synod pastors in the state. In those early years there was no manpower in the Wisconsin Synod to do the work. In 1895 only 8 men graduated from our Wisconsin Synod seminary. The year after our district was formed with 11 pastors in attendance and 5 congregations represented by delegates, there were already 119 Missouri synod pastors in Nebraska serving 72 congregations that were members of the Missouri synod, 109 congregations which were not yet members of the Missouri Synod and also 85 preaching stations.

You may have noticed that the early churches established in the Southern Conference were in rural areas. This generally holds true for all of the Wisconsin Synod churches in Nebraska. Occasionally our synod is faulted for this. But remember how the Wisconsin Synod came to Nebraska. It was not the plan of the Wisconsin Synod to go only to the rural areas. We entered the state where congregations called us. Also remember that the growth in Nebraska at the time and the mission work did not lie so much in the cities as in the country. Between 1880 and 1890, 500,000 people moved to Nebraska - the great majority to rural areas. In 1880 the population of Lincoln was 13,000. And while the cities had churches, the rural areas often did not. One of our pastors reports in 1926 that many settlements "Became easy prey to various reformed sects, because our church had not men here to provide for its own children." Add to that the fact that the Missouri Synod was in the larger towns. In those early years there were friendly relations between the pastors of the Missouri Synod and the pastors of the Wisconsin Synod. They went to each others conferences and even stayed in each others homes at conference. They accepted calls into each Synod. It was thought that to open a mission in the area that the congregation of one synod considered its territory would at least seem to be a poor use of resources since the people of that area were already being served by a church that proclaims the pure Word.

When we felt that the larger cities did contain areas that could be served by one of our Wisconsin Synod churches without harming the work of a Missouri Synod church, we looked to open a mission there. But the Missouri Synod did not always agree with our assessment and this caused some difficulties between the synods. In fact, this topic accounts for many letters between the district presidents and the presidents of both synods. In one such letter from 1948, President Behnken of the Missouri Synod sent a letter to President Brenner of our synod complaining

about the opening of Wisconsin Synod missions without the consent of the Missouri Synod congregations. He included a long list of cities which included the major metropolitan areas of our district and also included these cities in our Southern conference; "Lincoln, Grand Island, Hastings, North Platte."

We see God's grace, not only in the fact of how the Wisconsin Synod came to be in Nebraska at all, but that God has provided a visible church to preach His truth when humanly speaking, the effort of our Synod should have failed.

### **The Struggle with the Missouri Synod**

The history of the southern conference is of course tied to the history of our synod. And the history of our synod includes the struggle our synod had with the Missouri Synod. As has been said earlier, at one time the relations between the two synods was friendly. But already in 1945 there appears in the minutes of the Southern Conference signs of problems with the Missouri Synod and the "Doctrinal Affirmation." In 1947 the idea of having mixed conferences with the Missouri Synod came to a vote and was approved to iron out the differences between the two synods. It is interesting to note that the minutes state that "In regard to having the Lord's Supper at such conferences it was thought best to desist if possible since some felt they could not with a clear conscience. If they are insisted upon, no reason stood in the way of partaking."

As time went on the troubles with the Missouri Synod were not solved. In 1954 a motion was adopted at the Southern delegate conference held at Plymouth on February 23 that read; "That we, the Southern delegate Conference of the Nebraska District, express to District Synod as our conviction that Romans 16:17 applies to the inter-synodical situation now. We have marked the Missouri Synod as causing divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine we have learned, and should now follow God's Word which says, 'Avoid them.'" Later, at the district convention this was added, "This memorial is not intended as an ultimatum, nor does it imply any particular action being taken by the Southern conference as such. We are merely submitting our findings in this matter to our brethren of the Nebraska District for discussion."

In 1957 at the district pastors conference in Firth, a motion was passed to send a memorial to synod asking it to carry out the resolution of severance from the LCMS. In 1958 at the district convention at Clatonia, the convention asked for a special synod convention to deal with the LCMS. Other conferences pleaded that something be done. The request for a special synod convention was repeatedly turned down by the synod. It was frustrating that many in the Missouri Synod failed to see any problem. We get an understanding of why our synod continued to have problems with the Missouri and how they defended their change in position as we read what the president of the Missouri Synod, Dr. John Behnken, wrote in the Lutheran Witness on November 15, 1960: "We agree with our Wisconsin Synod brethren on all doctrines - even on the doctrine of fellowship. Our differences arise in the field of application of the doctrine of fellowship." (page 10).

In 1960 a special Nebraska District Convention was held in Lincoln to "discuss our future course of action." Several motions were made. A motion "to recommend to our pastors and congregations of the Nebraska district to suspend fellowship with the LCMS" failed with 27 voting "yes" and 32 voting "no." A report referred to as the "Tiefel minority report" asking to terminate our district's membership in the Wisconsin Synod failed by a vote of 45 to 13. A motion did pass 26 - 22 that resolved: "if God pleasing action is not taken at Synod's August 1961 convention, we will find it necessary to reconvene for an evaluation of synod's action on union matters: and we may have no other alternative but to suspend fellowship with the

Wisconsin Synod." At that 1961 Synod convention we did suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod.

## 1962 - 1999

After the break up of the Synodical Conference, some wondered if the Wisconsin Synod would even survive. It not only survived, but flourished. When a church body stands up for the truth it is also full of spiritual life. God led the Wisconsin Synod in going out to other places with the Word and more people joined us and formed congregations. In 1962 a congregation in Halstead, Kansas is listed as a member of the Southern conference. In 1962 the minutes of the Nebraska District Mission Board show that Kearney had been canvassed as well as Columbus. Services were begun in Kearney (in 1963 services were discontinued) and services were scheduled to begin in Columbus in November of 1962. Stockton, Kansas also had WELS services for the first time in September with a first Sunday attendance of 43. Junction City KS, 105 miles from Halstead, was being served as a preaching station. . In 1963 the mission board canvassed homes in northwest Wichita, KS. A new mission was begun in 1965 with the installation of Pastor David Plocher.

Also in 1965, some people left the Missouri Synod and asked if a WELS church could be started in Russel, KS. They were told that no church could be started there at that time. so they attended services in Stockton, KS. In 1966 Pastor James Behling came to serve the congregation at Stockton, KS and was to live in Hays, KS. The people of Russel, KS joined the new mission of Faith Lutheran Church of Hays. In 1967 Pastor Behling accepted a call and the people asked the mission board if they could have services in Russel instead of Hays, since Russel was more centrally located for the members. Permission was granted to hold reading services and in 1969 they applied for mission status.

The mission board also began services in Kansas City in 1965. In 1966 Karl Plocher, a graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was installed. In 1966 Pastor Elmer Miller serving congregations in Gresham and Garrison was granted permission by the mission board to begin services in Seward, NE.

In 1969 a number of families who had left the Missouri Synod in Norton, KS began attending our church in Stockton. In 1970 services began being held in Norton once a month. A committee studied the work in the area and determined that the interest in Norton was high. So in 1971 the voters decided to present this to the Nebraska District Mission Board. In 1972 services were held every Sunday. The mission board granted permission for this for a 6 month trial period. The services were held in the evening. In 1974 the mission board granted their request to become a mission.

In 1971 Our Savior Lutheran Church in Harrisonville, MO, voted to sever their membership in the Missouri Synod and join the Wisconsin Synod. This congregation first had services under the direction of the Missouri Synod in 1965. The first resident pastor was Pastor W. T. Niermeier. He was also the pastor when they joined the Wisconsin Synod. In 1971 the congregation in McCook, NE was established. In 1974 tape services were begun in Salina, KS. In 1975 the mission in north Kansas City was established. In 1977 exploratory services were held by Pastor Fredricks from Faith in Russel. Mission status was granted in 1978. The first services of Gethsemane Lutheran church (now in Lees Summit, MO) were conducted by Pastor P. Soukup from Overland Park, KS in 1977.

The Mission Board continued to look south and did work in many cities including starting congregations in these cities where we still have congregations today: Oklahoma City



(Gethsemane in 1967 and Holy Cross in 1974), Tulsa in 1971, Alexandria, LA in 1973 and Little Rock, AR in 1977. The 1960s and 1970s were times of mission expansion in our synod and also in our Southern Conference. Over 1/3 of the congregations currently in the Southern Conference were begun in the 60s or 70s.

The Southern conference was spreading out so that the conference included congregations from Columbus, NE to Alexandria, Louisiana. In 1972 the conference divided into three circuits. Until this time there was only one circuit in the conference. And in 1978 the Nebraska District convention agreed to divide the Southern Conference and make a separate Conference of the Mid-America Circuit. The Mid-America conference continued to grow adding congregations in 1979 in Topeka, KS and in 1980 in Midwest City, OK. In 1983 the Synod in convention voted to bring the South Central District into existence. That decision took half of the Mid-America Conference into the South Central District. The remaining congregations of that conference again became a circuit of the Southern Conference of the Nebraska District.

In the late 1970s the mission board explored the possibility of opening a mission in York, NE. After it was determined that they would not open a mission in York, the WELS members in York began to worship in Waco at the newly established Nebraska Ev. Lutheran high School and established Bethel Lutheran Church in 1980.

As early as 1957 Pastor Clement was asking for permission to begin a mission congregation in Kearney and some work was done as noted earlier. In 1980 the mission board granted permission to hold services to be held every two weeks in Kearney, NE. Mission status was withheld for some time but finally granted in 1984. In 1981 a group of people who had left the Missouri Synod in and around Washington, KS jointed our synod.

In 1984 another group of people formerly with the Missouri Synod, this time in Pittsburg, KS founded a congregation and joined our synod. From 1989 - 1992 mission work was also done in Olathe, KS And in 1998 the mission board began exploratory work. in Manhattan, KS and once again in Hays, KS.

The Southern Conference continues to be guided by a gracious God to do the Work of proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments.

### **Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School**

Nebraska Ev. Lutheran High School is part of the Southern Conference history not only because the school is located in the Southern Conference, but its history is also a part of the conference.

At the 1927 Wisconsin Synod convention in Watertown, WI, the delegates adopted the Mousa Report. This established the policy of eventually building academies in the outlying areas of the Synod. This was to be a joint endeavor with all Districts of the Synod building and supporting them. This would eliminate the possibility of a District establishing an Academy by itself. This was the resolution: "The Synod should authorize and subsidize the establishment of preparatory schools, or academies, in many different parts of its territory." The other resolution which put this plan into practice read: "The Academy to be established in the Dakota Montana District is to be a synodical institution supported and supervised by the Synod in every respect." So Northwestern Lutheran Academy of Mobridge, South Dakota, was established as the first synodical Academy in an outlying District. It was thought that the Nebraska District was to be given the next Academy.

The synod itself envisioned academies for outlying districts. But soon after the adoption of this resolution by the synod in 1927 came years of drought and depression. The Synod was

primarily concerned with the liquidation of its debt. Then came World War II. The Wisconsin Synod then was in a building program and increasing the Church Extension Fund. Northwestern Lutheran Academy was finally given a full compliment of buildings at that time.

Then the Nebraska District took up the cause to establish an academy in the District. At the Nebraska District Pastors Conference in Lincoln, June 19-21, 1945 the establishment of an Academy in the Nebraska District was discussed. The minutes from the sixth session, Thursday afternoon, June 21, 1945 state: "The motion regarding an Academy carried that the Visitors (Circuit Pastors) Tessmer, Fritze, H. Witt, and Gruendemann be a committee to consider the advisability of an Academy in our Nebraska District and report their findings to the Pastoral Conference in 1946." It was said that the Pastoral conference could memorialize the Nebraska district convention in 1946 if it was in favor of an Academy.

The committee of the four Visitors gave their report to the Nebraska District Pastoral conference in May, 1946 at Hastings, Nebraska. It is reported in the minutes: "The Academy Committee consisting of our four visitors gave the following report:

We, the Visitors of the Nebraska District, recommend to the Nebraska District Synod convention the adopting of a resolution to establish an Academy in our District for the reasons here given:

1. In general to further Christian Education.
2. In particular to aid in preparing students for the public work in the church as pastors and teachers.
3. Other institutions are too far away from our District which serves as a handicap to an enrollment from our District.
4. To get students from our District as future workers in our District.
5. To increase institution consciousness in our District.

It was moved and seconded that we, the Pastoral conference, memorialize the Nebraska District Convention with the recommendation of the visitors concerning the establishment of an Academy in our District. Carried. The question of location of this future Academy was mentioned but not discussed on the floor."

In that same year, the Nebraska District Convention was held at St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church, Gresham, Nebraska, Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Garrison, Nebraska; and St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Rising City, Nebraska. The convention was held June 19-24. The Academy memorial was referred to the Academy committee of the Nebraska District. The committee members were: H. Schulz, S. Kugler, L. Wenzel. They recommended "That the Nebraska District memorialize the Joint Synod of Wisconsin to establish an Academy within the bounds of the Nebraska District at the earliest possible opportunity." ( Nebraska District Proceedings, 1946, page 76). They then listed the same reasons given by the Pastoral Conference. This was adopted by the Nebraska district Convention.

The pastors were vitally interested in the establishment of an academy and heard a report at their next annual Pastoral Conference held at Denver and Golden, Colorado. The minutes of the morning session on June 25th show that, "Pastor Hackbarth spoke of the proposed academy. We are expanding. There are 10 more parochial schools, and more are planned. We should put an Academy near such places and strengthen the bonds. Synod always asks this question: Would this be a feeder to our other institutions? This is the point that should be regarded. We need to encourage more of our western men, whom we know will more likely be satisfied with the West

and stay here for work after graduation. Our delegates should be prepared as to the stand that shall be taken at this summer's session of Synod." On that afternoon the minutes tell us that "After recess private opinions as to where the Academy ought to be were given - among them Norfolk, Grand Island, Lincoln, and Denver. First we must, however strive for the school; location will come later."

The Nebraska District had a Memorial presented to the Joint Synod which met at Watertown in 1947, as did other Districts. There were memorials from the Pacific Northwest Delegate Conference for an Academy to be established there. One from the New Ulm Delegate conference for an Academy to be established in Arizona; one from the southeast Wisconsin District for an academy in South Milwaukee. These memorials were sent to committee. The committee said the establishment of academies is "very desirable and should be included in the long range educational program of the Synod." But they recommended that new academies not be built at that time. They also recommended that the Conference of Presidents be given the task to "make a survey as to the most desirable location of future academies." (proceedings 1947, page 78)

The Nebraska District responded in convention at Clatonia, Nebraska June 16-21, 1948, "We are happy to note that the committee sees the need of academies in Arizona, Nebraska, and the Pacific Northwest." (Nebraska Proceedings, 1948, page 86)

The report of the Conference of Presidents was considered by the Synod convention in 1949 held at St. Lucas Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the proceedings of this convention we read "The Committee Report is read to the convention. The Floor Committee, Pres. Im. P. Frey, chairman, reads its report. After some discussion a motion prevails to table the report. Resolved to appoint a committee of professors to give immediate and through study to the suggestion of the President to make use of the various Lutheran High Schools in order to increase the number of workers for the church." (Proc, 1949, page 88.

This ended any official action by the Nebraska District until 1952 at the District convention held in Plymouth. There the "Report of the Survey Committee" was presented to the District for its consideration. Part of that report says "Your committee recommends that the Synod immediately set the necessary machinery in motion for the establishment of new synodical academies at strategic points." Then they recommended that the first new academy be located in Milwaukee. The floor committee at that District convention brought about the passing of the resolution to again memorialize Synod for an academy in the Nebraska District. They also made this resolution: "Be it further resolved that the President appoint a standing committee of four (4) representing all conferences to gather information regarding the availability of facilities and locations and formulate reasons why the academy should be located in Nebraska. This committee shall bring its findings before the 1953 Nebraska District Pastoral conference for approval and thereupon to the attention of the Joint Synod convention in 1953." (Proceedings, page 133).

Appointed to the committee were: Pastors Hoyer, H. Schulz, Molkentin, and Grummert. Pastor Hoyer was appointed as chairman and he was also appointed to the Synodical Survey committee. The Academy committee, as it was called, did work in informing the members of the District about synodical schools and academy. The committee drew up a memorial for the 1953 synod convention.

WHEREAS the Synod formulated and adopted plans some 25 years ago, eventually to provide each of the outlying Districts with its own Academy. cf. Proceedings 1927, pp. 26-32; and

WHEREAS the establishing of this first academy shortly thereafter at Mobridge, South Dakota, has proved to be a blessing to the Dakota-Montana District, and to the church at large; and

WHEREAS it has been general synodical understanding, for the past quarter century, that the Nebraska District, the oldest and largest outlying District still without an Academy, had been promised the next synodical Academy; and

WHEREAS the fulfillment of the academy promise would assure rich blessings to the synod at large and to our District in particular, eg.

1. In general it would further the cause of Christian education on the High School level;
2. We would gain even more students from our district for work in the church as pastors and teachers. (Note: the great distances from our existing synodical institutions discourage many of our young people from attending these schools.)
3. It would encourage and strengthen our joint labors within the District and Synod; and

WHEREAS furthermore all of our synodical schools are filled to capacity and have reached their wholesome limits;

THEREFORE be it resolved that we memorialize the 1953 Synod convention now to establish a new academy within the Nebraska District." (Proceedings 1953, page 10)

The Survey Committee also reported about the academy question and the convention answer is found in response to their report. "To point b of the Survey Committee Report we recommend: a. that the Synod establish an academy in the Nebraska District as soon as the Synod declares that monies for it are available." (Proceedings 1953, page 85).

At the next District convention in 1954 held at Stanton, the Academy committee was enlarged. "For advice and consultation on major issues the following have been elected to the Academy Committee: District President, First vice President, Second Vice President, the four visitors, one layman from each conference chosen by the conference." (Nebraska Proceedings 1954, page 27).

At this time York College in York, Nebraska became available. After study by the Academy committee and synod officials, York College was not pursued as a site because no clear title could be obtained.

A memorial was sent to the 1955 Synod convention at Saginaw, Michigan. It resolved that "The Nebraska District be authorized to select and/or acquire under the direction of the board of Trustees in behalf of Synod the definite site of the Academy; and be it further RESOLVED, that the Nebraska District prepare plans and specifications whenever the Board of Trustees, indicates that the monies are available for such plans and specifications." (Proceedings 1955, page 73). This was adopted by Synod.

The work was then begun on the search for a suitable city and a satisfactory site for the Academy. A letter was sent to each congregation of the district, asking them to nominate cities and to give reasons for such nominations. These nominations were discussed at a meeting called

for January 30, 1956. Plans were made for the lay delegate for the committee elected at the February Delegate Conferences. The Laymen who were elected were: Mr. W. Gutzmann of Norfolk, Central conf.; Mr. J. Freese, Plymouth, Southern conf.; Mr. Robbins, Golden, Colorado, the Colorado Conference; Mr. Hasche represented the Rosebud Conf. The letters from the various congregations and interested parties were read and discussed. In May of that year, the Academy Committee discussed the cities nominated and decided to make a thorough study of the following cities: Norfolk, Lincoln, Grand Island and North Platte. Council Bluffs was later visited also. The information was gathered and sent to each pastor and congregation in the district so that they also might consider the information. After lengthy discussion, the District Convention then made the decision as to which city should be the location. On July 19, 1956, at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Hadar, Nebraska, the ballot was taken which chose Grand Island as the site for the Academy.

A memorial was sent to the Synod convention about the name of the Academy, the creation of the Board of Regents, submitting a list of candidates for the Board, and also asking that the synodical Constitution be amended to provide for the Academy. The memorial was sent to the recessed session of the Joint Synod in session at Watertown, Wisconsin on August 21-23, 1956. There the name "Nebraska Lutheran Academy" was adopted. The election of the Board of Regents was deferred to the regular session of 1957. The choice of Grand Island was left as the District had chosen.

A site was found by the Academy committee and after review by the Synod Board of Trustees and approval of the synod itself, land was purchased. 10 city lots (3 Acres) were purchased for \$2,500. A 30 acre tract was also agreed to be purchased for \$18,000.

The 1959 Synod convention at Saginaw rejected the Academy Board of Regents' request to authorize construction at the cost of \$650,000. The Michigan District Pastor Teacher Conference recommended "that the entire matter of the Nebraska Lutheran Academy be placed into the long-range program of the Synod for reevaluation." (Proceedings, 1959, page 104). The Synod approved this resolution. This did not eliminate the idea of an Academy, but it did not place it on any definite plan or time table either.

In 1960 the Nebraska District convention resolved that our congregations conduct a spring Academy Sunday and also area Reformation services with the offerings designated for the Academy fund.

The Board of Regents appeared before the Planning committee of the Wisconsin Synod on May 22, 1961 to state their case. They spoke of the history, the need, and the potential urging at the end of their report that the Planning Committee "recommend the construction of the Nebraska Lutheran Academy as soon as possible."

In their report they also took up a matter that is especially interesting today. They discussed the idea of an area Lutheran High School. They reported to the Planning committee: "A point mentioned at times is this: 'Why not establish an area High School in order to fulfill the purpose of an Academy?'" Anyone at all familiar with the geography of the Nebraska District, as well as the distribution of the communicant membership of the district, will realize the overwhelming difficulties to be overcome in order to make this a reality. Nor do we expect the Academy to fulfill the purpose of an area High School. We do not necessarily wish to enter into the argument of the choice between Academies and Area High Schools, other than to draw attention to a few observations. Where the training of the Synod's future workers are concerned it would be more satisfactory to have full synodical control over faculty, curriculum, etc., as indicated in the Mousa report of 1927. Only in this way can the Synod assure itself of the end

product trained as it desires. The Synod has already tried various stop-gap measures in an effort to cope with the ever increasing shortage of workers, Some measures have toyed with an abbreviated course, a lowered standard of qualifications. These have at best been considered as temporary procedures, and yet our difficulties continue and grow more and more urgent with the passage of time."

Luther Junior College in Wahoo, Nebraska was for sale in 1962. It was a complete school for 150 dormitory students. The price was about \$500,000. A memorial from the Southern and Central conferences was sent to the special Synod convention in New Ulm that requested that if the district could come up with the purchase price, the Synod would operate the school as its Academy. But this memorial was tabled until the next regular Synod convention. At that convention in 1963 in Milwaukee, the floor committee was in favor of that resolution but it was rejected by the Synod with a vote of 77-64. It is interesting again that the matter of an area Lutheran high school was addressed. "The congregations of the District, however, scattered over four states, would find it impossible to operate an area high school as is done in various, more densely populated sections of the Synod. No site chosen for the Nebraska Academy could offer the opportunity for more than four congregations to inaugurate a commuting of its students by bus. A dormitory school is the only feasible solution. It is not a high school offering a general Christian education, which the Nebraska District desires but an academy preparing boys and girls for entrance at the Synods' Normal School and College in preparation for the teaching and preaching ministry."

The Southern Delegate Conference submitted a memorial to the Nebraska District Convention in 1968. The memorial spoke of the "untapped reservoir of young men and women" in our district,, but it also noted "present commitments make it financially infeasible for the Synod to erect an Academy in our District to meet this need in the foreseeable future." And they added "We do not choose to wait until the Synod is able to build an Academy in our district before we do something to provide Christian education for our children at the secondary level." So the memorial resolved to "Accede to the proposal of the Advisory Committee on Education that, 'the Synod . . . rescind its resolution of 1953, 1955, and 1957, regarding the Nebraska Lutheran Academy.'" They then asked that the property in Grand Island be sold. Another "resolved" said "In view of the fact that the Synod has not been able to fulfill its plans for our Nebraska Lutheran Academy, we respectfully request that the Synod consider other forms of assistance by which it may in the future be able to further secondary Christian education in our District . (One possibility would be to donate the profit from the sale of the Grand Island property toward this cause.) "

In 1971 Zion, Clatonia looked into the possibility of starting 9th and 10 grades in Clatonia as the beginning of a high school. During the same year a committee was established to look at John J. Pershing College in Beatrice as a possible site for a school. In 1973 J. F. Kennedy college in Wahoo, NE was considered for purchase.

In 1974, the Nebraska District convention unanimously adopted a resolution establishing a standing Committee on Secondary Education. (Later called the Nebraska Lutheran High School Committee).

On August 18, 1975 a special district convention was held. It discussed the possibility of establishing a Lutheran High School in the district, and the formation of an association of individuals.

In Grand Island, Nebraska, on September 13, 1975, Nebraska Ev. Lutheran High School Association was formed. The Board of Directors was asked to pursue the purchase of the

facilities of John F. Kennedy college in Wahoo, Nebraska. They offered \$300,000 for the original campus with all equipment except for the library. The offer was rejected.

The association began issuing calls for administrator and first instructor in the fall of 1976. In April 1977 the Waco school facilities were purchased at public auction for \$38,500. School began in the fall of 1979 for 9th and 10th grade students. In 1981 all four grades were being taught with an enrollment of over 80 students.

These efforts to establish Wisconsin Synod Lutheran High School education in our district spanned a generation of pastors. In spite of the long history of set backs and seeming dead ends, the effort continued. This district interest still continues today.

The efforts to have WELS secondary education in the Nebraska district show why Nebraska Ev. Lutheran High School is considered by many a "district" High School and has more wide-spread district interest than other area Lutheran High Schools enjoy. It also shows why there is a great deal of interest in the recruitment of Nebraska district students into the public ministry since historically this was one of the reasons for establishing a school.

### **Conclusion**

It is good to look at what has happened before us so that we do not start to think that the work began with us and that we have finally come to show God's people how the work is really to be done. God has led many to do the work in Nebraska before us and they have done it faithfully and well. God has caused His word to be preached, and it has produced fruit. God has blessed the diligence of these men. God is in control and we are tools in His hands.

As we read the names of these first called workers in the southern conference and get a glimpse at their lives, we are moved to thank our God who brought these men to do the pioneer work and we are encouraged by their simple and faithful service to the God who loved them. They are now rejoicing with their God in heaven. We strive to reap after they have sown and to continue to sow the seed and pray for a harvest to the praise of the Lord of the Church.

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