

An Interview With Pastor Norman W. Berg

Church history 331
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On Thursday, April 13, 2000, I sat down with Pastor Norman W. Berg in his home at 4417 West Howie Place in Milwaukee, WI for about an hour long interview. Pastor Berg was born and attended school in Saginaw, MI at St. Paul Lutheran and Michigan Lutheran Seminary. He graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1944. After serving for one and a half years as a tutor at Northwestern Lutheran Academy, Pastor Berg was assigned to Globe, AZ in 1946. Pastor Norman Berg also served in Tucson, AZ, Benton Harbor and Plymouth, MI before accepting the call to serve as the Executive Secretary of the Synod's General Board for Home Missions. While in the full-time parish ministry, Pastor Berg served as the Second vice-president of the newly formed Arizona-California District. While in Michigan, he served on the Synod's Board for Information and Stewardship as well as the Michigan District President and the Synod's Second and then First Vice Presidents. All these positions, Pastor Berg told me, taught him administrative skills, familiarized him with working with other people in a business setting, and helped him to learn how the wheels of the Synod turn. The Lord surely had in mind how he wanted to use Pastor Norman Berg for the last twenty years of his public ministry.

Pastor Berg served faithfully as the Executive Secretary of the General Board for Home Missions from 1968 until his retirement in 1988. During those years, our Synod made significant progress in the area of home missions. Over 300 new missions were started, and the WELS expanded to every U.S. state during Pastor Berg's tenure on the General Board for Home Missions. The 1970's was an especially prosperous decade averaging about twenty new missions each year, and almost one building each month. The Lord certainly has blessed our Synod. During those twenty years, the Lord also allowed our Synod to expand our horizons in the areas mass

media, inner city mission work, and a more aggressive attitude toward campus ministry. While Pastor Berg himself will tell you that he is not the one to receive all the credit, the Lord used him and others to make all these and other advancements possible.

Pastor Norman Berg didn't stop serving the Lord publicly at his retirement. He filled vacancies in San Diego, CA, Houston, TX, Kennewick, WA, and Dallas, TX. The time of Pastor Berg's service at these vacancies ranged from about two months to about three and a half months. He also served at Grace Lutheran Church in Scroggins, TX for three years from September, 1991 to September, 1994. Pastor Berg is presently a member at Atonement Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, WI.

I have certainly benefited a great deal from completing this project. First and foremost, it was a blessing to see the strong faith of another man. Pastor Berg's love for the Lord motivated him throughout his ministry to serve God faithfully. He spoke of his baptism a couple of times as a priceless gift of God's grace. This love for the Lord gave him the desire to spread the gospel message to others. A love and a desire that is worth emulating.

I have also benefited from hindsight to see God's ^{providential} provincial hand at work for the good of the Church. The Lord placed Pastor Norman Berg into situations that prepared him for the work that he would complete as the Executive Secretary of the General Board for Home Missions. He was involved with mission congregations, building projects, and administrative activities. The Lord has a plan for everything.

The Lord also placed certain men in certain positions at certain times. I am speaking of the "Second Floor Triumvirate." This included Pastor James Schaeffer, Pastor Robert Voss, and Pastor Norman Berg. Pastor Berg told me that what our Synod needed during that period was

aggressiveness. These men were all very aggressive, talented, and faithful to their work. They worked together very well. At times, they fought hard, but for the good of carrying out the Lord's work. They conducted business for the good of the Synod, not for personal reasons. For example, Pastor Berg instituted the use of forms, a.k.a. "Norm's Forms", that keep track of the activity of the missionaries and their churches. He wasn't always appreciated for this because it required missionaries to complete much more paper work. However, Pastor Berg knew that this was only good stewardship of our resources. It had to be done despite the complaining that may have taken place.

The Lord also guides the direction of the Church as he sees fit. This is evident as we look at the growth in the area of home missions during the 1970's as well as other programs that were implemented while Pastor Berg was the Executive Secretary of the General Board for Home Missions. All these things have reassured my faith in the Lord's guiding hand and reminded me to always trust in that guiding hand in my life and ministry, Lord-willing.

I have also benefited from seeing the tremendous work ethic that Pastor Berg displayed during his ministry. He was a very hard worker. Recall how many missions were started in the 1970's. Pastor Berg visited almost every site, especially when acquiring land and beginning a building project. He was often on the road. One year his wife asked him to count all the days he was away on business. He was gone about one-third of that year. He is very thankful to his wife for doing such a great job raising their family during his absence as well as during his presence.

Pastor Berg had hip surgery in 1982. This hardly slowed him down. Within six weeks, he was driving a car and hobbling on crutches through airports.

Pastor Berg's retirement also displays his hard-working spirit. He served a handful of vacancies totally over four years of service. He recognized the great need for churches to have a shepherd, and the Lord moved him to respond to those opportunities at a time when he was officially retired from the public ministry. Again, this work ethic is something for a young man about to enter the public ministry to strive to emulate.

I also learned some practical items that will benefit me in the future. I have always been quite intrigued with home mission work, but I have gained a better understanding of how it works and a greater appreciation for its importance. I have always understood the importance of spreading the gospel, but Pastor Berg pointed out to me that home missions are the base for world missions. This may seem like a painfully obvious statement. However, the focus of home missions in conversation is more often on the saving of souls at home. People often forget the long term affect that home missions have on souls around the world.

I feel that I have benefited from reading through the convention proceedings, especially the portions devoted to home missions. This has helped me learn a segment of the history of the Board for Home Missions as well as get a taste of how the Board for Home Missions operates. These things obviously familiarize me with the dealings of the Synod and can only benefit my work as a full-time pastor in our Synod.

I also gained a greater appreciation for role models. Pastor Berg looks to his father who had a great influence on his life and ministry. As a future young pastor, Lord-willing, it will be beneficial for me to recall and apply what I learned from my father, my professors, my bishops from a summer vicar experience and from my vicar year, and, of course, what I learned from

Pastor Berg. It will also be advantageous for me to observe closely the veteran pastors with whom I come in to contact. I hope to learn from their successes and also their mistakes.

The most important benefit I gained from completing this project is a reminder to always preach law and gospel. Pastor Berg told me that if law and gospel is not being preached, then a pastor is not doing his job. Never be ashamed of the gospel!

In conclusion, it is my prayer that the Lord will allow me to serve him as faithfully as so many pastors before me have served him. This also is my prayer for my classmates and those who are already serving in the public ministry.

Interview

Early Years

Please tell me a little bit about your background. (birthday and place, parents and siblings)

Please fill me in on your education. (through high school)

Why did you decide to enroll at Northwestern College to study for the pastoral ministry?
(influential people/reasons)

Parish Ministry

Call Day, 1944. To where were you assigned upon graduation from the Seminary? How did this experience benefit you ministry?

Call Day, 1946. What was your second assignment after completing one and a half years at Northwestern Lutheran Academy? What was the current situation in Globe? How did this experience help you grow as a pastor? (I would also like to hear about your marriage that took place while you were serving in Globe, AZ.)

Redeemer, Tucson, AZ, 1950. What was the ethnic make-up of Tucson at that time? Please tell me about how the Lord blessed Redeemer Lutheran Church while you were there. How did the Lord use that experience to prepare you for work on the GBHM?

What circumstances brought about the forming of the Arizona-California District in 1954? What was your involvement in this new district? What challenges did the district and its officers face as this new district took shape?

Grace, Benton Harbor, MI, 1954. What challenges, if any, did you face as you succeeded your father at Grace Lutheran Church? What unique challenges did you face as a pastor in Benton Harbor?

Please describe your involvement on the Synod's Board for Information and Stewardship.

St. Peter, Plymouth, MI, 1960. How was this congregation and your ministry unique at St. Peter?

At what point did you become involved in the Church Extension Fund program? Please tell me how that program operated.

Michigan District President, 1962. Why did this election come as a surprise to you? What unique challenges and concerns did the Wisconsin Synod face at this time, shortly after the break with the LC-MS? What was the mindset of the Synod having lost it's "big sister"? What unique challenges did the Lord present to you as a district president in the WELS?

Why was the Missio Dei program established? What were the goals and objectives of this program? What methods were used to carry it out? What were the results?

What value did your service as a district president have for your future work as the Executive Secretary of the GBHM?

Executive Secretary of the General Board for Home Missions

Milwaukee, WI, 1968. What was the mission mindset of the GBHM when you took over as executive secretary? Of the Synod?

What area of responsibility did you feel was of primary concern to you as the new executive secretary of the GBHM? How did you address this issue?

Please explain the "Second Floor Triumvirate." How did you work together for the benefit of the Synod? (mission philosophies)

What circumstances led to the success with which the Lord blessed our Synod in the 1970's in the area of home missions? Is there a particular reason why 1978 was a slower year than the other years of that decade? Is there a particular reason why 1976 was an extremely prosperous year? How personally involved were you able to be with an individual new mission?

Please identify what has come to be known as "Norm's Forms." Why were these needed?

Why was the mission in Antigua placed under the jurisdiction of the GBHM as opposed to the BWM?

At the 1977 Synod Convention in New Ulm, the GBHM proposed a Synod-wide convocation on evangelism. Why was this necessary? Was it successful?

In 1979, there was a mass media push by the GBHM. Why did this seem like the right thing to do at this time? What types of mass media were used? How was it funded? Was the program successful?

Why was there also a push in 1979 to do inner city mission work? What methods were used? How was it funded? How did the Lord bless the efforts of the WELS in that area of mission work?

What circumstances brought about the reduced number of new missions in the early 1980's?

How did the surgery on your hips in 1982 affect your ministry?

Why did campus ministry receive the attention that it did in the 1980's?

What factors led to your retirement in 1987-88?

Please comment on this statement from Mike Roth's 1996 essay entitled: *The Life and Ministry of Rev. Norman W. Berg*. (Mike Roth is speaking of the timing of your call to the GBHM.) "He had

to be the trouble-shooter and resolution man. He had to be the counselor, advisor, missionary, pastor, banker, and real estate man - all rolled into one."

Retirement Years

In what places did you serve as a vacancy pastor during your retirement years? Please describe your emotions as you had the opportunity to once again serve full-time in a parish.

Having the advantage of hindsight, please comment on how you feel your father influenced your work as a full-time pastor.

How did the Lord shower his abundant grace on you in your life and in your ministry?

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