

THE FIRST FOUR FLORIDA MISSIONS
OF THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD
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Church History
Professor Fredrich
April 30, 1980

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For many years the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod stayed pretty much to home as far as starting new missions in the United States. It mostly concentrated its home mission work in the Midwest. Then in the ten year span from 1954 to 1964 things happened which turned the Wisconsin Synod into a much greater missionary-minded church body. One of these happenings was the establishment of the first four Wisconsin Synod missions in Florida.

I. Beginnings

In the winter of 1954, the Michigan District Mission Board took a serious look at opening missions in Florida. The Mission Board had been asked by some of our Wisconsin Synod members who regularly vacationed in Florida to investigate the feasibility of doing work in the Sunshine State. A very hard-working man in this area was Mr. Louis Ott. Some members of the Mission Board travelled to Florida's Suncoast and came back very enthusiastic about the prospects.

The Michigan District was up against a problem. Never before had a district of the Wisconsin Synod gone so far from home base in exploring the possibilities of starting missions. At the time no district had the right to begin a mission outside the district boundaries. The rule in the Synod was that a district could only go into the next neighboring state and work there before going on to another state.

Yet the mission field was ripe in Florida. Besides the great number of people who wintered in Florida there were, and still are, many older Americans who were making their homes in that southern state for health reasons. In addition to these facts, many families were moving to Florida because of jobs. During the 1950's companies such as General Electric,

Schlitz, and Budweiser set up plants in and around the St. Petersburg area. The population explosion was in evidence in practically all areas of Florida. A typical example was the city of Tampa. In 1950 Tampa had a population of 125,000. In 1960 it reached nearly the 300,000 mark.¹

The Mission Board of the Michigan District felt that the Lord was calling for them to bring the Gospel to those in Florida. Pastor William Steih was extended a call to begin work in "Florida in general and St. Petersburg in particular." In September of 1954 Pastor Steih and his family arrived in the St. Petersburg area.²

St. Petersburg was a large city. The first task before Pastor Steih was to choose an area in which our first Florida Wisconsin Synod congregation would locate. This was not exactly a simple matter for the Florida missionaries. The place which was chosen had to be one where the congregation could grow. The Bay Pines congregation, for instance, looked for more than a year before finding a good location.

In the meantime, the first four Florida missions worshipped in temporary facilities. Faith Lutheran in St. Petersburg held services in a rented school cafeteria. Mount Calvary of Tampa started out in a trailer court's recreation hall. It was a quiet place, but also out of sight and not very well known. Peace Lutheran in Bradenton also rented a recreation hall in a trailer court. Fortunately, its location was more satisfactory. However, there was soon a problem of overcrowding, especially during the tourist season. Bay Pines began worshipping in a beautiful chapel. This was only on a temporary basis. This congregation also experienced crowded

¹ William Steih, "Mission Activity in Sunny Florida," The Northwestern Lutheran, February 11, 1962, p.37.

² William Steih, "Our Florida Mission," The Northwestern Lutheran, January 22, 1956, p. 25.

conditions. Pastor Steih wrote in 1959 about another problem connected with worshipping in a temporary facility: "Mt. Calvary in Tampa and Bay Pines in St. Petersburg are unable to conduct any evening services, as for example during the Lenten season."³

Property and chapels were a must. Lutheranism was comparatively new in Florida in the 1950's and early 1960's. A chapel helped to identify a congregation. In addition, worship services and Sunday School could be held on a regular basis. It was important for the Wisconsin Synod to erect chapels, for other church bodies were coming into the same areas, acquiring property, and building chapels. When a chapel was built, this let the people in the community know that the congregation was there to stay.

Of course, money was needed to pay for the rentals of the temporary facilities, the salaries of the missionaries, and the construction of the chapels. Then there were also the properties and parsonages. Individuals and congregations loaned and gave money to get the four missions started. Two laymen in particular used their money as down payments on property for Faith Lutheran. Also helping out in purchasing land and buildings were congregations of the Michigan District, who had a special collection, "To Bring the Sunshine of the Gospel to the Sunshine City." Pastor Daniel M. Gieschen writes, "About \$15,000 was raised; to my knowledge, never before had district congregations voluntarily raised that much for one home mission venture."⁴

Other Wisconsin Synod congregations also contributed through their gifts to missions and their loans to the Church Extension Fund and the Parsonage-Teacherage Fund. This proved successful in the case of Faith

³ William Steih, "Florida-Retrospect and Prospect," The Northwestern Lutheran, June 21, 1959, p. 200.

⁴ Daniel M. Gieschen, 25th Anniversary Booklet of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1955-1980, introduction.

Lutheran, for in a very short time the congregation became self-supporting. Money was soon flowing back into the Synodical treasury instead of out of the mission treasury.

One big problem that faced the first four missionaries was the lack of "soul stewardship." In a letter to the editor of The Northwestern Lutheran, Pastor William Steih wrote:

We have a definite problem here in Florida with members from our northern congregations moving into our area without our knowing they are here.

...I would like to ask all pastors and congregations to exercise their "soul stewardship" more carefully. A letter or card to the local missionary informing him that a member or members are coming into our area would be the help I should like to request.⁵

The missionaries were also concerned about those people who were forced to leave the Wisconsin Synod because we had had no church in Florida.

The problem was not completely the fault of the pastors up north. In some cases, when former Wisconsin Synod members were contacted, they told the pastor that they didn't want to drive the 10 or 12 miles to church. In any case, the cooperation on the part of those pastors who did send the names of Wisconsin Synod members planning to live in Florida was much appreciated.

II. Growth

By the grace of God, the first four missions of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod grew. By 1959 our Synod had four full-time workers in the Lord's vineyard in the Sunshine State. All four missions were blessed by God to have permanent worship facilities by the year 1962. What was most important, Wisconsin Synod transplants and Floridian natives were hearing the good news of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Petersburg, was the first

⁵ William Steih, "In the Interest of our Florida Missions," The Northwestern Lutheran, September 30, 1956, p. 313.

Wisconsin Synod mission in Florida. A mission group of 12 members was organized in St. Petersburg on October 18, 1954. Two months later, Faith Evangelical Lutheran congregation was organized and a constitution was adopted. 70 people were in attendance at the first public service, which was conducted January 9, 1955, at Mount Vernon Elementary School cafetorium.

Faith Lutheran needed a suitable site on which to build. Mrs. Steih often helped her husband in studying various areas of St. Petersburg for a good location for a church. She related how, after it rained, they would go and check to see where the high ground was. This is very important in Florida, where rain comes down in buckets-full and often the drainage pipes can't handle the vast amount of water. In February of 1955, three-fourths of an acre of land and a home were purchased. The property lies almost exactly in the center of the city of St. Petersburg. At the time there were no other churches nearby.

In March of 1955 ground was broken for a small chapel. As the chapel was being built by the contractors, the hands of the members were also busy. One member made and donated all the chapel furniture. Other members made curtains and donated hymnals. Then on July 24, 1955, Faith Lutheran dedicated its new chapel. Only about six months after it had started conducting services, Faith Lutheran had a chapel of its own.

Pastor Steih was excited about the fact that Faith Lutheran now had its own property and chapel. He wrote,

Now that we have our own property and have our own chapel in which to conduct the Lord's business, we can settle down to the work in hand. Florida in general and St. Petersburg in particular, which up to this time knew nothing about the Wisconsin Synod, has accepted us as an organization which has intentions of being permanently "in business" here. The results are becoming quite gratifying. 6

6 William Steih, "Our Florida Mission," (continued), The Northwestern Lutheran, February 5, 1956, p. 41.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was now committed to Florida.

Two years later a two story addition was added at the rear of the chapel. This provided much needed space for Sunday School and meetings, and also provided more room for Sunday worship services. This first Wisconsin Synod mission continued to grow stronger both numerically and financially so that in July of 1958, three years after the dedication of the chapel, Faith Lutheran went self-supporting.

By 1961, the congregation found expansion plans gradually being forced on it, both for its Sunday School department, as well as for a church building, to accomodate attendance. This was seen and felt especially in the winter season when northern visitors (snow-birds) were in attendance.⁷

From Faith Lutheran two daughter congregations emerged: Mount Calvary of Tampa and Bay Pines of Seminole (then Largo). Pastor James L. Vogt writes, "A very interesting feature about the growth in number of missions is the fact that in practically every case the new missions were begun by the pastor, organist, and interested laymen of the established congregations."⁸ Exploratory work was begun in the Tampa area by Pastor Steih in 1955. Soon a group of people in Tampa requested that the Wisconsin Synod start a mission in their city. On December 18, 1955, Pastor Steih conducted Tampa's first service at the Sulphur Springs Recreation Hall. 24 people attended the service. The recreation hall was hard to find and the small Tampa group had some rough going for awhile.

In 1956 Pastor James L. Vogt was called to serve the group in Tampa. In November he took charge of this field. In February of 1957 he added Bradenton to his field of labor-some 60 miles to the south. In June of 1958 Pastor Vogt moved to Bradenton since it was obvious that this field

⁷ "Direct from the Districts," The Northwestern Lutheran, Jan. 15, 1961, p.24.

⁸ A letter from Pastor Vogt, March 17, 1980.

demanding a full-time pastor. However, he continued to care for the Tampa group until Pastor Howard Kaiser took over as vacancy pastor.

Mount Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized and its constitution adopted on July 10, 1957. By 1959 the congregation was worshipping in a Civic Club building in another section of the city from where it had previously been. Unfortunately, they were only able to make use of the building for a few short months. In Tampa an organization could not even rent a public-school building unless it assured the officials that it intended to purchase property and put up a chapel or suitable building within a given period of time.

In 1959 Edward C. Renz was installed as pastor of Mount Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church. During the next year he and his wife were protected by God during two serious flood conditions in north Tampa.⁹

With the arrival of a resident pastor, a home had to be built or acquired. Five acres of land in the northwest area of Tampa were purchased on June 1, 1960, for \$18,000. The mission was authorized to proceed with the erection of a parsonage on this property. December 4, 1960, was a happy day for Mount Calvary congregation, for on that day they dedicated their new parsonage.

Mount Calvary observed the laying of the cornerstone of its new chapel on February 11, 1962. Pastor G. Press served as guest speaker. The congregation dedicated the chapel on April 29 of the same year.

Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bradenton, like Mount Calvary in Tampa, started out in a recreation hall of a trailer court. However, they did not experience rough times as bad as Tampa. 105 people attended the first public worship service, held at Pic-Town Estates Recreation Hall on

⁹ "Direct from the Districts," The Northwestern Lutheran, September 11, 1960, pg. 301.

February 10, 1957.

Because it was apparent from the very beginning that there was a need for having a meeting place of its own and also adequate facilities for serving the great number of "winter guests," the congregation of Peace Lutheran, under the supervision of the Michigan District Mission Board, immediately began the search for a suitable piece of property.¹⁰ On October 7, 1958, five acres of property were purchased by a private individual for the congregation.

During the year 1960, Peace Lutheran watched the construction of their new church building, which was Floridian in design and able to seat about 200 people. With Lutheranism being comparatively new to Florida, it was felt that Reformation Sunday would be a most appropriate time for dedicating the new church to the worship and service of the Triune God. On October 30, 1960, the new church of Peace Lutheran was dedicated by its pastor, the Rev. James Vogt. A nursery-Sunday School-office addition was dedicated in February of 1964.

The last of the first four Florida missions to get started was Bay Pines Evangelical Lutheran Church of Seminole. Like Mount Calvary of Tampa, Bay Pines was a daughter congregation of Faith Lutheran. Exploratory work was begun in the Bay Pines area in 1958 by Pastor Steih, since a number of families holding membership in Faith were interested in starting a new mission there.¹¹

Under the direction of the Michigan District Mission Board, the mission was started in August of 1958. The first service was conducted on August 3 at the Beach Memorial Funeral Chapel. Pastor Steih conducted services in the

¹⁰ James L. Vogt, "Dedication - Peace Lutheran Church, Bradenton, Florida," The Northwestern Lutheran, March 26, 1961, page 103.

¹¹ Julian Anderson, author, 25th Anniversary Booklet of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1955-1980, p. 11.

funeral home for two months, until Pastor Howard Kaiser was installed as the first residential pastor. He began his work in October, and in January of the following year the congregation was organized with nine voting charter members. The nucleus of Bay Pines Lutheran was 10 or 12 people from Faith Lutheran who lived in the area. The church took the name Bay Pines because it was in the general area of Bay Pines Veteran's Hospital, a well-known place in the Tampa Bay area.

The funeral chapel only served as a temporary worship facility. Circumstances made it apparent that Bay Pines congregation could not worship there for very long. First of all, they were unable to conduct any evening services, such as during the Lenten season. Secondly, it was impossible to hold two services, even though the attendance was nearing the 80-seating capacity of the chapel.

Bay Pines needed a church of their own, and they needed land on which to build. At the time, finding land was easy, but paying for it was the hard part. Because of the building boom in Florida, land was getting high in price. After more than a year of inquiring and searching for a suitable site, three and a half acres of land were purchased from a developer and builder. The land was an open field of grass and snakes. It didn't look like much, but the developer foresaw a residential area growing up and a large shopping mall across from the property. Under the direction of God the area became the growing city of Seminole, with Bay Pines Evangelical Lutheran Church in the very heart of the city.¹²

The parsonage was dedicated in July 31, 1960. Potential problems in building the church were eliminated by a good contractor. When the blueprints for the church showed that it went over the boundary line, the

¹² An interview with Pastor Howard Kaiser, March 19, 1980.

contractor together with Pastor Kaiser decided to flop the church over. It worked out fine. The church was dedicated to the glory of God on February 26, 1961.

The Southeastern states are crowded with Baptist churches. At the time when the Wisconsin Synod began exploring Florida for possible mission opportunities, Lutheran churches were few. This was the reason why many people would visit our missions, thinking that one Lutheran church wasn't any different than any other Lutheran church. Pastor Kaiser had quite a few people walk out angrily from church services because they were not allowed to commune in his Wisconsin Synod church.

Lodges were, and still are, a big problem in Florida. People couldn't see anything wrong with them. Mrs. Kaiser would count the number of men in church on Sunday who wore lodge pins on their suit coat lapels. Many times there were more men who were lodge members than those who weren't.

The increase in membership of the Florida missions was largely the result of adult instruction classes. At Bay Pines, after eight years, out of 60 families only 6 were of Wisconsin Synod background. Most of the growth was either through adult confirmation or profession of faith. According to Pastor Kaiser, this worked out well. Seven out of the nine men on the church council at one time were adult confirmands. This kept the spirit alive within the congregation.

The four congregations made use of the lay visitor program in making calls on prospective members. Also, the Florida missionaries would meet as often as possible to canvass their fields and to survey new fields. They would conduct their own conferences.¹³ No doubt the four men enjoyed getting together, since they were more than a thousand miles from their fellow Wisconsin Synod pastors in the Midwest.

¹³ "From Florida," The Northwestern Lutheran, October 11, 1959, p. 333.

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