

# Perspectives of a Pioneer

The personal reminiscences of Rev. Edgar Hoenicke regarding the history  
leading up to WELS mission work in Africa

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Of all the individuals of the Wisconsin Synod that have given much of their life's work to the spread of the gospel to foreign lands, one name that stands out among the rest is Pastor Edgar Hoenicke.

Pastor Hoenicke is probably remembered most for being one of the two "WELS forty-niners" who were the first men sent out independently by the Wisconsin Synod to explore possible mission fields in Africa in 1949. What a journey that was! The groundwork that Pastors Hoenicke and Wacker did on that trip paved the way for our Synods first independent missionary work outside the United States.

Pastor Hoenicke seems to be a man who loved his tape recorder. On his first trip to Africa he took along a tape recorder, taping various interviews, African singing, and Lutheran church worship in Africa, along with many other things. We are privileged to have these reel-to-reel tapes that he recorded in 1949 and work is being at this time to dub those tapes onto cassettes, so that others may hear of the work, and see the mind of this mission pioneer.

In this paper we are going to look at some of the reminiscences of Rev. Hoenicke about the development of foreign missions in the Wisconsin Synod. The reminiscences transcribed in this paper were taped by Pastor Hoenicke himself in the year 1980, and will be included in the set of cassette tapes when they are complete.<sup>1</sup> He begins thus:

It is now May 6, 1980. I have been asked many times to put down some of my thoughts and recollections with regard to the development of greater mission interests, especially as far as world missions were concerned in the Wisconsin Synod back as far as I can remember. To give this background in order to understand the difficulties that were experienced by those who advocated the greater outreach into world missions in the 30's and 40's and who finally prevailed by getting the Wisconsin Synod to pass a resolution in 1945 convention,

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of Rev. Hoenicke are taken from tape number two of the set.

the “happy convention” of 1945 at the end of World War II, to authorize the sending of an exploratory team into Africa and then the opening of the actual mission work in Central Africa near Lusaka in about 1953. I’m going to try to give you some of these reminiscences and I would like to say that I will vouch for the correctness of what I recall and remember as far as the personalities, the facts, the obstacles, the difficulties, and the successes are concerned.

To begin his reminiscences of the growth of world missions in the Wisconsin Synod, Pastor Hoenicke takes us back nearly to the turn of the century, when he was a student at the Seminary. It is interesting to note here some of the names that we hear in his next few words. Here we see some of the greatest theological minds that our Synod has ever known, Professors August Pieper and J.P. Koehler.

As far as I am concerned... the real impetus for this renewed missionary activity to bring about a mission awareness in the first place in the Wisconsin Synod and then to carry it out in an independently conducted and financed mission thrust into the world overseas seems to have stemmed from some of the fiery lectures of Professor August Pieper at the Seminary at Wauwatosa, especially his lectures on the prophecy of Isaiah. I can still hear and vividly in my mind see him as he paced back and forth in the classroom in front of the entire class, lecturing in his incisive voice and punctuating his lecture with sudden direct approaches to one of the fellows who sat in the front row, sometimes even driving the tip of his large pocketknife into the desktop with a man sitting in it to drive his point home. The thing that moved him most incurably to such theatricals was his insistence that like Isaiah, we dare not rest until we have carried out the Lord’s command to bring the life-giving Gospel to the heathen of our world in our day....

But Professor Pieper did not save his rather cutting messages regarding the mission of the Church for his classroom. He spoke in a most fiery way at the 1919 synod convention, attempting to move the synod toward more of a mission mindset, both among those who spoke English, and to the far corners of the earth. Pastor Hoenicke recalls those words of admonishment against an anemic mission endeavor:

Some of the fire and force of August Pieper’s burning zeal for missions and his passion for souls comes through very powerfully in an essay which he read to the 1919 convention of the Synod.... August Pieper said: “Our mission work until now, our Indian mission, our ‘*Reisepredigt*,’ even our educational institutions have been but a miserable, pitiful bungling, a botchery lacking both fire and force.

At every convention it is as though we were asking ourselves, ‘Do we actually want to or do we not want to do the work?’ Half a heart, half a job, and therefore half a result. We’ve worked as though we were dreaming....”

The effect of this essay on the 1919 convention was profound. A resolution was passed immediately to publish it in both German and English for free distribution to all the members of our congregations and the congregations were asked to gather in groups so that Prof. Pieper in person could read this essay to them. Within a few years more and more work was done by the congregations in English and efforts were made to reach the unchurched. At the time of the Synod’s 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary it was reported that 70% of the churches were conducting also English services.

But this seeming victory for mission expansion in the church was not as much a victory as it would seem. Not all in the Wisconsin Synod were of the same mission mind as August Pieper. Here Pastor Hoenicke gives us a small taste of the conflict that was brewing between Professor Pieper and Professor J.P. Koehler that come to a head a few years down the road in the Protes’tant controversy.

With this fine beginning (from the results of Professor Pieper’s 1919 essay) it is difficult to understand that there was no awakening of a more zealous mission spirit at that time to reach the millions of souls who were still without the hope of Christ in far-off lands. To a certain extent this may be accounted for by the fact that in the year before the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary convention, that is 1924, the Synod had indeed responded to a plea from several groups of Lutherans in Poland, who after the war had been gradually deprived of orthodox preaching, and now had formed a small, confessional church which was in need of help. Apparently, this support and the cost of the Apache mission in Arizona was thought to be as much as the Synod could well carry. But there was another, and far more persuasive, argument which retarded mission progress. This was found in the diffident attitude and the unclear thinking, even among some of the leaders, concerning the obligation of the body, that is, of the Synod, to carry on heathen missions. This was still a strongly retarding impediment for mission outreach during the debate at the 1945 convention. This is not only reported by Professor John Philip Koehler in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, but it becomes clear that he shared the oppositional position. We quote, “There was something not entirely sound about Synod’s heathen mission endeavor. Namely this: that it was said that a church is not living up to its mission unless it engages in heathen mission work according to the Lord’s great commission.... That idea,” writes Koehler, “is dogmatism with a streak of pietism and it even provoked the criticism of Professor Adolph Hoenicke of the Seminary.... In distinction from the mission houses abroad, the tackling of the work in Arizona was unintelligent, in that, the

perspective missionaries were not given adequate training at college and Seminary....

These words from Pastor Hoenicke are indeed interesting. The WELS faced many challenges to growth in missions even after this time, and the debate was often very heated.

The constituency, however, that is, the members of the Synod, showed enthusiasm for the mission undertaking and so it was that the so-called “mission brethren” were given free reign. Now as it was these same mission brethren were the very ones who already did more than their share for Synod schools, their institutions. But “their dogmatizing,” that’s Koehler’s remark, “about the mission principle, to wit, that heathen mission is the best spur to the church’s home endeavors, remained only a pious slogan, at best.”

To understand the full implications of this statement of Professor John Philip Koehler with regard to the “mission brethren”... and their dogmatizing about the church’s principle... we must adduce another quotation from the same author. Let us note that it is a common human frailty that when a certain failing, such as a lack of simple obedience to the Lord’s clear, and oft repeated mission command becomes a habit, extenuating arguments are adduced to justify this failing and finally rationalizing principles are set up to salve the conscience. Here is such an example. This is another quote from J.P. Koehler in the *History of the Wisconsin Synod*. I quote, “In outward matters the church is subject to natural developments like the rest of the world under God. Not all groups or organizations have the same tasks to perform. There are organizations, like peoples, that remain small in number, and in that very fact have a token of their mission to do intensive rather than extensive work by which the world may profit even more. This Wisconsin Synod had a college, for instance, that was off to a good start along fundamental lines to maintain and develop. That was mission enough for a while.... The minimal growth of the organization ought to have come from within, to assure compactness of the body and the inward strength that grows from close identity and singleness of purpose....”

The battle lines had been drawn. For various reasons, many in our Synod, including Professor August Pieper wanted mission expansion. And for various other reasons, many in our Synod, including Professor J.P. Koehler seemed to be against it. At any rate, mission growth stagnated, and Pastor Hoenicke comments:

It was not merely a matter of being slow in following the Lord’s command, it was the matter of a false view of the importance of carrying out the commission of the

Lord to go out into all the world with the gospel and at the same time to hold on to that gospel in truth and purity in doctrine and practice. It must be remembered that Professor August Pieper and Professor John Philip Koehler were contemporaries... and we sat under both of these men.

One wonders what it might have been like to be a classmate of Pastor Hoenicke, to see these two theological giants butting heads in this way. But one also wonders why this divergence even occurred in the first place.

Looking at the statements of the two professors, as recalled by Pastor Hoenicke, it seems as though they were discussing the twofold task of the church, namely to share the gospel with those who have not yet heard it, and to nurture those who by the grace of God have faith in Christ Jesus. Which is more important? That is a difficult question, for both are important. Our churches need a proper balance of the two. But it seems as though in differing opinions, the two professors went to opposite ends of the spectrum.

But why so many disparaging remarks about Professor J.P. Koehler? We know from Synod history that the conflict between these two professors as the years progressed moved into the student body, which became divided. One might ask if Pastor Hoenicke was one of "Pip's Boys." But that question will have to remain for another paper.

It is in the middle of this debate over missions that Pastor Hoenicke entered the public ministry. He remembers:

When we finally entered the ministry, thus fired up and impatient to bring the world to the Savior's feet, we found that matters were very different, so very different and so very difficult than what we had expected. In the first congregation I served I found some people who were ready to be instructed and to join our church but could not speak German. I was told by the church council when I asked to instruct these people in English that I would not be permitted to hold English services.... I defied this order and had English services.... In our conferences and synodical conventions... it was seldom that anyone spoke of our obligations to win souls at home and abroad. Perhaps we heard this at mission festivals, but seldom otherwise.

To record the Synod's growth in the congregations through adult confirmations and conversions tells the story very eloquently. The fact that we had only the Indian mission and the mission in Poland and had great trouble in keeping these two going... also speaks volumes.

It is difficult for us to imagine what Pastor Hoenicke went through. With such a strong mind for missions, nothing seemed to be getting done. Even his own church council seemed to ~~not~~ want to have anything to do with missions. Yet young Rev. Hoenicke, full of bravery, defied his church council. This short part of his memoirs shows us what kind of heart for the mission of the Church that he had. Yet he was in no way a "Lone Ranger." There were others who shared his mission zeal.

And still there were men who had sat under August Pieper and had imbibed his spirit and whose hearts were warmed to mission work. I found a number of them when I accepted a call in 1929 to the Michigan District. We realized that we were not doing our duty as a church and determined to do something about it. The result was a publication... in the early 1930's. At that time I drew cartoons showing our pastors active in the mission of the church at large, or inactive, as the case might be.

The synodical President, John Brenner, asked to see some of the bulletins of the Michigan plan in 1933. And when he read them, he approved of them very greatly and ... introduced them for the entire Synod.... Some of these bulletins are still available.

I would give a great deal to secure... the one bulletin for which I had drawn a cartoon showing a railroad engine, standing huffing and puffing under a full head of steam but stopping because of the fact that before it stretched a deep gaping hole...labeled "the Synod's debt"...running in the neighborhood of six or seven hundred thousand dollars.

Things in the synod were at a very low ebb, indeed. This must be taken into account if anyone would understand the later reluctance... to take on a large mission expansion program.

Just when things seemed to be changing, right as Pastor Hoenicke began contact with others and work to inform the members of the WELS about missions, another problem had risen. Over the years the synod had accumulated a very large debt, which

would put a damper on any mission work until it was taken away. But the zeal for missions was not put out. And by 1945, we had some very happy news.

It was not until this new convention in 1945... that President John Brenner with a very happy emotion, clearly discernable in his voice, opened his biennial report with these words: "During the past biennium the offerings of our Christians increased to such an extent that our books today show a sizable surplus." The report of the Board of Trustees, usually appearing at the beginning of the convention to set a conservative mood and pattern, in 1945 came as number 41 in the list of reports....

I have called the convention of 1945 at New Ulm the "happy convention" of the Wisconsin Synod. Not merely because of the fact that a program resolved upon in 1935 to retire the Synod's debt had been completed and that a reserve fund of \$350,000 was in the treasury. That would have been cause for rejoicing. But there was greater reason behind our rejoicing, and calling the convention of 1945 the Synod's "happy convention." For me this convention was the "happy convention" because finally the Wisconsin Synod engine and train... could now be put into action.

With this wonderful news driving the convention forward, Pastor Hoenicke presented the report of the Executive Committee for the Apache Indian Mission. And, seizing the day, he bravely set the Synod on the track of foreign mission expansion.

The proposal... to extend our missionary activity and the Lord's work came from the proper source: The Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Apache Mission, the only truly heathen mission carried on by the Wisconsin Synod independently in 1945. The effect of this proposal on the synod was like dropping another bomb (the Hiroshima bomb had just been dropped). The report was based on a clear text from Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6. The report read in part as follows: "With unusual force the present-day fulfillment of prophecy concerning the signs of the last times must stir up in our hearts and consciences the remembrance of the Word of our Lord Jesus, 'Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and in Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth.'.... We cannot shirk these issues much longer with impunity. We've had the precious gospel kept for us for 100 years. We have become well established with all the means for carrying out a full program of work, as our Lord has outlined it. And we will have worldwide opportunities in profusion.... As your committee in charge of the only heathen mission... we earnestly urge this session of our Wisconsin Synod to take thought and action in the matter of mission work among those who have had no opportunity to hear the sound of the saving gospel until now.... And because world time is becoming short we plead that

consideration of the wider mission program be undertaken by the Synod with dispatch.”

What a stirring report! But what would be the outcome? Again, there would be some who were against expansion, and that was understandable, as the Synod had just gotten out of a huge debt. Who would win the day in August in New Ulm, Minnesota?

The immediate and surprising reaction to the reading of the Apache Indian Mission report with its proposal to expand our missionary activity was the curt statement from the President, and I quote, “You’re out of order.”

Then the Chairman of the Apache Executive Committee replied as follows: “With all due respect, Mr. President, but my Bible tells me that Jesus said, ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.’” Immediately there was a clamor from the delegates for permission to speak. In fact, there were many who spoke strongly in favor of a full discussion of the mission proposal that someone asked me later on whether we had pre-arranged the whole thing. This was not the case. But it was the spontaneous response and support of thankful Christians....

After a thorough discussion, pro and con, the convention proceeded to vote.... The resolution was adopted by a large majority.

The New Ulm convention of 1945 was a great turning point in the history of the WELS. It authorized the mission arm of the Synod to begin exploratory work in other countries and continents to find out where the WELS might best serve. This led to Pastor <sup>e</sup> Hoenicke’s first trip to Africa, where he found a land that was in great need of the good news of Jesus Christ.

To get to this point in the history of the Synod, however, was not easy. There were many obstacles in the way. Yet Pastor Edgar <sup>e</sup> Hoenicke did not give up. He did not lose his mission zeal.

As with all church history, we look back and first thank God for those who have gone before us. As we look at the blessings that the Lord of the Church is showering upon our current work in Africa we must thank him first for the men who took the

initiative to get us there. But even more than that we learn important lessons from those who have gone before. The love of missions and the constant stick-to-it-iveness of Pastor Hoenicke are good examples for us to follow as well.

May the Lord of the Church guide us as we share the message of Christ crucified, around the corner and around the World.

*Soli Deo Gloria*