

WISCONSIN SYNOD MISSION FESTIVALS (1850 - 1875):  
Their Origin, Custom, and Benefit

by

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The festival dedicated to doing mission work among the heathen finds a natural place in the church year at Epiphany, for this is when we celebrate the first worship of the Savior by men of a heathen nation. Undoubtedly, faithful pastors of the Lutheran church have always used this occasion to present to their congregations the work of spreading the gospel where it is not known. In America, for example, Dr. Walther preached a sermon on Epiphany Sunday, 1850; the theme was "Foreign Missions: a Christian Obligation."<sup>1</sup> But in an effort to emphasize this obligation to preach the gospel to the world, the practice came into being whereby a special Sunday was chosen and the whole day was dedicated to instruction in and encouragement to do mission work. Such a special mission festival in the Lutheran church began in Germany and was brought to America by German immigrants.

To be specific, two American farmers of the Missouri Synod remembered the mission festivals in Germany and wanted to see the same thing in their own community.<sup>2</sup> The result was that the churches near Edwardsville and Collinsville, Illinois (about 20 miles from St. Louis) were the first in the Missouri Synod to reserve a special Sunday for a mission festival. At least, the mission festival at Edwardsville in 1855 was the first one recorded in Der Lutheraner.<sup>3</sup> There was no Missouri Synod church in Edwardsville, but the pastors thought it would be of benefit to the people there, so they borrowed an English church for the occasion. The Sunday was the first in Advent and as was common in these first festivals, the church was filled to overflowing.<sup>4</sup> Der Lutheraner reports that again in 1856 and in 1857, the same group held its mission festival in Collinsville.

The pastor at Collinsville for these three years was Pastor C. Strassen, who shortly afterwards took a call to Watertown, Wisconsin. He obviously carried with him the idea of having a special mission festival in early autumn, because on the 14th Sunday after Trinity, 1859, the Missouri Synod congregations in Watertown and Lebanon held their first mission festival. This was, of course, also the first mission festival in Wisconsin.<sup>5</sup>

From here, the mission festival spirit spread to Sheboygan. In 1860, the congregations in that area held their first mission festival at the rural congregation of Town Hermann. The report in Der Lutheraner states that the people in this area had been wanting to have a mission festival for a long time already (although it is hard to say whether this means for the past few months or the past few years). Such a desire is quite evident in the way they carried out their festival. For one thing, this was the first mission festival recorded in Der Lutheraner which was held outside.<sup>6</sup> They had probably read the articles reporting on previous festivals which usually mentioned churches crowded to the chancel steps, into the narthex, and onto the outside steps and on a hot day nonetheless. Since they were inviting people from Morrison, Maple Grove, Manitowoc, Sheboygan, Sheboygan Falls, Plymouth and Hermann on what could be a warm September day, they solved the problem of overcrowding by holding the church services outdoors. Their zeal was also evident in the reports which appeared in Der Lutheraner. Every year, the title of the article would announce "The First (Second, Third, Fourth, etc.) Mission Festival in Northern Wisconsin." This yearly mission festival was the most regular of any in the 1850's or 60's. Of the seventeen mission festivals mentioned in Der Lutheraner by 1866, Sheboygan had

five; Collinsville, four; Watertown-Lebanon, three; and several others, one each. According to the numbering mentioned, Sheboygan also had another festival which wasn't reported.

It was here in Sheboygan that this zeal was carried over into the Wisconsin Synod. Although there was no Gemeindeblatt in 1864, in an 1874 edition of the paper, Pastor Sprengling mentions the first mission festival held in Sheboygan County 9 or 10 years before at Town Hermann.<sup>7</sup> In the first year of the Gemeindeblatt, 1865, what was probably the second mission festival was reported as being held in Centerville near Sheboygan. In 1866, it was at Mosel. Any later than that couldn't have been mistaken as being 9 or 10 years before 1874. Pastor Sprengling must have been referring to a mission festival which occurred before the Gemeindeblatt began. Such a mission festival in 1864 would make it exactly 10 years previous.

Why the most enthusiastic mission festival minded group in the Wisconsin Synod (from 1864 to 1875 a report in the Gemeindeblatt for a mission festival in this area is missing for only two years) should be located in the same area as the most enthusiastic group of the Missouri Synod is not hard to explain. The Wisconsin Synod congregations were formed in 1862 (Mosel), 1863 (Centerville), and 1864 (Hermann). It is not unlikely that some of the founding members were originally members of the Missouri Synod congregations, perhaps some of the same who had been eager to begin the mission festivals in 1860.

#### Sheboygan

The 1865 mission festival at Centerville covered a wider area than most. All the pastors of the northern conference (and their congrega-

tions) were invited. This would include Manitowoc and Green Bay and perhaps more, besides just the Sheboygan congregations. Of these pastors, only one was missing, because of bad weather.<sup>8</sup> As was the custom, there were morning and afternoon services and each service consisted of the liturgy and two speakers. I say speakers because some of them preached a sermon and some gave a talk on mission work, either historical, informative, or even a good mission festival story. Because of the length of the services, the liturgy was often shortened and consisted mainly of hymn singing.

The 1866 mission festival was earlier in the summer than usual and it was held outside. It is quite interesting to read in some of the earlier articles how they would fix up the "small woods" chosen to be the service place. They would build a special altar, pulpit, and lecturn out of logs. Benches, sometimes for more than 700 people, were set up, as well as a special place for the choir. At this particular festival, Pastor Kleinert took the people on "a trip around the world. He testified of the struggles and victories of the Lord among the heathen, the Jews, and the Mohamadans." And in the afternoon, Pastor Quehl gave them a short overview of the inner mission (what we would call home missions and benevolences). "He described the great need among the Lutheran preachers and the necessity of congregations calling for help, fervently desiring the healing grace."<sup>9</sup>

There were no mission festivals recorded in the Gemeindeblatt in the years 1867 and 1869. However, I don't think we ought to therefore assume that none occurred. In fact, in the December 15 issue of 1869, a contribution is recorded as coming from Pastor Dammann's congregation in Milwaukee (St. Peter) and it is noted as being the mission festival

donation.<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, although the Milwaukee congregations only reported one mission festival to the Gemeindeblatt, we may assume that they held one regularly. Besides this donation, a sermon which had been preached at a Milwaukee mission festival was printed in the November 15 and December 1 issues of the 1875 Gemeindeblatt, although the festival itself was not reported. Therefore, just because a congregation doesn't annually report its mission festival, we need not think that it didn't annually celebrate one.

The 1868 Sheboygan mission festival was not very eventful. It consisted of only one morning sermon and one afternoon sermon with coffee and bread at noon.<sup>11</sup>

In 1870, the festival was celebrated even earlier than before -- July 10. One of the guest speakers was Professor Ernst from Watertown. Although there were a few former missionaries among the pastors of the synod, they didn't travel to preach at mission festivals as much as the professors, perhaps because of the professors' availability on Sundays. We also read that the nearby Missouri Synod pastor and his congregation were invited to attend this mission festival. And although the pastor was hindered from coming, many of his members did attend.<sup>12</sup>

In 1871, two professors spoke at the festival. As most of the longer articles do, this one talks about two favorite subjects: the weather and the noon meal.<sup>13</sup> As you might guess, even though these festivals were usually held outside and on Sundays, the weather was not always favorable; but the food was unfailingly good.

Beginning in 1872, the Wisconsin Synod congregations around Sheboygan celebrated their mission festivals with the Missouri Synod congregation in Sheboygan. In the first year, the festival was hosted by

the Missouri congregation (Pastor Spehr). One of the benefits of this joint effort was the use of the Sheboygan congregation's orchestra. It is mentioned in both the 1872 and 1873 reports.<sup>14</sup>

As was mentioned before, the 1874 report reflects back to the first mission festival in this area.<sup>15</sup> The only outstanding item in 1875 is that Pastor Spehr (Missouri) preached.<sup>16</sup>

It is not practicle to refer to each of the remaining articles as was done with those at Sheboygan. You may refer to the chart to see in what years the different locations reported festivals to the Gemeindeblatt.

#### La Crosse

La Crosse was the first area in the Wisconsin Synod besides Sheboygan to report on a mission festival. Its first one was celebrated in 1866. The festival day contained several individualistic features. First, in the morning service, Pastor Bading replaced the Lord's Prayer with a mission prayer for inner and outer missions. Then, the entire afternoon service was the "children's mission festival." Pastor Kittel spoke on the word "mission" and Pastor Bading talked about his travels in foriegn lands.<sup>17</sup>

#### New Ulm

New Ulm was the next to report on its mission festival in 1868. Their festival day ran from 10:00 in the morning until 10:00 at night, with morning, afternoon, and evening sessions. But there was only one sermon in each service. Although this was the only report given in the Gemeindeblatt, it is spoken of as a yearly festival and reference is

made to the previous year's festival.<sup>18</sup>

#### Milwaukee

From a three-service mission festival we go to an equally unusual one-service festival. Perhaps because of the proximity of the Milwaukee congregations and because of the everyday contact with friends in the city, they didn't feel the desire to get together with friends in sister congregations and make a big day of mission festival. The festival service reported in 1870 began at 3:00. There were two sermons and a mission report which had to be cut short because it got dark.<sup>19</sup>

#### Farmington - Watertown - Jefferson

The most enthusiastic area next to Sheboygan is in Watertown, Farmington, and Jefferson. Not only did each of these congregations celebrate its own mission festival, but they also took part in each other's festivals. The services in Farmington and Jefferson were so typical of many other mission festivals that perhaps we can make a few generalizations. It was common practice for the outdoor equipment (e.g., altar, pulpit, and benches) to be decorated with flowers and branches; and if the service were held inside, the whole church would be decorated in the same manner. Often, even the wagons and carriages in which the guests came were also decorated. Although some distant guests would arrive on Saturday night, most came in the morning before the service which was usually scheduled to start at 10:00. The crowd could vary from only filling half of a small church to over 2,000. The chief festival sermon would usually be heard in this service and then perhaps a talk on "inner missions." The choir and congregation would, of course,



sing in between, and the service would end about 12:30. An intermission of about an hour and a half would follow, in which the guests could eat and talk. At 2:00 the second service would begin. Besides the singing and abbreviated liturgy, which was usually done by the host pastor, there would be a second, shorter sermon followed by a talk on "outer missions," (what we would call foreign missions). The service would end at about 4:00 and perhaps after a bite to eat, the guests would gradually leave for home.

But everything was not always the same. We are told that at Farmington, Pastor Ungroth directed the choir and the school children also sang a piece.<sup>20</sup> In 1875, in a woods about a mile from Jefferson, the service began with a short discourse on the original mission festival of Epiphany compared to a summertime festival held outside in God's big house of nature. We are also told that Farmington and Helenville held their morning services in their own churches, so that the members of these congregations attending in the afternoon were rather few.<sup>21</sup>

Watertown, the site of the first Missouri Synod mission festival in Wisconsin, also celebrated a yearly Wisconsin Synod mission festival. In 1871, this mission festival was celebrated by both synods together at none other than Pastor Strassen's church. Unfortunately, it had rained the night before and the ground was too wet and cold in the morning, but they were able to hold the afternoon service outside. Pastor Link from Lebanon gave a talk about eight people who had done mission work in the past.<sup>22</sup>

#### Others

At Manitowoc's first mission festival in 1871, many farmers had to

be absent because of a raging forest fire near their homes.<sup>23</sup> In 1872, the Hustisford congregation celebrated a combination mission-harvest-reformation festival.<sup>24</sup> West Bend held its first three mission festivals on Wednesdays and then on Thursday. In 1873, Fond du Lac celebrated its mission festival as early as the Monday after Pentacost, June 2.<sup>25</sup> In 1875, Theresa celebrated mission festival on Thanksgiving Day. The morning service was in Theresa where the new organ was played, and the afternoon service in Mayville where members from two congregations in Kekoskee could attend.<sup>26</sup> In Granville, in 1875, the mission festival featured two German sermons and one English sermon.<sup>27</sup>

After spreading from one lone congregation to almost twenty-one in ten years, the enthusiasm to have a special mission festival continued to mushroom so that the Gemeindeblatt contained over fifty reports of festivals in 1889. A likely reason for this growth is, of course, encouragement from one pastor or member to another and perhaps even the result of the transfer of pastors from one congregation to another. But another major cause has to be the encouragement given to every member of the Wisconsin Synod who read the Gemeindeblatt. Encouragement like: The conference which held the first mission festival in our synod is to be congratulated for the interest in missions which this joining of congregations has worked and can work in others, and "we wish that where such mission festivals are still not held within our synodical circles, they might be introduced as soon as possible."<sup>28</sup> Or "May the right mission spirit soon penetrate all our congregations and may all the members of our churches come to the realization that the Lord has something for them to do."<sup>29</sup> Or about Town Mosel, "It is worth all appreciation, what

this little congregation has done for the glorification of the mission festival."<sup>30</sup> Or, "May all congregations be moved through this lovely example to celebrate mission festivals in their midst. This would bring them, without a doubt, great blessing and many friends."<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, these mission festivals did bring great blessing -- to people who heard the gospel through the mission festival donations, but also to the people who heard the gospel at the mission festivals. The pastors who hosted and preached at the mission festivals saw its benefit. There are few articles, when given enough space, which do not end by asking God's blessing such as: "May the Lord richly bless the preached Word in the hearts of the hearers, to strengthen their faith and make them ever more hard-working to do good works."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Der Lutheraner, Vol. 25, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, Vol. 24, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Vol. 24, p. 26

<sup>4</sup>Der Lutheraner, Vol. 12, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Vol. 16, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., Vol. 17, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup>Gemeindeblatt, Vol. 9, No. 24, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., Vol. 5, No. 8, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., Vol. 5, No. 23, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., Vol. 6, No. 24, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 8. and Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., Vol. 9, No. 24, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., Vol. 6, No. 7, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., Vol. 10, No. 24, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., Vol. 8, No. 6, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., Vol. 8, No. 22, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., Vol. 10, No. 9, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., Vol. 11, No. 12, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., Vol. 5, No. 24, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 8.

Mission Festivals  
Recorded in the Gemeindeblatt

	1864	1865	1866	1867	1868	1869	1870	1871	1872	1873	1874	1875
Sheboygan	F	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
La Crosse			F								X	X
New Ulm					X							
Farmington							X	X	X		X	
Jefferson								X		X	X	X
Milwaukee							X					
Leeds								F				
Burlington								F				
Watertown								X			X	
Manitowoc								F	X			
Fond du Lac									F	X	X	X
Reedsville									X			X
Franklin									X			
Columbus									X		X	
Hustisford									X		X	X
West Bend									F		X	X
Osseo, Minn.										X		
Granville											F	X
Eastwick Valley											X	X
Theresa												X
Freedom												F

X - mission festival

F - first mission festival