

"The Beginnings of Heritage Lutheran"

by
Frederick B. Schleg

Prof. Fredrich
Senior Church History
May, 1991

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Maquon, Wisconsin

The Beginnings of Heritage Lutheran

As a Christian, one of the most exciting things to witness is how the Holy Spirit works in a mission church through the Means of Grace. In the book of Acts we have the thrill of traveling along with Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, etc. and watching the Holy Spirit work miracles of faith in the new missions of the early Christian church. For instance, on Pentecost it's exciting for us to see it all begin and hear Peter preach, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:38-39) and then see the Holy Spirit move three thousand people to confess Jesus as their Lord. It's exciting to go along with Paul and his companions on three journeys to begin new missions through out the Mediterranean world. And while each new mission had its own unique challenges, we can't help but to marvel at how the Holy Spirit always worked through the Means of Grace and brought more people into the invisible church.

Today in our WELS circles it's just as exciting to see our missions also bear the same types of fruit that we read about in Acts. Our world missions in Africa are growing at a phenomenal rate through the blessings of the Holy Spirit. Our world missions in Japan, Brazil, Columbia, etc. are growing at a slower rate and yet we enthusiastically see the Holy Spirit working through the Means of Grace to win foreign souls. Our home missions are also seeing the same exciting fruits. Recently home missions have been opened in Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida,

Virginia, Illinois, etc. and all of them have seen the Holy Spirit work great things. And while we can never judge the success of a mission solely on statistics, there is one home mission that is particularly exciting and has been especially blessed by the Holy Spirit. That mission church is Heritage Lutheran of Lindenhurst, IL.

What makes Heritage Lutheran so special? Well, unlike most of our missions, Heritage Lutheran is made up mostly of people who were previously not WELS. In fact when it first started, it was made up of people who at most only had some weak church ties when they were kids. Is this so different from our other home missions? Yes it is. The usual WELS mission church scenario goes something like this. A group of WELS families who have left their home congregations because of job transfers or some other reason form a nucleus in an area where there is no nearby WELS congregation. They then request through their District Mission Board an exploratory or mission status from our Synod's Board for Home Missions. If the Board for Home Missions sees that there is potential growth beyond the nucleus of families, they will call a pastor on behalf of the nucleus and whoola - instant mission church. For example, if you look at the history of our missions in the Atlanta, Georgia area, you will see that their nuclei were made of Kimberly-Clark people from the Fox Valley area of Wisconsin. And it comes as no surprise that a good share of our missions in Florida and Arizona have a nucleus of WELS retirees. As it was mentioned before Heritage Lutheran in Lindenhurst, IL doesn't fit the typical WELS home mission mold. In fact what it has done is created a new mold that our Synod's Board for Home Missions is seriously considering for the future. Heritage Lutheran has been graciously blessed by the Holy Spirit and through him have done exciting things. I would like

to share with you the unique and exciting beginnings of Heritage Lutheran.

The History of Lindenhurst, Illinois

In order to understand the success of Heritage Lutheran, one should become a little familiar with the history of Lindenhurst, IL. Lindenhurst is a young community that is only 20 years old in northern Lake County. It has a population of 10,000 people who can be characterized as middle to upper middle class. Now at first that might not sound all that different from any other area in which we have started a mission church, but there are some things that make Lindenhurst unique.

First of all, Lindenhurst is located in Lake County, IL. According to reports put out two years ago in the summer of 1989, Lake County was the second fastest growing county in the nation and Lindenhurst is experiencing that growth. Back in 1980 Lindenhurst's population was only 1,500. As it was mentioned before, today Lindenhurst is slightly over 10,000. The projected growth for the area is even more astounding. Right now Lindenhurst consists of 2,500 homes. According to housing developments that have already been planned, within five years the number of single family homes will be over 4000. In other words, that would put the population of Lindenhurst at about 16,000. As for Lindenhurst's long range plans, within another 10-15 years another 10,000 - 15,000 people are expected to move into the area. With that kind of growth Lindenhurst is prime mission area.

Another thing that makes Lake County and Lindenhurst a promising mission area is the fact that recent reports have also shown that Lake County

families have the largest average family income of any other county in the nation. The average family income in Lindenhurst is \$75,000. This also makes Lindenhurst a prime mission area for two reasons. First of all, it shows us that a mission church, like Heritage Lutheran, will have the potential to become self-sufficient much sooner than other missions. But secondly and more importantly, this shows us that there is a special spiritual need in Lindenhurst. Just because the average family income is \$75,000, doesn't mean that the people don't have spiritual needs. The typical Lindenhurst family is a dual-income family that lives in a \$125,000 to \$400,000 home and with that comes stress; the high cost of living, huge mortgage payments, long commutes to Chicago, climbing the corporate ladder, day-care, parent-children problems, marital problems, materialism, etc. All of these things can add up and make the people search for something more. They have it all according to the ways of the world and yet they feel empty. They're looking for something. Something that can give them the peace they lack. And so they become prime mission prospects.

What does Lindenhurst have to offer in the way of churches to meet the people's spiritual needs? Nothing at all and that is another thing that makes Lindenhurst unique. With all of these prime mission prospect families there are only a handful of churches and none of them really offer what the people of the community need, namely the peace that only Jesus Christ can bring. There is a Methodist and ELCA church that offer humanistic fluff. There is a Catholic church that is quite liberal. And there are a couple of Community Churches with a strong Calvinist Reformed background. About the only church that has even made an attempt to reach out to the community is the Jehovah Witnesses.

And so that is where Heritage Lutheran comes into the picture. It's a WELS mission church that offers the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ in a community that really needs it.

Faith Lutheran's Role

In the Spring of 1985 Faith Lutheran of Antioch, IL called a second pastor from the graduating class of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. When the voters decided to do this they had two goals in mind. The first was to reduce the work load of their current pastor, Darald Gruen. The second was to have the new pastor concentrate on evangelism. Faith had always been strong in this area, but with it's growth over the years Pastor Gruen had less and less time to give evangelism the time it deserved. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit Faith received Greg Hermanson as their second called pastor. When Pastor Hermanson got settled in, he got to work immediately in the area of evangelism. After doing some studying of the demographics and future developments of the areas around Antioch, IL, the congregation decided to target the Lindenhurst - Lake Villa area. Faith already had 12 families living in this area and believed there was potential for more growth.

Before this Pastor Gruen had already done some initial ground work in exploring this area with Mr. Melvin Harms back in August 1984, but no field work was done until 1985. In 1985 the first thing Pastor Hermanson did was to go to the City Hall of Lindenhurst and Lake Villa to get the names of new families that had moved into the area. Immediately it became evident that Lindenhurst was an area that was ready to explode. After some initial surveying Pastor

Hermanson, Pastor Gruen, and the church council decided that it needed to take some action concerning the Lindenhurst area. So what the voters decided to do was to set up a Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) to study the current growth of Faith and to take into consideration the growth potential in Lindenhurst.

The LRPC came up with the following recommendations. If Faith were to grow at its current rate and would take in families from the Lindenhurst area, it would out grow its worship facilities by the year 1996. Since Faith is landlocked and has no more room to expand, it would have to sell its facilities and move to a new site. However, this recommendation wasn't feasible at that time and was turned down. Another recommendation from the LRPC was that Faith should begin exploratory services in the Lindenhurst area with the intention of beginning a daughter congregation. This was also given serious consideration, but Faith didn't have the manpower or the funds to begin a daughter congregation on its own. So the third recommendation that Faith pursue through the District Mission Board the possibility of starting a new mission via the Synod's Board for Home Missions was finally approved.

Faith immediately contacted Pastor Robert Hartman, the District Mission Counselor, and expressed to him the mission potential of Lindenhurst and the need to act quickly in order to get in Lindenhurst on the ground floor before other denominations did. From this point the The District Mission Board took control.

Since then Faith's voters have passed resolutions to let Heritage Lutheran use Faith's Christian Day School at a reduced tuition (giving Heritage Lutheran another mission arm), to share facilities for meetings, classes and special

services, and to help Heritage Lutheran in any way it can. During the past year Faith has also transferred five strong Lindenhurst families to Heritage Lutheran in order to give the congregation a solid base. Currently Faith is looking into the Spring Grove, IL area as its next mission project.

The District Mission Board's Role

Once Faith Lutheran expressed the vast potential for growth in the Lindenhurst area the District Mission Board of Northern, Southeastern, Western Wisconsin and Minnesota took over from there. The man in charge of seeing if a mission congregation was a viable option was Robert Hartman who at the time was the District Mission Counselor. Pastor Hartman began his work in the Lindenhurst area in the Summer and Fall of 1985. His first objective was to determine if Faith's report of the projected growth of Lindenhurst was accurate. To do this he went to the Lake County Court House and the Lindenhurst City Hall to get the current numbers of new homes being built in the area along with the expected population growth. What he found out was that if anything, Faith had underestimated the growth potential of the area. When Pastor Hartman further pursued the matter and got the projected figures for developments planned to be built within the next ten years, he was convinced that Lindenhurst was ready to experience a population explosion.

The next step was to determine how much of Lindenhurst was presently active in a church and to what extent these churches planned to do outreach. He interviewed all of the Churches in the neighboring area and found out that none of the churches were experiencing any significant growth and that none of them

had any intentions of doing outreach in the community. In fact when he asked all of these churches for their total membership numbers and compared that to the number of people in Lindenhurst, he found that over half of the town was unchurched.

While Lindenhurst was looking more and more promising for an exploratory mission, there was still one more question. Could the neighboring WELS churches work together in dividing and incorporating the Lindenhurst area in their own outreach programs? After sending out surveys to the neighboring WELS churches and receiving their replies, Hartman was ready to recommend Lindenhurst for an exploratory mission to the Synod's Board for Home Mission. In the survey Faith Lutheran in Antioch (3 miles away from Lindenhurst) said that their own growth and facilities would prevent them from being able to do this, but they would be glad to help in any way and transfer their Lindenhurst families for a nucleus. St. Paul's, Round Lake (7 miles away) also said they would be unable to help, but would be glad to transfer people for a nucleus. St. John's Libertyville (15 miles away) said they didn't have any members to transfer, but they would be glad to help a new mission. And finally, Immanuel, Waukegan (15 miles away) also said they would help in any way they could. The general consensus among these congregations was that Lindenhurst was ripe for a mission and they would encourage the Synod's Board for Home Missions to start one.

With all of these things taken into consideration, the District Mission Board recommended Lindenhurst to the Synod's Board for Home Missions as a hot spot for an exploratory for two basic reasons. One, it had tremendous growth potential

with a high percentage of unchurched people and two, the exploratory would receive tremendous support from the neighboring WELS congregations. This recommendation was approved and the calling for a mission pastor began on September of 1987. From this time to May three calls were issued, but all of them were declined. So in May of 1988 the call for the Lindenhurst exploratory was assigned to graduate Mark W. Anderson.

The Beginning of Heritage Lutheran

After Mark Anderson received his call from the Board for Home Missions, he began his work in Lindenhurst on July 1, 1988 with the help of Pastor Hartman. Pastor Hartman explained to Pastor Anderson the work that had already been done in the area and the help that he could expect from the Synod, District, and surrounding WELS congregations. As Pastor Anderson recalls it the Lindenhurst mission was presented to be a sure thing. Nevertheless, there was work to be done and with no WELS transfers up to this point, Pastor Anderson became a one man evangelism team.

The first thing he did was to conduct a door to door survey in the neighborhoods that surrounded his home. This, however, was not as easy as it might sound. Lindenhurst is a closed community. In other words, in order to do any canvassing work a person must first of all register with the police and apply for a permit. On top of that the hours in which a person is allowed to conduct a survey are quite limiting; weekdays and Saturdays 10 AM to 6 PM. This did create a problem. Most homes in Lindenhurst are two income homes and sit empty during the weekdays and during the summer months a good share of the town

leaves for the weekend. So what Pastor Anderson decided to do to overcome this barrier was two things; do evangelism mailings and friendship evangelism.

The friendship evangelism was most effective. Every evening Pastor Anderson would just go out for a leisurely walk through the neighborhoods and strike up conversations with anybody who was outside in their yard. He would then set up evangelism appointments in the evening with everyone who was interested. By September of 1988 he already had 100 solid prospects who wanted him to continue his visits and were very committed to coming to the first worship service. One of the things that Pastor Anderson found to be beneficial in his outreach was making it known that he had a home in Lindenhurst. He said that by having a home people saw him more as a friendly neighbor than some pushy Jehovah Witness who was just passing through.

By January of 1989 Pastor Anderson was ready for his first service. At this point he had gained another 100 prospect and still had no WELS transfers. Along with Pastor Hartman the two men planned the first service for Heritage Lutheran. (The reason the name Heritage Lutheran was chosen was because many former LCMS and ELCA members along with people from other denominations had expressed their displeasure with the liberal theology of their churches. By selecting the name Heritage Lutheran Pastor Anderson hoped to let the community know that this church was a solid Bible teaching church.) The first thing that they did was work with the public relations aspect of the first service. They sent mailings, bought adds in the local papers, and put up posters. The next thing they worked on was developing a user-friendly first service. They had found a worship facility in Lindenhurst, the Lindenhurst Civic Center and by

May things were ready.

On May 7, 1989 (in less than a year from when the first survey work took place and with no WELS nucleus) Heritage Lutheran had their first service. 252 people attended the first service and less than 50 of those people were visiting WELS people. As Pastor Anderson recalls it was an exciting experience to see over 200 unchurched people come.

As most mission churches experience, there was a significant drop in attendance for the second service. Nevertheless, for the remainder of 1989 Heritage Lutheran's church attendance averaged over 64 people. The unique thing about this was that this number was made up of previously unchurched people only. In fact the church council up to 1990 was made up of previously unchurched people only. As Pastor Anderson pointed out this was an educational experience not only for the men of the council, but also for him.

Another unique thing about Heritage Lutheran was that they had no communicants since everyone was previously unchurched. Everyone needed to go through instruction classes. However, the typical Bible Information Class format just wouldn't work for the number of people involved. But with some creative thinking Pastor Anderson found a way around this barrier. Every Sunday for an entire year he would preach on a specific part of Luther's Catechism. He would find a text and hymns that would all fit the topic so that the entire service would be an instruction class. For his Sunday morning and midweek Bible classes he would then supplement the Sunday service with Bible Information Class materials. And so on Pentecost Sunday in 1990 Heritage Lutheran had a special confessional service in which 75 members were received in the Rite of Reception.

As Pastor Anderson pointed out, this is something they would like to continue every Pentecost.

An amazing statistic about Heritage Lutheran is that it received mission status on April 7, 1990. In less than 11 months from its first service, it has become a mission church. This is certainly a sign that the Holy Spirit is blessing the work of Heritage Lutheran.

Heritage Lutheran Today

Today Heritage Lutheran is the thriving mission that everyone hoped it would be back in 1985. It is continuing to grow through the power of the Holy Spirit. In fact it has grown to the point of where they have recently purchased some property to build a church that could possibly hold up to 500 people. The nice thing about the piece of property they have is its location and attraction. For \$250,000 they bought 6 acres of lakeshore property in what will eventually become the center of Lindenhurst after 10 years of development. In Northern Illinois that same piece of property is worth at least a million. However, due to some village blue laws the developer was forced to sell and Heritage Lutheran quickly stepped in. The size of the piece is more than adequate for future growth and its location is perfect. Another benefit is the lakeshore which will be effectively utilized in both attracting new members, congregational events and giving the church esthetic beauty.

Besides the fact that Heritage Lutheran is a thriving mission congregation on the grow with over 100 members in only two years, what else makes it so special? What makes it different from our other mission congregations today?

When Pastor Hartman was asked this question he said that three things made Heritage Lutheran special; its user-friendly worship service, its pastor, and most importantly its solid core of members who are dedicated to outreach.

Heritage Lutheran has a church service that is a little different than most WELS congregations. It is very user-friendly. In other words, the service is designed so that any unchurched person that visits can easily follow along without any explanation. Pastor Anderson says that what they have done is taken the common liturgy and brought it down to the visitors' level of understanding. They have 12 different services for variety, but all of them share the same basic elements, a focus on God's Word through out the entire service, a wide range of music, and simplicity.

Each Sunday the service focuses in on one particular need of the people in Lindenhurst such as family relations. Everything from the Sermon to the readings to the Psalms focus in on what God has to say about the family in his Word and how Jesus Christ affects the whole picture. In other words, the people feel that the entire service is something that is very applicable to their everyday lives.

Something else that makes Heritage Lutheran's worship special is their music. According to Luther music is only second to God's Word in moving people. Since this is the case, music plays a major part in the services. So much so that the congregation might sing up to 5 to 10 hymns on any given Sunday. While every hymn is Scriptural, they, nevertheless, cover a large range of music. By doing this everyone is able to sing a style of music they like such as; Christian Contemporary, and at the same time learn to appreciate other styles like German

chorales and Bach. Musically there is something for everyone; musicians, choir members and the average guy in the pew.

Another strength of Heritage Lutheran is Pastor Mark W. Anderson. As Pastor Hartman said, "Mark has a special personality that reaches out to people." This is very evident when you consider that Heritage Lutheran began with only unchurched people just two years ago. What Mark does for outreach comes natural. He presents himself as the caring pastor who is active in the community and can be a trusted friend when you need one. In other words, he is very strong in friendship evangelism. For instance, when Pastor Anderson moved into his home he made a visit to every neighbor just to introduce himself. Over time people got to know him as a good friend who was willing to listen. Today his next door neighbor who was previously unchurched is now the President of Heritage Lutheran. In fact, most of the people in Heritage Lutheran are people who have come to now Christ through their friendship with Pastor Anderson.

Another strength of Pastor Anderson's is closely related to his friendship evangelism approach and that is his ability to understand where people are coming from and being able to accept them as they are. So often pastors are accused of not being in touch with reality. It is said that they often live in their own little worlds. They have no idea of what it is really like in the "real world" and as a result they have a hard time relating to the common man and his problems. Pastor Anderson, however, isn't this type of pastor. Before enrolling in the Bethany Program and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mark was a businessman in Florida. He knows the pressures that people face in the real world. He understands the problems that most of the working couples in Lindenhurst are

experiencing: job stress, marital stress, financial stress, etc. And so what Pastor Anderson is very strong in doing is applying God's Word in very simple terms to his people and their needs. This is evident in his preaching, teaching, and in every aspect of his ministry.

As it was mentioned before, the greatest strength of Heritage Lutheran would probably have to be its people and their enthusiasm to share the Gospel with the community of Lindenhurst. Right now the congregation's make up has changed from its early beginnings. Before it was made up of unchurched people only. Today the congregation is 50% unchurched and 50% churched (people who have come from the WELS, LCMS, Reformed, and Pentecostal Churches) As Pastor Anderson points out this combination makes for a healthy balance. The recent converts add tremendous enthusiasm and the churched people add stability. Together as a whole the congregation has become very effective in the work of evangelism. In fact, in 1990 the congregation went over the Synod's recommended expenditure for evangelism in a home mission and spend over \$4200 in their outreach to Lindenhurst. What is even more astounding is the fact that all of this \$4200 came out of their own pockets and not from Synodical support.

However, the congregation's most effective way of outreach is friendship evangelism. Each member is encourage to share their faith with their close friends and neighbors and so far this has shown to be more effective than mailing, surveying and multi-media public relation campaigns. But this should come as no surprise since this was also the most effective means of outreach in the early Christian church. In order to further enhance the people's ability in the

area of friendship evangelism, Heritage Lutheran has just begun a five year program called "Come and See" in which within a five year period every member will go through an in depth study of how to witness Christ to their friends.

While all of these things are important factors in the success of Heritage Lutheran, Pastor Anderson and the congregation are quick to point out that their success is the work of the Holy Spirit. Heritage Lutheran gets the Gospel out to its community, but the Holy Spirit is the one who is really working in Lindenhurst. As Pastor Anderson says, "We're just doing what Jesus told us at the Great Commission."

Conclusion

Missions are exciting. It's exciting to see people who were lost in sin excited about their new life in Christ. It's exciting to see the people of a congregation make a commitment to carry out the Great Commission. It's exciting to watch the Holy Spirit work in and through Christians with the power of the Means of Grace. It's exciting to see a mission church grow with God's blessings. And it will be exciting to see what the Holy Spirit has in store for the future of Heritage Lutheran.

Special Thanks

I would like to give special thanks to Pastor Greg Hermanson, Pastor Robert Hartman and especially to Pastor Mark Anderson for all of the materials, information and interviews that made this paper possible.