

The History of the Lutheran Church in Latin America

The voyages of Columbus under the flag of Ferdinand and Isabella introduced medieval Christianity (albeit the Roman Catholic variety) into the new world. Twelve priests sailed with Columbus on his second voyage, and thereafter churchmen always accompanied the conquistadores on their perilous ocean crossings and even more perilous penetrations of wild and unknown shores.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries churches and monasteries were planted profusely in unlikely places and in circumstances requiring extremes of devotion, self-sacrifice, and physical and mental suffering. Soon this new "Christian empire" stretched from Argentina to California.

The vast empire which Columbus opened up for Spain in 1492 was converted into a closed corporation which stretched westward across the Atlantic to Mexico and Guatemala, southward to Chile and Argentina, and northward to Florida and California. It did not all belong to Spain, but all of it paid spiritual allegiance to Rome. In 1494 the Pope, in arbitrating a dispute between Spain and Portugal, drew a line whereby Portugal eventually acquired Brazil and imposed its language there. No one could then foresee the true extent of the new world, for the famed conquests came a generation later.

Cortes took Mexico in 1521; Pizarro took Cuzco or Peru in

1531; Quesada reached Bogota in 1538; and Valdivia established Santiago in 1541. Portugal, attaching greater importance to her new colonies in Africa and India, did not begin to settle Brazil until 1553. And, while these things were happening, the great tide of Protestant reformation was sweeping over Europe north of the Pyrenees - a reformation which would eventually reach into the Roman Catholic empire in Latin America. In 1528 German traders established a trading colony on the shores of Venezuela. There they engaged in a series of treasure-hunting expeditions, one of which shared in the romantic search for El Dorado and the capture of Bogota. But because of abuses and mismanagement the colony never really thrived and was gradually abandoned.

It was not, however, very long after the Venezuelan experiment began that Germans of definite evangelical convictions appeared in Santos, Brazil, shortly after the founding of that coastal town in 1532. One of the early names was recorded as Helio doro Eobano, the son of one of Luther's friends and one of the founding fathers of Rio de Janeiro. Another name associated with this colony was that of the Bavarian, Ulrich Schmid, who lived in South America from 1534 to 1554 and was probably a co-founder of Buenos Aires as well as the author of a book about his cross-country trek from Asuncion to Santos, Brazil in 1553. He was known to have suffered for his evangelical views. Most famous of all was Hans Staden who, while visiting his friend Heliodor in 1554, was captured by Indians and was almost devoured, but escaped to write the immortal account of his adventures, revealing his Lutheran faith.

The first regular Lutheran services were held in the Danish

Antilles, part of the Virgin Islands in 1666 when Pastor Kjeld Jensen Slagelse organized a congregation. He had accompanied the first colonizer, Captain Erik Smidt, from Copenhagen to the island of St. Thomas. A few years later a Danish West Indies company was organized and by 1672 attendance of all resident Danes at Lutheran services became compulsory. At this point, however, we are getting ahead of ourselves and away from the South American continent.

Justinian Von Welz became the first Lutheran missionary to hold services in South America. Von Welz was born in 1621 and while in Germany wrote many Christian pamphlets that stirred the souls of many people in the area of missiology. "He reminded all righteous believing Christians of the Augsburg Confession regarding a special society, through which with divine help 'our evangelical religion could be extended' and issued an invitation for a 'Society of Jesus' to promote Christianity and the conversion of the heathen."¹

Because of favorable responses from leading university professors and others, Von Welz was encouraged to write two further pamphlets: "Christian and Heartfelt Admonition" and "An Invitation to the Approaching Great Supper." When these publications didn't get much response from people, Von Welz called upon the courts of the princes for support. However, he received very little support in that quarter. In these writings he stated: "It will not be wrong if we in the year 1664 are considered to convert the Turks and the heathen. We evangelicals on Judgment Day will not be able to answer for our lack of effort to free unbelieving nations from their darkness."² He then attacked the

court chaplains, theologians, town councilors and other influential people for being apathetic toward missions: "In our day love for many good things has grown cold, therefore all those whose consciences accuse them and who are thinking of the day of reckoning should join the Society of Jesus."³

Although ~~these~~^{ese} two earnest appeals were without any results, still Von Welz once more came forth from his retirement into which he had retreated and in the same year (1664) seriously addressed all evangelical governments, clergymen, and all those who truly loved their Lord. This last appeal of his had to be printed in Holland, since all his further writings were forbidden to be published in Germany. His written appeal was answered by the scholarly Lutheran superintendent of Ratisbon, John Henry Ursinus. His reply had such an influence on the public that even some of Von Welz's friends forsook him and only a remnant of them were present in Holland to hear his very impressive parting words before he left for South America to carry on his mission work alone for two years before his martyr's death in Surinam.

Despite Von Welz's early death as a missionary in 1666, three searching questions with which he endeavored to awaken the slumbering conscience of the Church remain: "(1) Is it right that we, evangelical Christians, hold the Gospel for ourselves alone, and do not seek to spread it? (2) Is it right that in all places we have so many students of theology and do not induce them to Jesus Christ? (3) Is it right that we spend so much on all sorts of dress, delicacies in eating and drinking, etc., but have hitherto thought of no means for the spread of the Gospel?"⁴

As far as the theological leaders of the orthodox Lutheran church were concerned, there were not many men who, in principle, were opposed to foreign mission work, least of all Johann Gerhard (1528-1637), who "is always the parade horse trotted out to show that orthodox theologians had no understanding of missions."⁵ Elert shows convincingly that Gerhard had the same mission-mindedness as Luther and consequently did not hold "that the Great Commission had been fulfilled and was no longer binding."⁶

The first Lutheran church to be organized in South America was apparently established in the western part of Dutch Guiana in 1743. Some planters met in the home of Loedwijk Abbenzets on the Berbice River just below Fort Nassau and appealed for the right to have a pastor of their own. On condition that they agree to continue paying church taxes for the support of the Dutch Reformed Church, the appeal was granted. Even then they waited nine years for the arrival of a Lutheran clergyman. There was also a Lutheran congregation in Essequibo formed several years later.

After this, little mission work was done in South America until 1824 when the first large group of German immigrants landed in Brazil under the patronage of Dom Pedro I. It would be nice to think that the first thing the Lutheran immigrants did was to pool their resources to build a church and obtain a pastor. Occasionally this happened, although most of the Germans had neither the resources nor the incentives to plant churches. This was particularly true of those who were strongly influenced by the liberal philosophy of that era and who thought of religion as something to be established by the state. The Lutheran his-

tory of Brazil reveals that even though the first congregations were organized at Nova Friburgo in 1823, at Sao Leopoldo in 1824 and at Rio de Janeiro in 1827, nearly 40 years passed before a regular supply of pastors from Germany could be arranged for the rapidly growing colonies.

Another generation passed before the first synod was organized in Rio Grande do Sul in 1886 consisting of 15 parishes. It is unlikely that any German pastor dreamed of an autonomous Brazilian Lutheran church even then. A second synod, called The Lutheran Church in Brazil was organized in 1905 and two other German Synods in 1911 and 1912. The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod entered Brazil in 1901 after receiving pleas for help from orthodox Lutherans. In that year the L.C.M.S. sent its first missionary to San Pedro in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where within three years this mission had 13 congregations and 10 pastors. Today this church, whose main seminary is in Porto Alegre, has over 150,000 members and 600 congregations. They are even sending Portuguese pastors as missionaries to Portugal.

The L.C.M.S. also began mission work in Argentina in 1906 by first concentrating on rural areas. Since 1937, however, it has focused its mission work on urban centers. With a missionary force, the United Lutheran Church in America started work in Argentina in 1908, although it did not pursue its work vigorously until 1918, when it established a flourishing mission in Buenos Aires (where one-fourth of Argentina's inhabitants dwell). Its policy from the very beginning was to conduct its work chiefly among unchurched Spanish-speaking Germans and Scandinavians.

Meanwhile, World War I had given the large German colonies

all over Latin America a rude shock. Brazil, where the number of Germans was by far the largest, was especially affected. Not only were the normal ties with the homeland disrupted, cutting off both financial subsidies and the regular flow of pastors, but the colonists were regarded as enemy aliens, the use of the German language was prohibited, and a flourishing school system was wiped out instantly. During the second World War the German language was again banned in Brazil, some pastors were interned, and home support ceased.

The first Lutheran parish in Chile was founded in 1863. Today the German Evangelical Lutheran Church, which belongs to the Lutheran World Federation, has approximately 30,000 members. The L.C.M.S. is doing mission work basically in the cities of Valparaiso and Vina del mar.

In 1935 some Lutherans plunged into Latin American mission work where there was neither an English language basis (as in British Guiana), nor a special relationship to the United States (as in Puerto Rico), nor the attraction of an established constituency of European Lutherans (as in Brazil and Argentina). The missionaries were North Americans of Scandinavian origin who set up a "faith mission" and began work in Colombia.

In 1938 the World Mission Prayer League - another Lutheran "faith mission" - entered Bolivia and steadily developed a work which primarily reached out to the depressed remnants of the Andean Indians. The W.M.P.L. also took over a budding mission in Mexico in 1945, sent missionaries to Ecuador in 1951 to start work among the Indians and in 1953 to the westward expanding frontier of Brazil.

The Iglesia Luterana del Peru, with only around 500 members, has served Lutherans of various persuasions since 1951. In 1968, however, our sister denomination, the E.L.S., started mission work in Lima. I recently read in their publication, Mission News, that they are sending a fourth missionary to Peru because of the spiritual growth of the church, not only in Lima but also in various villages.

The L.C.M.S. started mission work in Caracas, Venezuela in 1951 with two missionaries. Today there are 10 churches, some of which have services in German, Spanish, and English. The L.C.M.S., through Lutheran Hour contacts, also started work in Mexico in 1940, Uruguay in 1942, Panama in 1943, Guatemala in 1947, and Cuba in 1949. In the last 10 years they have also started work in El Salvador and Costa Rica.

Wisconsin Synod Mission Work

We could say that our synod's mission work among Latin Americans officially begun 38 years ago when Pastor V. H. Winter received a Call to be a missionary to Spanish-speaking residents of Tuscon in 1948.

Although Pastor Winter had a love for Hispanics and a knowledge of Spanish, mission work among Latins had a slow beginning. For one thing, there was no nucleus of believers for a congregation. Secondly, many Latins looked upon Martin Luther as a heretic. And thirdly, Pastor Winter was viewed as a "Gringo" lost in the wrong neighborhood. There were months when not a single person showed up for worship services and when canvassing showed little results. Finally, however, some mothers agreed to allow their children to attend Sunday School.

Eventually the children not only stayed for Sunday School but also for church. Later the children invited their parents to attend church with them. From this humble beginning the mission grew by the Holy Spirit's guidance. In 1949 radio broadcasts in Spanish helped introduce the Tucson mission to the surrounding area. In fact, over 75% of the individuals who first joined the congregation first came to the mission as a result of those radio broadcasts.

After a chapel-school had been built in a good central location, Pastor Winter began teaching a group of hispanic children in the one-room day school. From this beginning, confirmation classes for children and later for adults were begun. Today Lutheran mission work is prospering under the Lord's guidance in Tucson.

In 1963 the Wisconsin Synod, under God's direction, made plans to enter the ripe field of harvest in Mexico. However, because of a Mexican law banning expatriate missionaries, work was not officially begun until 1967. In that year Dr. David Orea Luna, the president of the Mexican Lutheran Seminary, and one of his former students, Pastor David Gonzales joined the Wisconsin Synod by colloquy.

Because of their orthodox position Dr. David Luna and Pastor Gonzales, along with over 60 parishoners, left the liberal Mexican Lutheran Church to form The Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mexico. Dr. Luna became its first president and served until his death in 1972, whereupon Pastor Gonzales became its president. When the seminary in Mexico City had to be discontinued because it had no Mexican born leader, it was reopened in

El Paso under the leadership of Pastor Rupert Eggert. Today a three man pastoral staff train national pastors from El Paso to serve in Mexico. Presently there are five pastors serving over 450 people in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, Juarez, and Monterrey. W.E.L.S. pastors in El Paso make regular trips into Mexico to assist and help guide the national pastors. They also are involved in translation and printing projects as well as classroom teaching.

W.E.L.S. missionary work began in Puerto Rico in 1964 with the arrival of two missionaries making up "The Missioner Corps." In this program, missionaries preach the Gospel and help guide the church, but nationals themselves are involved in paying for and building their churches and supporting their pastors, eventually governing their own church body.

Through the Holy Spirit's guidance, Missionary Roger Sprain started work among some people along a sugar plantation railroad in Puerto Rico called Gran Stan Bran. After their instruction and confirmation they met in various homes until they bought an old shed for \$25.00 down, fixed it up and turned it into their church. Total cost: \$145.00.

In 1970, after two boys and a girl from the Martinez family in Barrancas were confirmed, they decided to build their own church out of home-made cement blocks. Later in the early 1970's a corner lot was obtained from the government on a perpetual land-use basis which cost one dollar a year. A church was then constructed with the Puerto Ricans and a missionary doing most of the work themselves. This chapel, which seats over 100 people, was built from donations from parishoners and a C.E.F. loan. Total cost: \$6,000.00.

Upon arriving in Puerto Rico in 1964, the two missionaries found that the Bible, Luther's Catechism, and a hymnal were already written in Spanish. Other items such as a confirmation instruction course, better Sunday School materials, and Bible filmstrip commentary and questions, all in Spanish, had to be produced by the missionaries. Equipment for producing these materials in quantity was needed and was purchased through monetary gifts sent by individuals from the states. The materials for classes such as instructions and Sunday School, Bible study and evangelism were written week by week as they were needed and printed in rough form for the classes. Other monetary gifts that were received through individual contributions were used for limited radio broadcasts on two stations. A 15 minute program was broadcast each week on both stations. The programs were done by the missionaries on tapes.

On the lay level, people were also trained after confirmation for Sunday School teaching and for evangelism. This was done by either sending the lay people to a one or two week intensive program or by training them in weekly classes.

Toay in Puerto Rico there are three missionaries working with over 150 baptized members in five different locations. There are no national pastors at the present time in this country.

Mission work began in Colombia in 1974 after the 1971 W.E.L.S. convention authorized work to begin. In 1972 a family corporation gave \$144,000.00 for this endeavor. Finally in 1974 two missionaries were sent to begin work in Medellin. Pastor Sprain, one of the first missionaries to be sent, wrote on Jan. 20, 1974: "This Sunday of prayer is only the beginning of your part in

this exciting, new undertaking, and it is a most important part for us missionaries who are going to preach Christ in your name. We need God's abundant grace in our planning, our surveys and our outreach. He must guide us to those whom He wants us to reach."⁷

Work in Colombia has progressed steadily, even though there is a noticeable class structure. Foreigners have a hard time being accepted by certain social groups. The Roman Catholic church is socially and politically very strong. Protestants are generally looked down upon by most Catholics.

On August 25, 1974, the first confirmation took place in Colombia. In November, six more people were confirmed.

The work in Colombia was first begun in missionaries' homes, parishoners' homes, or in rented storefronts. Finally the congregation was able to purchase and remodel a home for their chapel. A \$25,000 grant was established by W.E.L.S. for the Colombian C.E.F. which was borrowed by this first congregation for the purchase of its chapel.

Mission strategy concerning expansion work has been different in Colombia. Whereas in Puerto Rico the two missionaries split up and worked in separate areas (one and one-half hours distant), all the mission work in Colombia was confined to Medellin and its suburbs, within a half-hour from one end to the other. This was done for several reasons. First, this enabled a team effort and easy covering of a preaching station or congregation by any one of the men. Secondly, it would simplify setting up a theological training program for nationals. Thirdly, it was learned through trial and error in Puerto Rico that missionaries

should be careful of over-expansion, which in the long run has a debilitating effect.

In 1975 a theological training program was started. Today in Colombia there is a Bible institute and a seminary. In 1983 the first graduate of the seminary, Omar Ortiz, was ordained. He is presently a pastor in downtown Medellin where this central congregation dedicated its new church in February, 1985.

In 1984 mission work was started in Bogota with much success. Today there are five missionaries and one national pastor working in five parishes in Colombia, with approximately 100 baptized members.

The last country we should look at is Brazil. This country, consisting of over 140 million people, is the fifth largest nation in the world. Two-thirds of its population is located in the southern and central eastern coastal regions. In fact, six of Brazil's seven major cities are located in these sections of Brazil. All of these cities have over a million residents, with Rio (four and one-half million) and Sao Paulo (15 million) being the largest.

Although Brazil has a population made up of many different racial and cultural groups, there is little prejudice. However, there are very pronounced class divisions between the upper wealthy class and the poor lower class. Social status in regards to educational level is also found in Brazilian society.

Although Brazil is 90% nominally Roman Catholic, other religions are tolerated by the people and government. The Mormons, Pentecostals, Baptists, and Lutherans have made great religious inroads in Brazil.

Lutherans in particular have been in the country for 150 years. The Lutheran Church of Brazil, affiliated with the Missouri Synod, has been in Brazil since 1905. This group, which has over 600 congregations and 150,000 members, is growing rapidly, especially in the coastal cities. It was out of this Lutheran body that the Orthodox Lutheran Church of Brazil was born. This tiny church body, consisting of one small congregation, left the Lutheran Church of Brazil for doctrinal reasons in 1975. In that year they appealed to the Wisconsin Synod for help. In 1979 Mission Secretary Sauer and Prof. Wendland visited the country to further determine if mission work could be started in the near future. As a result of the favorable impression that Brazil made on these men, the Wisconsin Synod passed a resolution to send a two or three man mission team there. However, this resolution was not acted on because of lack of mission funds. Finally, in 1983 the Synod convention authorized sending an exploratory team to Brazil to check out its mission possibilities.

In January of 1984, another request came from Brazil for mission help. Dr. Paul Oserow, a former pastor in The Lutheran Church of Brazil, now living in Dourados, near the Paraguayan border, appealed for aid from the W.E.L.S. to start work in this interior region. In February of 1984, the Board for World Missions sent another team to Brazil. This team, consisting of Prof. Wendland and Pastors Janke and Lauersdorf, stated in a report to the Interim Committee that work should begin there as soon as possible.

In April, 1985, another mission team, consisting of Prof.

Wendland and Pastors Tomhave and Goeglein, also visited Brazil. After further evaluating the possibilities of mission work in Brazil, this team also reported that work should begin.

Finally, in August of 1985, the Synod authorized the Mission Board to send five missionaries to Brazil as soon as funding was available. As of the present time (February, 1986), funds are available to send five men to Brazil for one year. Let us pray that the Synod now sends out the men into the Brazilian field, which is ripe for harvest.

As we have seen in this paper, the history of the Lutheran Church in Latin America goes back to the seventeenth century, with mission activities of Von Walz in Dutch Guiana in 1663-64. Later in 1743 the first Lutheran church was organized in that country. After this period of time, very little Lutheran mission work was done until the 1820's, when Lutherans organized congregations in Brazil. Because of the lack of pastors and evangelical zeal, the Lutheran church did not really start spreading until the late 1800's and early 1900's. During the 1930's-1950's, Lutheran districts and synods came into being in most Latin American countries. The Wisconsin Synod began hispanic mission work in 1964 in Puerto Rico, in 1967 in Mexico, and in 1974 in Colombia.

Through God's guidance the Lutheran Church has spread into every country in Latin America. The Holy Spirit, operating through the Word of God, continues to spread the saving Gospel light of Jesus Christ to people who are in darkness.

Above all the terrorism, hate, hunger, dissension, discord, grief and greed in Latin America stands the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and through Him all who believe will receive peace, hope, and the promise of eternal life. To God be the glory!

Charles D. Lowry

Footnotes

1. Preston Laury, A History of Lutheran Missions (Reading, Pennsylvania: Pilger Publishing House, 1935), p. 29 ff.
2. Ibid., p. 33.
3. Ibid., p. 13 ff.
4. Glover-Kane, The Progress of World-Wide Missions (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 45.
5. Elert-Hansen, The Structure of Lutheranism (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), p. 397.
6. Gerald Anderson, The Theology of the Christian Mission (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), p. 101.
7. Edgar Hoenecke, Grace for Grace (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1975), p. 13.