

# God Gives the Increase

How the Lord uses even a shaky foundation in building His church:

The story of the founding fathers of the Minnesota Synod.

[Written for Prof. E.C. Fredrich, C.H. 373, April 29, 1977]

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As one looks back through the pages of the history of the Christian Church, there are names that stand out above the rest in every age—great preachers, dogmaticians, reformers, missionaries, martyrs. The names echo down through the centuries, and their influence is still felt: Walther, Spurgeon, Chemnitz, Luther, Augustine, and a hundred others. Such men were tremendously gifted, in addition to possessing the highest zeal for furthering the work of God's kingdom.

Yet it is also eminently clear, in each and every case, that these men, however great and gifted and zealous they were, would have done nothing, would have been nothing were it not for the grace and power of God working in and through them. How else could a crude German monk take on the "Most Holy Father"? Or who would've given two cents for a profligate young punk like Augustine? Or who would have thought that a motley crew of a dozen fishermen and tax-collectors could turn the world upside down?

Humanly speaking, none of these men or their endeavors ever had a chance. But that's where God's grace comes into the picture. The Lord has chosen to do His work through such weak, sinful men—earthen vessels, indeed. And when great things are accomplished in the church, when truth wins out over error, when the gospel penetrates more lands and is brought to more people, certainly the men who carry on the work are remembered. They are remembered, however, as the instruments of God. It is He with His grace, wisdom, and power that does the work and brings the results. When He accomplishes the growth, protection and welfare of His church through His chosen earthen vessels, it becomes all the more evident that it is indeed *His* work, not theirs.

Perhaps some of the most striking illustrations of this fact lie in the founding and development of certain (and not few) church bodies, and we need not look to ancient history for examples which teach us this lesson. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Minnesota and Other States was one of those church bodies which was founded on a very shaky foundation. Yet the synod survived, growing quickly into a strong, confessional Lutheran body.

What comes to the fore in the story of the birth of the Minnesota Synod, especially in the stories of the founding fathers, is the grace and power of God, accomplishing the building of His church. In spite of the weaknesses and errors, quirks and foibles of these six men, in spite of their varied backgrounds, concerns, and even beliefs, the Lord through them brought about the founding of the synod. It is these very weaknesses, errors and imperfections which accent ever more the truth that it is God who gives the increase. The purpose of this paper is to present the stories, as much as can be known, of these men, the founders of the Minnesota Synod, and in doing so to show how our Lord does His work through such weak and imperfect servants. The paper will deal in the main with the five men—Blumer, Brandt, Mallison, Thomson, and Wier—who with "Father" J.C.F. Heyer began the Minnesota Synod. Heyer will be mentioned only briefly, as so much has already been written about him.

All of the men who were involved arrived in Minnesota during the latter half of the 1850's, during the first rush of immigration following the opening up of the "Suland."<sup>1</sup> The big-name personality, as noted above Johann C.F. Heyer, the pioneer foreign and home missionary of the Pennsylvania Ministerium and General Synod. Having retired at age 64 from his work in India (he'd been the first man sent by American Lutherans to a foreign field), Heyer accepted the call from the East Pennsylvania Synod to work in Minnesota.<sup>2</sup> Arriving in

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Abbetmeyer-Selke, "The beginnings of the German Lutheran Churches in Minnesota," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, II (St. Louis: C.H.I., Jan. 1930), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 201.

1857, he was to remain in Minnesota till '63, and to serve as the first president of the fledging Minnesota Synod.

Although there was no better missionary than “Father” Heyer, he was some ways from being a staunchly confessional Lutheran.<sup>3</sup> In his desire to unite all the Lutherans in the state he was willing to overlook the confessional differences and doctrinal weaknesses of certain groups and individuals. Such unionistic tendencies made Heyer the one who was probably most responsible or to blame for Minnesota’s early membership in the General Synod.<sup>4</sup> Yet through this man the Lord did His work.

The two men who with Heyer made up the less shaky half of the synod’s foundation were nothing too great, either, from a conservative Lutheran point of view, yet each did his part in the work. Of Albrecht Brandt little is known. He arrived in Winona County in 1856 with a large family, a small group of settlers, and a lot of cattle.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this he had been a licensed preacher in Indiana and Illinois, and a member of the short-lived Indianapolis Synod. While we ought not judge a man (or his theology and practice) by his background, by his affiliations, such things can tell us at least a little about him. The fact that Brandt had been a member of the Indianapolis Synod shows that, at least at that time, he was not overly concerned with the strict confessionalism. The following quote quite strongly points to the less-than-orthodox position of that body:

(Polack) was ordained by the Indianapolis Synod and later became a member of that body. But Wichmann and Polack soon realized that they stood alone in their firm orthodox position, and so on Oct. 11, 1851, they declared their withdrawal from that body.<sup>6</sup>

Again, the Lord used Albrecht Brandt, though he like Heyer was not our “brand” of Lutheran. It must be said, though, that evidently Brandt did become more concerned with confessionalism. After serving as lay preacher for a time in Town Hart and taking part in the founding of the synod in 1860, he resigned in 1861 because of eye-trouble. Then, in the following year, he appealed to Walther of the Missouri Synod, thus opening to them a promising mission field<sup>7</sup> and at the same time procuring confessional Lutheran preachers for his people.

Closer to Heyer than any of the others was Pastor Adam Blumer. He is characterized as being “the real pioneer” among these five men, and as having served the synod “with much self-denial, time and energy.”<sup>8</sup> However, he too shared in the very common weakness of the time and circumstances, unionism. The circumstances which produced such tendencies were, of course, his background combined with the general laxity of the time in this respect. Blumer came to America in 1855 as a missionary of the Basel Pilgermission of the St. Chrischona,<sup>9</sup> one of the many German mission societies to send men to serve in the States. The Basel society, like the others, was unionistic, and so obviously the men trained there would lean in this direction, also.

Pastor Blumer was sent to Iowa by the Home Mission Society of the Pennsylvania Synod.<sup>10</sup> From there in 1858 he went to Minnesota, succeeding Pastor Wier at Baytown, near Stillwater (from there he also served Jordan once a month and Prescott, Wi.). Two years later, in the year of the founding of the synod, he moved to Shakopee; here his tendencies toward unionism show up again, for he considered himself to be the pastor of a German Congregational Church.<sup>11</sup> Even several years after the birth of the synod, the record still points to the same problem. In 1864 one of Blumer’s congregations (Town Benton) appealed to the unionistic Kirchenverein des Westens for a preacher, and his church in Shakopee sent contributions to that same body’s seminary at

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<sup>3</sup> E.C. Fredrich, “The Minnesota District’s First 50 Years” (Essay, 1968 District Convention), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> August R. Suelflow, “William Gustave Polack,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* (St. Louis: C.H.I., Oct. 1950), V. 23, p. 98.

<sup>7</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> A. Kuhn, ed. *Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode und ihrer einzelnen Gemeinden* (St. Louis: Lois Lang Publ. Co., 1910), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (St. Cloud: Sentinel Pub. Co., for The Protestant Conference, 1970), p. 126.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Marthasville, Mo.<sup>12</sup> Just how long Pastor Blumer remained part of the synod he'd founded, and how close and strong his ties were, is hard to say. He did attend the 1864 convention at Trinity, St. Paul—as guest!<sup>13</sup>

These first three, again—Heyer, Brandt, and Blumer—formed the more solid half of the group under discussion, yet even these men were far from our conception of real, confessional Lutherans. But they were faithful and zealous ministers of the gospel, and through them the Lord founded a church body which in future years would become more and more a confessional Lutheran synod.

As far as the other three men are concerned, there are other problems involved. Very little is known about the life and work of William Mallison. He was born in England in 1805 and came to Minnesota from New York, filing for land in Winona County in October of 1855.<sup>14</sup> His background is Methodist,<sup>15</sup> but from 1856 on he was conducting Lutheran services as an elder in Wabasha County.<sup>16</sup> What is striking about his story is that here we have an Englishman with Methodist leanings who becomes a founder of a German Lutheran synod. Naturally, Mallison's main problem was language, a problem which he shared with the next man, William Thomson. Consequently the work of both these men was limited;

Mallison and Thomson confined themselves to their own fields of activity and could not really serve as missionaries since they did not have a mastery of the German language.<sup>17</sup> (That they “confined themselves to their own fields” is probably accurate in more ways than one; another source says they “were busy with their farms.”<sup>18</sup>

Finally both of these men, “unable to speak German and thus not a natural part of the body whose work was thought of as highly specialized for service to scattered German Lutherans, withdrew.”<sup>19</sup> Mallison did maintain some fairly close connection with the synod, anyway, regularly preaching the English sermons at the synod conventions.<sup>20</sup>

Thomson's story reveals that his differences went deeper than just language. A native Swede, he had been a carpenter in New York for a time.<sup>21</sup> Then for ten years he served in Ohio and Pennsylvania pastorates as a member of the East Ohio Synod.<sup>22</sup> In 1855 he along with his family and several members left Wellsville, Ohio, traveled down the Ohio and up the Mississippi, landing at Hastings, Minnesota, on April 17.<sup>23</sup> He subsequently settled on a farm near Cannon City, Rice Co., and in '56 started a journey through the whole area—Rice, Scott, Blue Earth, Waseca, Dodge, Le Sueur, Olmstead, and Fillmore Counties. At (East) Prairieville he founded the first exclusively English Lutheran congregation in Minnesota in June of '55.<sup>24</sup>

Pastor Thomson was Lutheran, but his brand of Lutheranism was far from the best, for he was an avowed champion of “American Lutheranism.”<sup>25</sup> The tendencies of the English synods (his E. Ohio was, of course, one of these) were:

- 1) appreciation for contemporary American measures in their worship;
- 2) a critical attitude toward the Lutheran Confessions;
- 3) a vital interest in contemporary social and political issues.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Kuhn, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> Lehninger, M., ed., *Continuing in His Word* (Milw.: NPH, 1951), p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Abbtmeyer-Selke, p. 80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Abbtmeyer, p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

<sup>26</sup> James Weiss, “The Problem of Language Transition Among Lutherans: Ohio 1836-1858,” (C.H.I.Q., vol. 39, April 1966), p. 15.

That Thomson shared these views to some extent (especially the second) is clear from a letter he wrote to the Swede Norelius when the push was on to unite all Lutherans in Minnesota. Thomson said that this was not possible, since they differed on their doctrinal basis:

I am most decidedly opposed to symbolism and formalism and fully satisfied with the doctrinal basis of the General Synod.<sup>27</sup>

Even such feelings were not enough to exclude him from taking part in the new synod's beginnings. Heyer reasoned this way:

If Thomson were connected with an orthodox Lutheran Synod his superficial views might undergo a change and he might become more and more convinced of the soundness and scriptural correctness of the true Lutheran doctrine.<sup>28</sup>

Whether or not this actually happened is hard to say. Perhaps the Lord who brought about such a change in the Minnesota Synod also brought about a change in Pastor Thomson. At any rate, as mentioned above, he withdrew from the body because of the language problem.

This brings us to the last of the synod's founding fathers. Except for Johann Heyer, of these six men perhaps no one accomplished more than Rev. F.W. Wier. But on the other hand none of them caused as much trouble as he did, either! As checkered as his career was, however, and as strange as some of his beliefs were, still the Lord managed to use him for His own purposes.

Pastor Wier was one of the first Lutheran missionaries in Minnesota. Up to the time when he came, the mid-1850's, the German Lutherans in the state had been sadly neglected.

True, there were several churches with German services, but none of them was Lutheran. In 1855 the first Lutheran missionary had come to St. Paul and looked up the Lutherans. This was the Rev. F.W. Wier, who conducted the first Lutheran service in the German language on 27 July, 1855. Three days thereafter a congregation was organized; this was old Trinity on Wabasha St. Pastor Wier received the call which he accepted.<sup>29</sup>

Evidently this Pastor Wier was an energetic man, a man who wasted no time in getting things done. But who was he? F.W. Wier was born Sept. 1, 1812, in Germany, and after studying at Pastor Gossner's mission in Berlin he came to America in 1841 (though originally destined for the mission in India).<sup>30</sup> Several congregations at Weinberg (Weissberg?), Indiana, were served by him, and he became treasurer of the Indianapolis Synod which in '46 left the Kirchenverein des Westens.<sup>31</sup> Things weren't all that great in Indiana; he worked there "amid great privations," which he explained in a letter<sup>32</sup> in which he defended himself for taking a call away from his Blue Creek congregation. It seems that he had been hired on a year-to-year basis, and had never been adequately supported, with the result that he had had to turn to farming just to keep his family alive. And if that wasn't bad enough, the congregation hadn't even finished his parsonage as they had promised!

So in 1849 Wier took the call to Rochester, N.Y. where he succeeded Muehlhaeuser. Becoming aware of the wrongness of unionism, he three years later joined the Buffalo Synod and became pastor at Martinsville, near Buffalo.<sup>33</sup> During this time some of his off-beat ideas showed up, like for instance his belief that the Old

<sup>27</sup> E. Theodore Bachmann, *They Called Him Father: the Life Story of John Christian Frederick Heyer* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1942), p. 272.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Adolph Ackermann, "pioneer Pastor and Lutheran Missionary," (C.H.I.Q. vol. 39, April 1966), p. 36.

<sup>30</sup> Kuhn, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> *Kirchliches Informatorium*, Feb. 15, 1852, p. 70.

<sup>33</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

Testament ordinance against the eating of blood is divinely ordained for all believers.<sup>34</sup> By 1855, however, he had already gotten into trouble with Grabau and Von Rohr over his management of a colonization project,<sup>35</sup> and soon made his exit.

From N.Y. Pastor Wier made his way to St. Paul and there, on July 27, conducted the first German Lutheran service in the state, in the English Episcopal Church. After organizing Trinity Congregation he got onto a borrowed horse and went to visit the German settlers near Stillwater, with the result that St. John's, Baytown was organized.<sup>36</sup> By August, 1856, Wier was having trouble making ends meet (the financial crash of '56-'57 just about wiped out the congregation), and so bought a 160-acre farm near Inver Grove, about seven miles out of St. Paul and began serving there the Bavarians from Indiana.<sup>37</sup> He promised to visit the St. Paul people every two months.

Another indication that things were not all as they should have been with Wier comes from an incident which occurred in 1857. When Pastor F. Sievers of the Missouri Synod visited Wier on his farm, he "had doubts about Wier's and the congregation's orthodoxy!"<sup>38</sup> These doubts were probably not unfounded, as the record of following years shows. Pastor Heyer succeeded Wier at Trinity in '57 and Pastor Blumer did the same at Baytown in '58. Where F.W. was for two years is a good question, but at any rate he again became pastor at St. John's in 1860. Affairs went fairly smoothly for two years, then Wier got things stirred up again. This time the trouble was over private confession, which he wished to make mandatory for all while abolishing common confession.<sup>39</sup> The congregation wouldn't stand for this and dismissed their pastor, whereupon Wier organized a new congregation and quit the synod.

Wier's leaving of the synod which he had but two years earlier helped found was not based completely on this one case in Baytown. He had other erroristic conceptions also, not the least important of which was his position on Church and Ministry.

Pastor Wier shared in the false doctrine of the Buffalo Synod on Church and Ministry, and caused only division and scandal. He soon separated himself from the other brethren and went his own way.<sup>40</sup>

That way led to the organization, with Pastor L.F.E. Krause (an old buddy who also had been in and out of Buffalo), of the Concordia Synod of the West. This venture soon died, however, when Pastor Warns (a third member) and Krause joined Ohio.<sup>41</sup> Wier again turned to Buffalo and was received in '69; thereafter he served, at Waltham, families who had come from David's Stern in Kirchkhayn, Wisconsin.<sup>42</sup>

These are the men, then, who were the founding fathers of the Minnesota Synod. All six of them in one way or another passed from the stage soon after the birth of the synod, and in this too we can see the hand of the Lord at work. These were not the men to carry on, not the men to strengthen the body and move it in the direction of firmer confessionalism. That would have to be done by others of the Lord's chosen servants. When we look at the story of such men—men of varied backgrounds and varied beliefs, men who spoke the "wrong" language, men who clung to certain errors—and we see what they accomplished, we can only respond in one way: "Soli Deo gloria." It was the Lord God, not these weak and imperfect men, who accomplished the founding of the synod, the growth of His kingdom. And so it always is, that the Lord works through us who are mere earthen vessels. More exactly, it is through the means of grace which He has provided and commanded us to use that He carries out His saving will. Our job, then, is to faithfully administer Word and Sacrament,

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Kuhn, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup> Abbtmeyer, p. 80.

<sup>38</sup> Koehler, p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Kuhn, p. 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> Kuhn, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Abbtmeyer, p. 114.

<sup>42</sup> Abbtmeyer, p.

knowing that His power and grace will give the increase in spite of our sinfulness and weaknesses, mistakes and shortcomings, for He is the Lord of the Church, the Lord of history.

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