



Project Share: A Tri-City Area WELS Ministry
A Continued History

Matthew J. Sprunger
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Introduction and Brief History

To some, especially Dr. Glen Thompson and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, it seemed that there was a definite border in the ministry of the WELS. One could almost say that the WELS was almost too middle-class and that the congregations and members of the WELS preferred to reach out to people just like them – fellow middle-class citizens. Dr. Thomson and the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee, on which he served, saw a definite need to cross this gap and be actively engaged in outreach to all levels of society, including the one level most often left behind – the lower-class and poor of society. The committee sought a way to bridge this gap and explored methods and a location to try and do so. That location was Bay City, MI and especially Trinity Lutheran Church in Bay City. Trinity is located in an economically disadvantaged area of Bay City and the congregation and its leadership have always proven to be very outreach minded and willing to explore mission work in its community in many varieties of ways. Once the location had been chosen work began at Trinity to see if a model for outreach to the poor could be made so that other congregations seeking to do similar work would have a model to consider as they planned their work. This ministry at Trinity, being started with synodical funding and having a full-time staff minister devoted to its work, became known as Project Share.¹

What is Project Share?

The current brochure for Project Share describes itself and its ministry as such:

Project Share is a Christ-centered ministry to the Tri-Cities of Midland, Bay City, and Saginaw, Michigan, sponsored by area WELS and ELS Christians.

¹ This introductory paragraph is a summary of some of the information presented by Michael M. Kober in *Project Share: Tri-City area WELS Lutherans – A Background and History*, 4-16-99.

Its mission is to faithfully share God's Word with people in our community who are spiritually confused and might never come through a church door to learn of their only Savior from sin. Project Share serves both spiritual and physical needs.²

In order to keep this mission and the people it seeks to serve in mind, each Project Share Governing Board meeting begins with the reading of Matthew 25:34-40.³ It is with this mission in mind that when describing the various aspects of Project Share, the brochure states, "While many agencies offer physical help to those in need, Project Share seeks to offer not only physical help but above all, the Gospel, "the one thing needed," as Jesus told Martha in Luke 10:42."⁴

The Current Work of Project Share

Project Share has always kept its mission of outreach and ministry to the poor in mind as it has carried out its work over the years. An introduction and history of Project Share was written in the spring of 1999 by Michael Kober and since then the mission and ministry of this undertaking has remained largely the same, and yet has also largely changed.

When Project Share began its work, it was focused on the generally poor of society and that work continues to this day, with a seemingly different clientele to whom it reaches out to. While it still certainly places much emphasis on outreach to the poor and devotes much time to this work, it has been noted that the work of Project Share "seems to have changed from the original focus of ministering to the economically disadvantaged to more concentration on those with substance abuse problems, or trouble with criminal actions (the two seem to go hand in hand)."⁵ And this partial shift of mission can be evidenced in the way that Pastor Mark Schulz, the Outreach Pastor and Trinity Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI, has described the work of Project Share:

² Project Share, Informational Brochure, Revision 10/08/08.

³ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08

⁴ Project Share, Informational Brochure, Revision 10/08/08.

⁵ Sprunger, Paul, Written Interview. 12-1-08

- 1) Devotion at a Bay City rescue mission
- 2) Sunday afternoon church services at the local jail, distributing Bible studies
- 3) Bible study at a rescue mission in Saginaw
- 4) Setting up budgets for families in financial turmoil
- 5) Food assistance and help with rent and heating expenses
- 6) Help to locate a job
- 7) Help to put together a resume
- 8) Visitations of Prisoners at the local jail and the prison in Freeland, MI
- 9) A Monday night Christian 12 step transition group
- 10) Assistance in getting a low-priced auto-we have had autos donated
- 11) Thanksgiving meals for the homeless⁶

And it can also be seen in how Pastor Richard D. Starr, the Administrative Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI and Project Share Governing Board member, explains the work of Project Share when he writes, "Project Share seeks to serve those who would not normally walk through a church door for a worship service. Historically, the work has focused on the incarcerated, the newly released, their families, the underprivileged, the addicted, etc."⁷

Currently Project Share seeks to carry out their mission and ministry as they work in various institutions and places in the Tri-City area, including The Bay County Jail, the Freeland~~Prison~~, the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission in Bay City, The Saginaw Rescue Mission, the Saginaw Arete Center, by holding Christian 12-step addiction counseling and transitions groups meetings at Trinity, and by writing letters to various inmates who have been transferred to other prisons or are in prisons where those involved with Project Share are not able to carry out their work.⁸

The work of Project Share in the area of prison ministry is rather extensive. When Project Share was started, Trinity, together with St. John's Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI, was already involved in prison ministry, especially focusing on the Bay County Jail, where Pastor Schulz from Trinity and Pastor Schweppe would take turns preaching for services on Sunday. Since the inception of Project Share, the work of prison ministry has greatly expanded. Paul Sprunger, a

⁶ Schulz, Pastor Mark, Written Interview. 11-29-08.

⁷ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08.

⁸ Schulz, Pastor Mark; Paul Sprunger; Pastor Richard D. Starr, Written Interviews. 11-25-08 through 12-1-08.

lay member of Trinity, was involved with the prison ministry of Project Share for a period of 22 months and continues to serve the prison ministry aspect of Project Share in an advisory manner as well as having contact with those who have been released from prison and by writing letters to those who are still in prison. In the 22 month period of time he was carrying out prison ministry work within the Bay County Jail he describes the work as running a book cart to provide inmates with reading materials, including religious materials, providing Bible Studies for the inmates, writing letters to inmates, meeting one on one with inmates who desired to meet with him, as well as helping out with the two weekly worship services conducted at the prison by Pastors Schulz and Schweppe each Sunday. This work involved somebody who could commit to being able to spend time at the Bay County Jail two to three days during the week as well as most Sundays.

This vital work of Project Share is work that cannot be carried out without people willing to do the work. Currently Project Share has two paid part-time staff members. Tom Lambert is a member of Trinity and is someone who is considered to be a Project Share alumnus. Through the message of the Gospel as was first shared with him by Project Share, the Holy Spirit has worked within Mr. Lambert to bring him to faith as well as empowered the new man to live a life worthy of his calling as a child of God. Mr. Lambert is currently serving as the part-time director and administrator of Project Share. The other paid part-time staff member is Gerald Rexin, also a member of Trinity, who serves as a counselor and has also taken up the duties involved with the prison ministry taking place at the Bay County Jail as the work within the jail is something Paul Sprunger was no longer able to carry out. Within the Bay County Jail, Mr. Rexin has been given the position of Assistant Chaplain.

In addition to these two paid staff members, Project Share also provides mileage reimbursement for two men who help with services in the Bay County Jail as well as with Bible Studies at the various shelters which Project Share carries out its work in. In total there are about ten volunteers involved with the work of Project Share in a variety of ways, including leading or helping with Bible Studies, correcting the tests that are included with the WELS Bible Study materials for inmates, providing counseling or support for those that need it, providing transportation, and by helping to meet the physical needs of those being served, to name just some of the work that volunteers carry out in connection to Project Share. And the focus and reason that the volunteers have for doing this work is to share the ^gGospel message with those that need to hear it just as much as anybody else, yet are often overlooked by any number of people.

The manner in which these staff members and volunteers carry out their work has already been touched on to some extent. The current work of Project Share involves bringing the ^gGospel message of full and free salvation to all the people it can, especially to the poor and to those who would not have the opportunity to hear the ^gGospel message in ordinary circumstances or even set foot in a church. Some of these means of sharing the ^gGospel have already been explained, but there is one method which is used in many aspects of Project Share which serves to aid in opening doors to be able to share the ^gGospel message with those whom Project Share seeks to serve. As Pastor Starr writes,

When a person has no place to stay, no clothes to wear, no food to eat, no job or a way to get to work, it is difficult to talk to that person about their Savior from sin because the person is just trying to physically survive. We help with the survival, which gives us the opportunity to explain why we are helping—love for God and love for mankind.⁹

The ministry of Project Share relies heavily on meeting the physical needs of those it is ministering to in order to be able to more fully meet their spiritual needs. To paraphrase Pastor

⁹ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08.

Starr, how would somebody give any attention to hearing the ⁹Gospel message and become occupied with their eternal future when their basic needs for survival are non-existent and their immediate future is something which they are struggling to become occupied with? Paul

Sprunger also describes this important aspect of Project Share's ministry:

We have in the past provided clothing for those who need it, food from Trinity's food pantry, rent assistance, help finding housing, assistance finding employment, bus tickets for people in need of transportation. Also in the jail we gave reading glasses to those in need. I know of at least one Project Share volunteer whose family purchased food and gifts for an inmate's family at Christmas.¹⁰

The last sentence of this paragraph from Mr. Sprunger shows yet another group of forgotten people whom ministering to is very important. The family of an inmate is often overlooked, but the reality in their lives is that they are struggling, especially if they relied upon the income of their now incarcerated family member for survival. Meeting the physical needs of not just the inmate, but the inmate's family, can be an effective way to open the door for both the inmate and his or her family for hearing the ⁹Gospel message.

As Project Share has grown during its years of carrying out its mission of sharing the ⁷Gospel message it has expanded to the point where it is no longer a specifically Trinity run program. Project Share is now a self-run program with its own governing board to give it direction rather than gaining direction only from Trinity. This ministry is supported by a variety of area congregations, including Trinity Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI, St. John's Lutheran Church, Bay City, MI, St. Bartholomew Lutheran Church, Kawkawlin, MI, as well as other area WELS congregations and one ELS congregation.

And it is these churches which have joined together to help support the financial aspect of this ministry. Currently much of the funding is still supplied by Trinity, with gifts from St. John's and other area congregations. In addition, some other WELS congregations not in the area

¹⁰ Sprunger, Paul, Written Interview. 12-1-08.

but who are aware of Project Share, have given gifts to help support this ministry. In addition to donations from congregations and individuals, Project Share has two annual fundraisers – a golf outing and a family bowling event. All money that is donated or raised for Project Share is matched at 25% by the WELS Kingdom Workers.¹¹

Challenges

When it comes to carrying out the work of ministry, no ministry goes about without meeting any challenges. Man's *opinio legis* and opposition to the ^gGospel message or to the carrying out of the ministry of the ^gGospel is always present. It is with this in mind that all those involved with Project Share recognize that this is a challenging ministry, especially as it works with those who have previously committed crimes and may later on commit crimes again. As Paul Sprunger has noted, the recidivism rate among convicted criminals is unfortunately high. Mr. Sprunger also notes that when it comes to this type of ministry, and especially the aspect of working with current and former inmates, that change is often slow and difficult and that often people, and sometimes Project Share staff and volunteers, want to expect immediate results. He notes that for as much as a person may want to change, it is difficult for a person to leave their comfort zone and enter into circumstances which they are not accustomed to.¹²

Specific challenges with the prison ministry taking place within the Bay County Jail include some major theological differences with the chaplain who is with Forgotten Man Ministries and that this chaplain has, in the past, done things to undermine the work and ministry of those who he does not get along with. Another challenge within the Bay County Jail is that most of the workers do not desire for members of Project Share to be there carrying out the ministry they seek to carry out. The jail staff often view those doing ministry as a hassle and a

¹¹ Rexin, Gerald; Pastor Mark Schulz; Pastor Richard D. Starr, Written Interviews. 11-25-08 through 11-29-08.

¹² Sprunger, Paul, Written Interview. 12-1-08.

burden and, as Mr. Sprunger states, they would often let him know, in no uncertain terms, that he was just another problem for them to deal with.¹³

Both Pastor Starr and Mr. Sprunger note another challenge present for Project Share – people who are looking to con or work the system. As Pastor Starr writes, “Working with con-artists, you are always in danger of being conned. The prayer is that the gospel will work a change of heart and behavior in the client.”¹⁴ And in connection with this, Mr. Sprunger wrote, “Pastor Starr and I talked about this before and we agreed that we would ERR on the side of caution. We would rather give to someone who is abusing the system than to deny a very real need or destroy someone's faith by misjudging them.”¹⁵

Yet another challenge to this unique form of ministry has been that of support. Financial support has always been a challenge for Project Share. When Project Share began it received a limited amount of synodical funding, funding which was set to decrease every year for a limited amount of time until no synodical funding was given. This meant that funding for Project Share needed to be secured and much of the funding of Project Share has come directly from Trinity. In the efforts of Project Share to seek funding and support (financial support and otherwise) from other WELS congregations they have met a number of barriers. It seems that many WELS congregations, as Gerald Rexin states, do not understand the ministry of Project Share.¹⁶ And concerning this Pastor Schulz writes:

Not many Michigan District congregations support Project Share because they feel:

- 1) Diverting money away from Synod Mission offerings and offerings to their own congregations
- 2) The feeling that we have enough work to do within our own congregations, without having to do extra work elsewhere
- 3) The misconceived notion that Project Share is a Social Gospel organization

¹³ Sprunger, Paul, Written Interview. 12-1-08.

¹⁴ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08.

¹⁵ Sprunger, Paul, Written Interview. 12-1-08.

¹⁶ Rexin, Gerald, Written Interview. 11-25-08.

- 4) Jealousy over another congregation gaining recognition for doing something that gains Synodical attention
- 5) Not having a trained WELS pastor overseeing the project. Many Michigan district pastors have concept that lay leaders are dangerous, and will lead to the corruption of doctrine.¹⁷

To counter the way that some people feel about Project Share, those involved with Project Share seek to educate about the work of Project Share whenever possible and that is one of the purposes for the brochure which Project Share has produced. In trying to educate people about Project Share they seek not only to receive financial support, but also to receive volunteer support. There are often not enough volunteers to carry out the work and the work of Project Share would be able to expand more if more people would become involved with donating their time to volunteer to help with this ministry. All those involved with supporting Project Share in any aspect, be it with time, talents, money, or otherwise seek out others to help them carry out this unique and much needed ministry.

Blessings

For as many challenges are present with the ministry of Project Share, the Lord has presented this ministry with countless and rich blessings. All four interviewees – Gerald Rexin, Pastor Mark Schulz, Pastor Richard D. Starr, and Paul Sprunger – all noted the effect that the Gospel message has upon the hearts and lives of people. On the blessings of this ministry Pastor Starr writes, “The greatest blessing is the difference between going to hell and going to heaven in one person’s life, who might never have heard the good news of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. We have the blessing of knowing that we are carrying out our Savior’s will.”¹⁸ And concerning the effect that the Gospel can have on one person who then reaches out to others Pastor Schulz writes, “We have seen the lives of several people changed by the Gospel. Some of

¹⁷ Schulz, Pastor Mark, Written Interview. 11-29-08.

¹⁸ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08.

the people are actively involved in our Transition Support group, and are actively reaching out to others.”¹⁹

In addition to the benefits seen as the Holy Spirit works faith and new life in the hearts of people is also the blessings that those who carry out the work of Project Share see within their own lives. Gerald Rexin noted about the number of dedicated Christians who support the ministry of Project Share.²⁰ On the subject of personal blessings Paul Sprunger writes, “I would be remiss if I did not mention the personal blessings one receives just for the opportunity to work with Project share and all the people involved. After spending a little time working with other people in different situations than our own it’s difficult not to learn something and to appreciate the many things we have.” And also, “It is one of the most worthwhile programs I have ever been involved with.”²¹

Looking to the Future

As Project Share, its Governing Board, its staff, and its volunteers strive to carry out its mission, they are always seeking to further their mission in sharing the Gospel message and are not content to just go about ministry in a day to day manner, but to work on future planning. As they look to the future, Pastor Schulz writes about some future plans about a half-way house for homeless persons or newly released inmates and describes it as “A 30 day program where a homeless person or former prisoner would be in the Word every day. The study would deal with issues that the homeless person or prisoner faces...Self Esteem, Anger, money management, child raising, etc...”²²

¹⁹ Schulz, Pastor Mark, Written Interview. 11-29-08.

²⁰ Rexin, Gerald, Written Interview. 11-25-08.

²¹ Sprunger, Paul. Written Interview. 12-1-08.

²² Schulz, Pastor Mark, Written Interview. 11-29-08.

When describing how Project Share has changed over the years, Pastor Starr also speaks of the future direction of the program as he writes, “We are working much more on follow-up of clients, helping them with budgets, helping them with resumes, teaching them how to dress for an interview and how to respond in a job interview. The youth and elderly work is an entirely new direction.”²³ On the topic of working with the youth and elderly, Pastor Starr stated elsewhere that this is another aspect of ministry that has overall been suffering and Project Share seeks to work also in this area of ministry to reach the youth in order to strengthen their faith in order to keep them from leaving the church as well as to share the ^gGospel message with the youth. Ministry to the elderly is another almost forgotten aspect of ministry and is especially important as the elderly face end of earthly life issues, extreme changes in their lives, increasing losses of loved ones, many physical ailments, and many other things – all of which can have a negative effect on their spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

The ministry of Project Share is a very unique form of ministry which, while it has seen many changes over the years, continues to remain constant in its mission to share the ^gGospel message with all people, especially with those whom it seems society has overlooked. As Project Share seeks to go forward and continue in its ministry, may the Lord continue to richly bless the ministry and all involved so that through the preaching of the ^gGospel message more souls may be won over from death in hell to eternal life at God’s right hand. May those who seek to perform such types of ministry look to Project Share as one example of how things may be done to God’s glory and to the benefit of his people and may others be moved to also be blessed through their assistance to this ministry. As the Project Share brochure proudly proclaims:

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:16)

²³ Starr, Pastor Richard D., Written Interview. 11-25-08.

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