

**A CENTURY OF WELS WORLD MISSIONS  
TELLING THE STORY**

While flying from Milwaukee to Phoenix and then making the four-hour drive on good roads from Sky Harbor airport to the mission at East Fork, Arizona, it is hard to imagine what it must have been like to make this trip back in 1893.

That was the year in which on October 3 two young men set out from Milwaukee to begin mission work on the reservation of a recently conquered Indian tribe onto whose territory no Christian missionary of any denomination had as yet set foot. The two young men, recently graduated from our Wisconsin Synod seminary were John Plocher and George Adascheck. The tribe they had volunteered and were called to serve with the gospel was the Apache.

Almost a century has passed since this small initial venture by our synod into the large work of bringing the gospel to people of other cultures and other lands. Much has happened in these ten decades. The years have seen other beginnings, some small and hesitantly undertaken, others bolder and on a larger scale. There have been times when it seemed that little was happening, but in retrospect it is clear there has been an ongoing forward movement, so that after 98 years it can truly be said that the sun does not ever set on WELS world missions.

**A Fitting Memorial**

Two years ago the BWM in its report to the synod called attention to the fact that the year 1993 marks the centennial of WELS world missions. It also indicated that it would select certain unreached people groups for the 1991 WELS convention to approve as new fields in commemoration of this milestone in our synod's history.

The year 1993 is a WELS world mission anniversary year in more than one sense of the word. Not only will it be a hundred years since Missionaries Plocher and Adascheck started out for San Carlos to get our world mission program underway. It will also be forty years since Pastors A. B. Habben and O. H. Drevlow and lay missionary Paul Ziegler arrived in Lusaka, Zambia, to begin work which has been blessed beyond all expectations; thirty years since we entered Malawi, today our synod's largest world mission field; and twenty years since the commissioning of our first missionaries to South America. Surely, a most fitting time to thank God for the grace he has given and to ask him for new strength and a new sense of urgency to reach out to others with the gospel of Christ.

The manner in which the synod as such will observe this centennial will to a large extent be determined by this summer's synod convention. The Board for World Missions, however, already as early as 1986 began looking for ways to call attention in a special way to the Lord's blessings on our world mission activity in these past 100 years. Among other things it felt that a fitting memorial would be the publication of a WELS world mission history. It resolved in its January 1988 meeting to authorize the writing and publication of such a history, its release to coincide with the celebration of the centennial year. This would

be a first for our synod. While much has been written about WELS world missions, including the very fine resume of some 50 pages in the recently published book, Our Church, its Life and Mission, there has to date not been an effort to publish a separate, more detailed telling of the story. It was the board's consensus that to do so at this time would be a fitting way in which to commemorate the centennial of WELS world missions.

#### How to Proceed

The Board for World Missions had certain thoughts as to how to proceed. It would appoint two editors, a project coordinator and a field correlator for each mission field. These field correlators would recruit writers, each of whom would prepare a 10 to 25 year segment of their respective field's history. This was later simplified to an arrangement by which there would be a single writer for each field.

It was the intention of the board initially to sponsor the writing of two separate books, one a detailed history for posterity, accuracy and theological perspective and the other a popular history for easy reading and widespread appeal.

The BWM outlined the purposes of the project as follows.

1. To share with the constituency of the synod the history of God's grace as evidenced in 100 years of WELS world mission work.
2. To see in God's grace, as shown in a 100 year history of WELS world mission work, both an occasion for thanksgiving and an encouragement to greater efforts to share the gospel in world fields.
3. To provide for posterity an accurate, official and comprehensive account of the first 100 years of WELS world mission work.
4. To gain insight and perspective on future world mission endeavors by learning from the blessings and mistakes of the past.

It was recognized rather early in the project, however, that it was unrealistic to think of preparing and publishing two separate histories simultaneously. There was no question as to the desirability of having historical accounts written on two such different levels. Each would serve a specific purpose. A detailed and definitive history would by its very nature not only be a fitting memorial but would serve as a valuable study and research tool. Because of its larger size and more limited readership, however, it would be a fairly costly venture. A popular history would on the other hand be easier reading and would target the largest possible readership. It would be motivational in nature and in addition to deepening understanding of our synod's world mission outreach would serve to encourage widespread interest among our members in this important phase of our synod's work. Because of its more limited size and its wider distribution it could be produced at a cost which would make it attractive for purchase by readers throughout the synod.

The decision was made to write a popular and yet fairly detailed history of 300 to 350 pages in a format and at a language level approximately that of the People's Bible. This has subsequently been modified somewhat by increasing the

page size to six by nine inches in order to give somewhat greater flexibility in page layout and in the placing of maps and photographs. The result is a book which will be large enough to provide a substantial amount of information and detail and which at the same time should have considerable appeal for the typical lay reader in our synod. It was felt that the writing of a definitive history could best be undertaken as a separate project, perhaps by someone wishing to make the writing of such a history a personal project or possibly by an individual interested in making it the subject of a doctoral thesis. Use of techniques involving word processors and copy machines could make the more limited number of copies available at costs which are both realistic and manageable.

### **The Project Takes Shape**

The first order of business was the assembling of a team of writers. The board had already appointed Professors Ernst H. Wendland and Harold R. Johnes as co-editors. Their obvious qualifications and their close proximity to one another gave promise of efficient and effective work in this department. Your essayist was asked to serve as project coordinator. The prime consideration in choosing field writers was a demonstrated writing ability and an ongoing interest in and dedication to our synod's world mission outreach. The final selection led us to a seminary professor, two retired but still very active pastors, two former missionaries and a man with long experience on a BWM executive committee. The names are well known to most of us. They are Professor Richard Balge and pastors or retired pastors Howard Festerling, Winfred Koelpin, Richard Lauersdorf, Loren Schaller and Stephen Valleskey. Both editors also served as writers.

In order to get the project underway a two-day writers' conference was held in September 1988. Present as advisors were Rev. William Meier, BWM chairman; Rev Duane Tomhave, administrator, and Rev. Mentor Kujath, then the editor-in-chief at Northwestern Publishing House. During the course of the conference the book and each contributor's part in writing it were carefully outlined. Guidelines for writing history from the Christian perspective were presented and discussed, as were writing style guides and rules for submitting manuscripts. Length of manuscript for each section was determined. Lists of source materials were distributed and information given as to where they could be found. A project schedule was adopted giving deadlines for submission of manuscripts by the writers to the editors and by the editors to Northwestern Publishing House.

Target date for publication is the middle of May 1992, just in time for introduction and initial distribution at the 1992 district conventions and at the 1992 LWMS national convention. It is hoped that synodwide distribution can be achieved by the time of the centennial year, 1993.

I believe that it was Robert Burns who said, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley." And so it was with the carefully laid plans for the editing of this book. Just months after the writers' conference had put all the details into place, the Executive Committee for Central Africa was led to call co-editor Wendland once more to serve our mission in Zambia both as missionary

and seminary professor asking him to give special attention to the writing of much-needed curriculum materials for use in our Central Africa worker training program. January 1989 saw him return to the mission field which he had served so well from 1962 to 1978.

At first this seemed to present an insurmountable obstacle. We felt that we needed Professor Wendland's insights and his expertise at writing if the book were to be what we hoped it would be. We decided against a change of personnel. Professor John and the project coordinator worked as stateside editing team. As manuscripts were completed, they were shuttled back and forth between the U.S.A. and Zambia, sometimes two and three times before we felt we had a particular manuscript about where we wanted it. Fortunately, we were able to make use of an international courier service which at a price was able to get manuscript copy nearly half way around the world sometimes in as little as three days.

This process was climaxed in November by a thirteen-day intensive editing session at Mequon for which Professor Wendland returned to the U.S.A. and during the course of which the editing team went through every paragraph and every sentence in the book. Prior to that a preliminary manuscript had been sent out for review to three men who either are or previously were deeply involved in the administration of our world mission program. A fourth copy was sent to a knowledgeable WELS layman of whom we had reason to believe that he would be representative of the kind of persons who would be reading the book. Their added insights, valuable suggestions and needed corrections were studied by the editing committee and many of them incorporated into the text. The result is that the manuscript is in what we expect will be its final form except for any last minute updates which may be indicated by significant events taking place between last November and the date the manuscript is due at Northwestern Publishing House. Still remaining to be done are the selection of photographs, the designing of the cover and the making of maps.

#### **Putting It All Together**

How does one take the accounts of mission work in eight different areas, each a unit in itself, written by seven different writers and weave them into a single story with a distinct and unbroken thread moving from beginning to end? The answer was to assign an eighth writer to tie it all together.

The project committee decided to have one man outline the flow of the story and then to have him write both the introductory and concluding chapters and also the intermediate sections leading from the history of one field to that of another. This man completed his assignment early enough in the project so that each individual field writer could see in advance how his section was to fit into the overall scheme. These intermediate sections were titled Mission Currents and were intended to present the ebb and flow of events on the overall synodical scene and how these affected our world mission outreach. These Mission Currents were kept under review and at times extensively rewritten after the field writers had submitted their work. The result is a story which not only presents the

historical development of each mission field, but carries out a unified theme and is an absorbing account of the way in which the Lord has used our synod in these past one hundred years to carry his gospel to the far ends of the earth.

That theme is indicated by the title of the book, To Every Nation, Tribe, Language and People. The reference is to Revelation 14:6 and the proclamation of the eternal gospel to all those who live on the earth. The story tells how our synod's involvement in this worldwide gospel proclamation has developed over the past one hundred years. The flow of this story can best be demonstrated by taking a look at the book's table of contents.

### TO EVERY NATION, TRIBE, LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE

#### *A Century of WELS World Mission Activity*

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| <i>Introduction</i>                                  | A Gradual Awakening  |
| 1. APACHE MISSION<br><i>Mission Currents One</i>     | A Century of Patience and Persistence<br>Strengthening the Stakes          |
| 2. MISSIONS IN EUROPE<br><i>Mission Currents Two</i> | A Battle for Confessionalism<br>Postwar Internal Problems                  |
| 3. WEST AFRICA<br><i>Mission Currents Three</i>      | Answering West African Appeals<br>The Happy Convention                     |
| 4. JAPAN<br><i>Mission Currents Four</i>             | To the Islands of Japan<br>The Hook of the Kafue                           |
| 5. CENTRAL AFRICA<br><i>Mission Currents Five</i>    | Blessings beyond Expectations<br>Mission Goals, Policies, Strategies       |
| 6. LATIN AMERICA (I)<br><i>Mission Currents Six</i>  | A Growing Awareness of Latin America<br>Oriental Overtures                 |
| 7. SOUTHEAST ASIA<br><i>Mission Currents Seven</i>   | Opening Doors to the Far East<br>Changing Scenes                           |
| 8. LATIN AMERICA (II)<br><i>Conclusion</i>           | The Sleeping Giant to the South<br>Looking to the Past, Present and Future |

A Chronology with 175 entries lists significant dates in the world mission story together with key dates in our synod's history and helps the reader get a cohesive overall view of events as they took place.

To encourage further reading and research, a Bibliography gives listings of both published and unpublished source materials and wherever possible indicates where these may be found.

#### **An Absorbing Account**

The story actually begins 108 years ago, or perhaps we should say 141 years ago. Though world mission work was perhaps not high in the thinking of the three pastors who formed the German Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of Wisconsin in 1850, it has been our subsequent experience that this aspect of our church's work is best carried out not by individual congregations, but as a cooperative venture within the framework of a synodical organization.

It was not until 1883 that the young synod gave serious attention to world mission outreach. In that year of the quadricentennial of Luther's birth it resolved to seek out and support an orthodox mission society. When in the following year the committee appointed to find such a mission society reported that it could not find one to meet these specifications, it was instructed to look for a potential heathen mission field of our own and for young men within our own synod to serve in it.

The outcome was that five years later John Plocher, George Adascheck and Paul Mayerhoff were enlisted as trainees for mission service. As previously mentioned, the first two became our synod's first world missionaries. The third was called to the Apache mission three years later to replace Adascheck, who had returned to Wisconsin after about a year in the field.

It seems that extraordinary synodical or world events often were the catalyst for the beginning of new work. It is interesting to note that the decision to begin work among the American Indians coincided with the forming of the federation of the Joint Synod Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan and Other States. It seemed fitting that this newly organized body should undertake what was for it an entirely new kind of gospel outreach.

No time was lost in implementing that decision. Pastors Theodore Hartwig and O. H. Koch were sent to explore Arizona and to find a tribe among whom no gospel work had been done. They recommended Apacheland, and little more than a year after the 1892 convention Plocher and Adascheck were on their way.

For thirty years the Apache Mission was our synod's only "foreign" mission. There has often been question as to the appropriateness of considering a mission in the continental U.S.A. to be a world mission. The answer is that the Apaches have a language and culture which is as different and as unique as that of people among whom we are doing mission work anywhere else in the world. Even today enough of that uniqueness remains to warrant keeping the Apache work under the administration of the Board for World Missions. The chapter titled "A Century of Patience and Perseverance" amply bears this out.

The founding of our first overseas mission came in the aftermath of the First World War. The story of this mission has been told in a previous presentation to the WELS Historical Institute and need not be repeated here (Ernst H. Wendland, Our Synod's First Mission Overseas, 5/1/83). The beginning of work in Poland had to do more with confessional concerns than with gospel outreach as such and came as the result of pleas from various individuals in Poland to relatives in the Wisconsin Synod to help them in their spiritual need.

Following World War I the new republic of Poland had revoked the guarantees of religious freedom given during the 19th century to Germans who had emigrated to Poland because of crowded conditions and lack of economic opportunity at home. The only "Lutheran" church in Poland which retained government recognition was woefully lacking in sound scriptural doctrine.

The story is an absorbing one, how the Wisconsin Synod resolved in 1923 to take on the mission in Poland at a cost of \$10,000; how the new church encountered opposition both from the government and from the liberal Augsburg

Church; how World War II resulted in the moving of the Poland mission members to Germany; how against great odds they regrouped to form a new free church in Germany. It is a story which unfortunately does not have a happy ending. After some years of declining membership, it left our fellowship in 1976 when it merged with SELK, the new Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church.

As world events on occasion contributed to the beginning of new missions, so they at times stood in the way of extending our gospel outreach. The Great Depression was such an event. The reduced income of our members, coupled with a crippling debt incurred largely through synodical building programs undertaken in the "good times" preceding 1929, left our synod with a debt which was not eliminated until 1945 and which stood in the way of mission expansion both at home and abroad.

Yet the Lord has his way, and it was in the middle of the depression years that the opportunity came for our first rather limited involvement in work in Africa. What we were unable to do on our own, we resolved to undertake together with the other three synods of the Synodical Conference. The cost was modest since each synod contributed according to the size of its membership. The large portion of the cost was met by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. A bonus for us was the fact that some of the key persons in the work in Nigeria, including mission superintendent William Schweppe and seminary head Norbert Reim, were members of our synod.

The close of World War II saw new growth and remarkable development of our synod's world missions. By 1945 the synod debt was retired. For the first time in years the treasurer's report showed black figures and a \$350,000 in reserve funds. A world torn by six years of devastating war yearned for peace. New and previously inaccessible areas were open to travel. Communication was more rapid and efficient than ever before. Conditions were favorable for new mission outreach.

It was in this same year that our synod met in what has been called "The Happy Convention." Against the background of the war's end and the synod's new fiscal solvency the convention in New Ulm resolved that a committee be appointed "to gather information regarding foreign fields."

That was the beginning of four and a half decades of world mission expansion which has been unprecedented in our synod's history. We wish that we could tell the story here in some sort of detail, but the discovery of how it all happened is going to have to be left for your reading of the book. It will have to suffice for the moment to call attention to a few select dates in the years following "The Happy Convention".

- 1947 The Wisconsin Synod authorized "the expansion of mission work in foreign mission fields."
- 1948 Our first Latin American work was begun in Phoenix, Arizona, and after a short time was shifted to Tucson.

- 1949 Pastors Arthur Wacker and Edgar Hoenecke undertook exploration of fields in Africa... They ended their trip in Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia after finding the area to be a promising field.
- 1951 The synod voted to send two missionaries to Northern Rhodesia, Africa. It also authorized the Spiritual Welfare Commission to place a man in Japan to care for people in the armed services as well as "to investigate mission opportunities" there.
- 1953 The synod authorized two men to be called as missionaries to Japan.
- 1954 A mission station was established on a native reserve land grant at Lumano (Mwembezhi) in the Sala area of Northern Rhodesia.
- 1960 Peter Chang requested financial assistance from the Wisconsin Synod for work in Hong Kong. Granting of assistance to the Chinese Lutheran Christian Mission in 1964 eventually led to a full mission program in Hong Kong.
- 1963 The synod authorized the calling of two missionaries to Puerto Rico.
- 1963 Missionaries Richard Mueller and Raymond Cox arrived in Blantyre, Malawi, to extend the Central African work to that country. This subsequently has become our largest single world mission field.
- 1964 Our first missionaries arrived in San Juan, Puerto Rico, later beginning work in Guayama and Humacao.
- 1968 The Institute of Biblical Research (Biblicum) was founded in Uppsala, Sweden. This became the starting point of confessional Lutheran work in Sweden, Norway and Finland.
- 1969 The Wisconsin Synod voted to support confessional Lutherans in Mexico.
- 1969 Fellowship was declared with the Confessional Lutheran Church in Indonesia. Our first two missionaries came to Indonesia ten years later in 1979.
- 1970 A congregation was begun at Everlasting Happiness Village on the Island of Taiwan. A three-man missionary team for this field was authorized by the 1977 synod convention.
- 1971 The WELS convention unanimously approved sending a three-man team to Medellin, Colombia, South America.
- 1972 The Board for World Missions voted to support the newly-formed Evangelical Lutheran Church of the United Republic of Cameroon.
- 1973 At the synod convention at New Ulm three missionaries were commissioned to begin work in Colombia, our first mission field in South America.
- 1975 The Lutheran Confessional Church of Sweden formally established fellowship ties with the Wisconsin Synod. Our synod has continued to the present time in providing a modest amount of financial support for this young church.



- 1977 The WELS convention resolved "to explore the best possible way of standing at the side" of Christ the King Lutheran Synod in Nigeria. Ten new missionaries were authorized for various world mission fields.
- 1978 A Mequon seminary graduate was assigned to Brazil for one year.
- 1985 The synod convention unanimously resolved to enter Brazil with a five-man team.
- 1990 Two men were called to assist the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Germany (ELF).
- 1991 In January a missionary advisor left for Nigeria for a period of two years to assist Christ the King Lutheran Church in developing and expanding its worker training program.

Of the work we were doing in 1945, only the Apache Mission remains. At the dissolution of the Synodical Conference in 1963 the church in Nigeria elected to remain with the LC-MS. As mentioned, the Lutheran Confessional Church in Germany joined a church body not in fellowship with us. In 1945 the Apache congregations had 354 communicants. From that small number our world missions have grown in these four and a half decades so that today they number over 15,000 communicants and over 31,000 baptized members. We have missionaries resident in ten countries and serving on a non-resident basis in four others. Working alongside them are some 130 national pastors, vicars and evangelists. In a most remarkable way the Lord has permitted us to see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm." Is 60:3.4

#### **Personal Glimpses**

A book on world missions would not be complete without some personal glimpses of those who have been on the front lines. The writer of the concluding chapter of To Every Nation, Tribe, Language and People states,

Our story is a "people story." Our Savior God has seen fit to use people to reach out to people. He through his Spirit has empowered "jars of clay," as the Apostle Paul expresses it, to carry out the primary mission of his church, which is the rescue of fallen mankind."

The book provides such glimpses in the form of personal anecdotes. We are given a close and at times intimate look at the people whom the Lord has used to carry out his work. We see their strengths and can only marvel how God empowered these workers and blessed their work. On occasion we also see their weaknesses and the mistakes they made and marvel again how the Lord was able not only to minimize the damage, but more often than not turned events and brought blessing out of what looked like sure disaster.

I wish it were possible today to give you a number of these personal glimpses. Again, these will have to await your reading of the book. For the moment just one short anecdote will have to suffice.

Back in 1947 six pastors of the former Poland mission were working in the three allied occupation zones in Germany. Pastors Armin Schlender and August Lerle labored in the Russian zone. Lerle had lost 90% of his vision, but did much of his traveling by bicycle. There were those who questioned whether he ought to be doing this and pointed out the danger this posed both to himself and to others on the road. "When they see me coming, they should have enough sense to get out of the way," he said.

Once when crossing the border from one occupation zone into another, Lerle was challenged by a border guard for including a Bible among his papers. Lerle simply said, "Here is the Bible. Read it. I'm willing to sit here all day until you have finished." The guard let Lerle pass without further delay.

#### **Initial Response**

It is my hope that this preliminary look at the book will have whetted your appetite for the real thing. Those of us working on the project have found it stimulating and encouraging. What the Lord has permitted our synod to see in a century of world mission work is a heartwarming demonstration of the power of his word and fulfillment of his promise. As one of the reviewers put it, "It comes off as upbeat, exhibiting an ongoing confidence in the Lord's over-arching promises and power." Another stated, "Have been enjoying the history tremendously. Spirit is beautiful. Really captured it." The layman wrote, "It was very interesting and I have learned a great deal about the synod's mission work."

It is the hope of all who have been involved in the project that the overall response will be similar and that the publication of this world mission centennial history will prove to be the blessing for our missions and for our synod's members which the Board for World Missions envisioned when it first commissioned the project.

Presented at the Spring Meeting  
of the WELS Historical Institute  
April 14, 1991, by Theodore A. Sauer