

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH
"LA SANTA CRUZ"
How this church became affiliated with the WELS

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“Adelante in Mexico”, is the heading found on the cover of the February issue of the Northwestern Lutheran. In English, this heading translates into “Forward in Mexico”. Under their current President, Mexico has enjoyed an increase in commerce and industry never seen before. The restrictions sanctioning foreign companies have become increasingly lenient, injecting a flow of much needed revenue. However, the caption “Adelante in Mexico”, is the heading for an article which depicts growth, not on levels of industry and commerce, but more importantly on levels of Gospel outreach. By the Grace of God, another country steeped in superstition and Biblical ignorance has opened its doors allowing expatriate missionaries to preach and teach the Gospel. Not until 1992 did Mexico begin to ease their laws on church and state. The doors which were shut for so many years to foreigners, due to Nationalism and patriotism, are now slowly opening to allow missionaries to spread the good news.

However, God’s Word had reached this land long before the government had exercised leniency in its policies. In 1941, a congregation by the name of “La Santa Cruz” (Holy Cross) was founded in Monterrey, Mexico. It was affiliated with the Lutheran Synod of Mexico as part of the mission program of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. However, this congregation did face some trying moments in their history. The pastors serving there did not carry out their duties as faithful workers of God’s kingdom. The congregation suffered many blows as Satan tried to create barriers for them. It wasn’t until 1984, after many years of lengthy discussions on doctrinal and fellowship matters with the Lutheran Synod of Mexico, that the congregation “La Santa Cruz” decided to apply for membership in the CELC (Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church) in Mexico which is affiliated with the WELS.

In this paper, I plan on discussing the proceedings between the Lutheran Synod of Mexico, and the Church "La Santa Cruz". My sources were generously provided for me by Pastor Paul Hartman who acted as the counselor for the WELS. The information I have consists mainly of correspondence between the two parties with some letters written between the pastors in Mexico and the United States. This first hand material at times may seem somewhat confusing, but I will do my best to logically show the progression of events. There may be some gaps in the sequence of events, due to the fact that some of the information concerning this matter was withheld from me because of its confidential status.

As I mentioned before, this congregation in Monterrey had experienced some trying times. For forty years, they had been shepherded by pastors who had failed to carry out their roles as called shepherds of God's flock. In 1980, at the request of some of the members, the congregation "La Santa Cruz" decided to write a letter to the Lutheran Synod of Mexico disputing the work of their pastor.

In response to this denouncing letter, the Lutheran Synod of Mexico responded with their letter dated February 27, 1980, in which they made know their deepest regrets for the unfaithfulness of Pastor Arnulfo Dominguez. In this letter, the Synodical Council in Mexico expressed their sentiments and recommended the following procedures. The congregation was to verify any allegations against the accused pastor to see if he was guilty of the following: 1) *Heresy* 2) *Inmortality*
3) *Unfaithfulness in his duties as a called worker.*

The LSM (Lutheran Synod of Mexico) left the option open for the congregation in Monterrey to clarify their dealings with their pastor. If nothing was to be clarified, then the Synod would be forced to support the retirement of pastor Arnulfo Dominguez. His retirement would be handled in a graceful manner in the upcoming General Assembly. However, the following stipulations were also included

in the letter dated February 27, 1980. If the congregation would release him from his duties, two things could happen to the congregation: 1) *They would not recommend or supply another pastor for this congregation.* 2) *The Church "La Santa Cruz" would no longer receive subsidy from the LSM.* Ironically this letter was signed by three members of the Synodical Council. One of them was the very own Arnulfo Dominguez acting as the president of this council.

In March of 1980, the congregation "La Santa Cruz" wrote a letter addressed to the president of the LCMS. In this letter, the church took the initiative to relieve their pastor Arnulfo Dominguez of his duties as a called worker. In the letter five reasons were given in respect to this decision taken by the congregation.

- 1- Incompetence in carrying out his ministerial duties.
- 2- The Conduct of the Reverend Arnulfo Dominguez Estrada and his family is not in accord with the conditions established by the first Epistle of Paul to Timothy 3:1-7.
- 3- During the eight years of ministry the Reverend Arnulfo Dominguez, as pastor of this church, has been noticed in his conduct to go against those things written by the Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians 5:19-21.
- 4- The Reverend Arnulfo Dominguez has been found to be lacking in piety, contentment and humility. His actions go against the things written by the Apostle Paul in I Timothy 6:3-10, and 3:10-11.
- 5- These proceedings employed in this present judgment were taken textually as it is recorded in the Holy Scriptures in Matthew 18:15-18.

In the closing paragraph of this letter, the congregation expressed their sadness in having to relate these grieving problems to the LCMS. However, the closing statement of this paragraph made me realize how God in his mercy had given the foresight to the members of this church to uphold His Word in all its truth and purity. The closing statement, translated from the Spanish, reads like this: *(speaking of their decision to remove from office the Reverend Arnulfo Dominguez)... "but we did this with the*

intention to defend the purity of God's Word, and the justice of the ministry of the Lutheran Christian". It becomes evident that this congregation realized the severity of their continued battles with their pastors. Their decision was not an easy one, yet it was a necessary one.

In August of 1980, the voting members of "La Santa Cruz" met. In this meeting they decided to formulate another letter which spelled out clearly and simply the false teaching of pastor Arnulfo Dominguez. Their direct accusation dealt with Pastor Dominguez and his interpretation of the Lord's Supper. He (Arnulfo Dominguez) declared that Martin Luther affirmed and practiced "Transubstantiation". He said, according to Luther the bread was transformed into the body of Christ, "up to the point when it was ingested by the believer". In the letter, the congregation also expressed these thoughts. They believed that many of the problems which had arisen in the past few years were due to the fact that they depended economically on the LSM. They had written that pastor Arnulfo Dominguez had taken into account only the welfare of the LSM, since they paid him his salary, and therefore had disregarded the welfare of the congregation.

It was in this letter that the congregation finally decided to declare their independence economically from the Lutheran Synod of Mexico. Such action was taken with the ^{intended} intent purpose of resolving all the problems which they had in the past. The congregation was well aware that such a decision would bring some enormous responsibilities. Yet they realized that with the help of God they would be able to come out of this situation victoriously.

In the following two years some letters were written back and forth between the LSM and the congregation "La Santa Cruz". None of these letters, however, are available for reproduction. In June of 1982 a letter was written from the voters of the congregation to the President of the LSM thanking the LSM for accepting them again

as a constituting church. The congregation in some manner must have come to terms with the LSM. However, this agreement did not last long. One year later in 1983, the congregation once again declared in writing their independence from the LSM. The letter points out the the following fact about their ongoing dealings with the LSM.

“...for unknown reasons and only being supported by your last letter that you had the goodness to send us, and obeying the suggestion to wait, by not having a reply after a full year, and seeing that with this passive attitude toward the work of our church, and still not having such a person, this indicates to us that there is no manifest interest for said congregation, the following decision was taken that we wish to bring to your attention: That our congregation met in special session and recognizing the eminent necessity of spiritual help for its flock; the following was unanimously agreed- to once again take up our Independence and Autonomy from the Mexican Synod, according to the agreement found in the minutes of both parts with the date of the 3rd of August of 1980 and basing ourselves on the last communication received from you as president of the Lutheran Synod of Mexico; in such a manner that in this situation we hope for the help of the Lord Jesus and by means of His Light to look for and find the ideal person that can agree to the responsibilities of the pastorate of our congregation.” (letter, June 15, 1983).

Once again the congregation found itself without a pastor and without any economic support. A couple days after the June fifteenth letter the retired Pastor, Felix Segovia Fraga of Monterrey, who was currently helping the congregation as much as possible due to his poor health, telephoned Pastor David Chichia (President of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church) asking him to visit with the congregation in Monterrey. Pastor Chichia arrived in Monterrey in early September of 1983.

A week after Pastor Chichias' visit, the voters of the congregation submitted another letter, this time to the CELC, dated September 8, 1983. In this lettered they reiterated their hardships with their previous Pastor Arnulfo Dominguez and his constant attacks against the Lutheran Church. But the purpose of this letter was not to

harp on past problems, but to bring to the foreground a formal request of affiliation. The request was to no longer be independent, but dependent of the CELC which was affiliated with the WELS. Their decision was based on references given by the same Pastor Segovia Fraga and several other pastors. The congregation expressed their desire to do whatever was necessary for the formal agreement to take place. They included in this letter a list of signatures, in which eighty-two members signed expressing their common desire for this affiliation to take place, as well as other figures which might in any way help the CELC in their decision.

On this same date another letter was addressed to Pastor Paul Hartman who was acting as one of the three mission counselors for the CELC in Mexico. This letter came from the pen of Pastor David Chichia, who was informing Pastor Hartman of the current situation in Monterrey. On October 7, 1983, Pastors Chichia and Hartman visited with the congregation in Monterrey to assess the situation. In their visit they had the following objectives in mind: *1) To better understand the situation. 2) To ask about the congregation's reason for leaving the LSM. 3) To meet the nucleus of the congregation.* In turn the congregation had a list of their own objectives: *1) To have a pastor soon, since Pastor Segovia could serve for only a little while longer. 2) To talk with our synod accompanied by another pastor.*

The Missouri Synod wasted no time in responding. On November 8, 1983, their Board for Mission Services wrote a letter addressed to Pastor Felix Segovia. In the letter they mentioned the rumor of Pastor Segovia's retirement, as well as information concerning the congregation's attempts of obtaining a pastor from the WELS. Upon learning these facts, the LCMS proceeded to call Pastor Essmann, who at the time was the secretary of Latin American Missions, and confirmed the dealings between the congregation "La Santa Cruz" and the President of the CELC Pastor Chichia. In the letter, the Board for Missions of the LCMS stated that as far as Pastor

Chichia was concerned the congregation was independent of the LSM (Lutheran Synod of Mexico). However, this was not the case. According to the LCMS, the LSM (The affiliated branch of LCMS in Mexico) was under the understanding that the congregation "La Santa Cruz" had never declared itself independent of the LSM.

On November 12-13, 1983, Pastor Daniel Perez Rodriguez from Guadalajara visited the congregation in Monterrey in order to gather data and inform the following to the CELC: *1) The congregation has identified itself with the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church, therefore affiliated with the WELS. 2) The congregation would have some difficulties because the LSM on November 21, 1983, would not consider the congregation an organization independent of the LSM even though it contradicts the June 15th letter.* Not much else is known concerning the visit of Pastor Perez Rodriguez.

The information I have received for this paper does not clarify the misunderstanding between the LSM and the congregation "La Santa Cruz". As it stood, the congregation had declared its independence from the LSM, however the LSM did not recognize that decision. In order to find out more information, Pastor Chichia wrote a letter to both the Lutheran Synod of Mexico and the congregation in Monterrey. He did not receive any correspondence from the Synod, but he did receive a letter from the church dated December 11, 1983. In the letter the congregation wrote the following. *"In regard to affiliation with the Lutheran Synod of Mexico, we want to make manifest to you that after three long years of not arriving at a favorable solution for our work, we decided to request a pastor who would attend our congregation, and consequently to affiliate ourselves with the synod over which you diligently preside. (Letter, 12/11/83)* In the same letter they expressed their desire once again to affiliate themselves with the CELC. To testify to this fact, they (the Church Council) once again made evident that the congregation was in agreement with the steps that were being taken by Pastor David Chichia for the affiliation.

It is at this point where more questions are asked than can be answered. The LSM claims to have never received any request or formal petition of autonomy from the congregation. The congregation claims to have exercised sufficient patience with the LSM as far as arriving at a favorable solution to their problems. Nevertheless, the congregation continued with their plans to affiliate themselves with the CELC even though their dealings with the CELC would be under protest by the LSM.

The following letter came from the congregation to Pastor Chichia in January of 1984. In the letter, the congregation made it known that a special meeting was held to request from the CELC a substitute pastor to fill in for the ailing Pastor Segovia. This letter was signed by the board of directors of the Church "La Santa Cruz". Several pastors from around the area belonging to the CELC initiated a series of doctrinal studies with the congregation "La Santa Cruz".

In February, Pastor Chichia wrote a letter to the LSM informing them of the ongoing between the provisional pastors and the congregation in Monterrey. He also asked why the LSM had discontinued writing to the congregation in Monterrey. He received a response in March concerning this matter. Meanwhile, Pastor Chichia made it known to the LSM, that on March 30, 1984, the congregation in Monterrey was accepted by the CELC.

The LSM responded with a letter dated March 3, 1984. This letter was written by the Secretary of the LSM to Pastor David Chichia with a copy sent to Paul Hartman. In the letter, the Secretary made it clear that the situation involving the congregation in Monterrey was a very delicate one, and had to be dealt with in a special meeting between the LSM and Pastor Chichia to be set up some time in May. The Secretary once again stated very clearly that the congregation "La Santa Cruz" was not independent *totally* of the LSM. That is to say that the LSM had not received any official information concerning this matter. In view of this, the Secretary of the

LSM advised that any ecclesiastical relation with the church should be discontinued until such meeting would take place in May.

It was on April 1, 1984 when the congregation officially announced its affiliation with the CELC. At the same time they decided to extend a call to Pastor Daniel Perez Rodriguez to serve as Pastor of the congregation "La Santa Cruz". Pastor Perez acknowledged such a call with his own letter dated April 6, 1984. In this short letter he expressed his most devout consideration in such a call and asked for the prayers of the members in the church.

The LSM did not keep quiet. On April 27, 1984, they wrote a letter denouncing the acceptance of the congregation "La Santa Cruz" into the CELC since they had not declared complete autonomy from the LSM. While hard feelings were present between the LSM and the congregation in Monterrey, Pastor Perez did accept the call after having given it much thought. In his acceptance letter, Pastor Perez recommended June 3, 1984, as his installation date since he would have to travel a long distance from Guadalajara to Monterrey. He also asked Pastor Chichia to conduct the installation on that Sunday, with Pastor Larry Schlomer as the preacher.

With this previous letter, Pastor Perez also included an additional letter where he included a list expenses for his travel to Monterrey. He requested 23,000 pesos (approx. \$15) for himself and his family for travel and food. He also requested another 4,000 pesos (approx. \$4) for hotel expenses. He finally requested that they advance his monthly pay since he did not have any emergency funds.

These requests to me seem a little presumptuous. It seems to me that any expenses for their new Pastor would be taken into consideration by the congregation. However, Pastor Perez gave a detailed list of what he needed and also desired, seeming to neglect the church's financial status at this point. I don't know what was settled between the congregation and Pastor Perez in regard to his travel expenses.

The LSM was not out of the picture yet. On May 11, 1984 they would address

a letter to Pastor David Chichia, expressing the following:

1. By virtue of the fact that the Work of Holy Cross Lutheran Church of Monterrey, N.L. was initiated under the auspices of what today is the LSM, investing for it a large amount of money for the land, building (temple), installations and furnishings.
2. By virtue of the fact that Holy Cross Lutheran Church has opted to affiliate itself to the church body of which you preside,
3. On account of which the LSM has been profoundly wounded as a result of the previous in reference to the property and installations of that building,
4. Therefore, we consider that the LSM should receive from your church body economic compensation of the total actualized value of said property. (Note: "actualized" presumably means current market value.) (Letter 4/11/84)

Accompanying these four statements, the Directors of the LSM recommended that the CELC promote this matter of economic compensation immediately to our WELS Mission Board. They also added a small yet significant phrase which stated that their request for property compensation was a just and Christian one.

The Executive Committee for Latin America wrote a letter addressed to the Board for Mission Services acknowledging this matter of compensation to the LCMS. The matter had been presented to the WELS Executive Committee for Latin American Missions at their meeting on the December 12, 1984. This matter was referred to in a meeting by the Executive Committee on January 16-17 of 1985, where they received additional information on the decision taken by the Committee and the Board for World Missions.

The BWM in their report gave their decision concerning the request to reimburse the LCMS for the Monterrey Chapel. Since the requests for reimbursements were made by the LSM and the LCMS, the Executive Committee for Latin America recommended that the Board for World Missions deny any requests for

compensation for the following reasons: 1) *To do so would leave the impression that we are acknowledging guilt where there is none.* 2) *We also feel that the LCMS donated the property to the congregation that still has the use of the building. The WELS has received no property.* (BWM Report, 1/16/85)

The BWM made it clear that they agreed in the above statement and that the Executive Committee for Latin America be asked to transmit this declaration of agreement to the LCMS. Harold Essmann, Chairman of the Executive Committee for Latin America, wrote to the LCMS explaining the decision the BWM had taken. He wrote that if the matter was to be pursued by the LCMS, the matter then would then rest in the hands of the BWM. In March, Pastor Hartman wrote to Pastor Chichia informing him of the decision taken by BWM to deny their request for compensation.

Between 1985 and 1991 there was no correspondence that I know of between the LSM and the congregation in Monterrey or Pastor Hartman. It wasn't until January 1, 1991, that a letter was written from Pastor Daniel Perez (who had served the congregation in Monterrey for five years but had resigned for personal reasons) to the President of the Municipality in Monterrey. In the letter he wrote about a most interesting incident. According to him, his replacement as ^PPastor of the congregation in Monterrey was going to be Pastor Ebenezer Orea Coria who lived in the town of Juarez. Supposedly this alleged Pastor Coria presented himself to be registered in the office of Ministry in Monterrey but he did not have any identification. On top of that, Pastor Perez also wrote that two months later he became aware of the fact that this Pastor Coria was unknown to our ^PPastors in the United States.

He went on to complain in his letter about the manner in which the WELS supplied temporary pastors to serve the congregation in Monterrey. He mentioned Pastors' Schlomer and Guillen as examples. He also wrote that as of January 20, 1991 Pastor Ernest Zimdars would take public possession as new pastor of the

congregation. The whole reason for this letter was to create some awareness in the Municipality of Monterrey of how illegal it was to name a foreign pastor to serve in Mexico. The animosity expressed by Pastor Perez can be capped with his closing statement in this letter. *“For the following, I ask as one responsible for this church: Can a congregation mock the Law?”* Regardless, Pastor Zimdars was called by the Synod to serve this congregation in Monterrey. To the present time the congregation in Monterrey still continues to receive letters which denounce the work of the WELS. Yet, because the government has begun to relax its policies on their constitution many of these accusations have faded away.

As I mentioned before, many questions arise which I cannot answer. Many of these questions cannot be answered because much of the information is confidential and could not be included in this paper. I tried to present the facts as they were given to me. But, as I read these documents and letters, I realized the stumbling blocks the devil was trying to put in front of this congregation. Maybe things were not done the way they should have been done, but what remains is the desire of this church to stick to the true doctrine of God. Their battles may not be over yet, but they will continue to uphold to God's pure doctrine and proclaim his Word faithfully.

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