

# **A Brief History of the Campus Ministry in Oshkosh**

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Who likes school? Who wants to be challenged in every aspect of life while at school? Who wants to establish who they are at a school which challenges their core beliefs? This is what may happen when a college student leaves home to learn the ways of the world. College offers a unique opportunity to grow and learn. It maybe one of the most intense times in a person's life. Friends made in college become life long friends. Attitudes and habits formed in college can become the habits and practices for the rest of a person's life. College is an eye opening, jaw dropping experience. Who would not want to be prepared to meet these challenges head on? The Wisconsin Evangelical Synod has recognized the importance of reaching out to college adults. Since the 1950s WELS on a synod level has been involved in reaching out to college students.<sup>1</sup> In the city of Oshkosh, Wisconsin it was a different story. Martin Luther Church showed their concern for the students at a much earlier date. As early as 1924, Martin Luther Church was involved in reaching out to the college students.<sup>2</sup>

At Martin Luther, the first organization of Lutheran college students was called "National Lutheran Society." Then the organization changed its name to the "College Lutheran Society." Martin Luther Church records state that the CLS met in the church's fellowship hall which was behind the church on Jackson Street. The earliest mention of CLS at Martin Luther was in 1948. The CLS continued until sometime in the 1950s when the name of the organization for the college students was changed again. For a brief period of time the Lutheran college student became a part of "Delta Mu" a chapter of "Gamma Delta" a nation-wide organization for college age students. By 1957 the chapter of "Delta Mu" met at Martin Luther. After this brief time of association in "Gamma Delta" Lutheran Collegians began.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Westerhaus, Martin G. Material for a History of the WELS Campus Ministry. Milwaukee, Wisconsin. September 26, 1979. page 10

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther Congregation Yearbook, 1964. page 20 The author begins looking at the history of only one church because this was his home church. All the congregations in Oshkosh helped at some point with these organizations. At one point Faith was active, at another time it was Bethlehem. Still at another time Grace was involved. Martin Luther had a larger facility and was located near the University. Many meetings were held at Martin Luther Church. This does not mean that the other churches did not support the ministry to the college campuses.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, page 20

During the school year of 1963 students took the initiative to establish themselves in Oshkosh. They sat down with Pastor Kleinhans of Martin Luther and drew up a constitution and elected officers to form their own organization. They called themselves, "Wisconsin Synod Collegiate Organization." This organization functioned for a year. Then steps were made to join the new Synod collegiate group called "Lutheran Collegians." Oshkosh became a charter member of this fledgling organization in 1964. Oshkosh was a member of Lutheran Collegians for the majority of the organization's existence.

The 1960s saw growth in the ministry for college students. Oshkosh took full advantage of the opportunities offered to college age students. They still continued to hold meetings at Martin Luther Church, but guided by Pastor Kleinhans and two laymen /professors the college students met regularly. Roger Dennis and Adolf Froehlke held lectures and conducted meetings with the students. The organization of this group allowed the students to go to National Conventions for college students, have social gatherings, and also do outreach. Some students would also go to the area Lutheran High School and make presentations to make incoming students aware of Lutheran Collegians in Oshkosh. The organization continued in this manner until 1969.<sup>4</sup>

In 1969 a campus house was purchased to give the students a permanent meeting place. The Lutheran Collegians in Oshkosh were instrumental in acquiring a house. The Lutheran Collegians of Oshkosh showed their willingness to work to maintain a ministry in Oshkosh. At the time Oshkosh had the second highest concentration of WELS students attending a public university. So with the help of people like Eugene Schroeder, a member of District mission board, Adolf Froehlke, and Dr. Roger Dennis the Campus house was purchased. It was purchased for a hefty sum of \$70,000. The reason for the expense was the size and quality of house which was purchased. A large solid house was purchased so that there would be room to have worship and small group Bible studies. The house on 634 Wisconsin Street fit the bill.<sup>5</sup>

Yet even though great strides were being made in campus ministry, the needs of the college students were continually placed behind the needs of the churches. Throughout the sixties and seventies Pastor Kleinhans, Pastor Habeck and also a handful of vicars from Martin Luther and other churches in Oshkosh

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<sup>4</sup> History of Lutheran Collegians Wisconsin State University--Oshkosh. Author is unknown. Date written unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Schroeder, Eugene. Telephone Interview. 12/03/2005

served the Lutheran Collegians on a part time basis. There was no one man dedicated to this ministry. In 1969 when records of attendance started to be recorded there were small numbers who came. The Lutheran Collegians worshiped primarily when it was convenient for the pastors in the area. In some years the number of students attending the Campus house worship was in the single digits. The District Mission board became concerned with the lack of numbers attending and the large number of students who were in the area. The District mission board was focused on retaining the students from the WELS. There is nothing more valuable than a soul. The leaders wanted to reach and retain as many as possible.

The District Mission Board then called Pastor Robert Diener to take over the Campus house full time. In 1977 the Campus finally received a full time pastor when Diener accepted the call. When Pastor Diener was called there were anywhere from 600 to 900 WELS students attending Oshkosh University.<sup>6</sup> The need was there for a full time position. Pastor Diener took over in 1977 only six years after he had vicared in Oshkosh at Grace Lutheran Church. During his vicar year Pastor Diener had conducted services and been involved with the functions of the Campus Ministry.

Pastor Diener wasted no time in establishing goals for himself to reach. He did not want to without a focus or mission. He spent many days at first meeting with other campus pastors in the hopes of finding a way to reach out to the students. He came up with a three pronged approach. The mission of the Campus house was to retain, train, and gain.<sup>7</sup> One of the goals of the Campus ministry was to retain all the WELS students who went to Oshkosh. The make-up of this college makes this unique. More than one person has called this campus a suitcase campus. Students come only for a short while and then are gone. Some students come for a few years until they can get into Madison or another larger college. Others live in the area and go home on the weekend. How can you retain students in such a revolving system? This would prove to be a challenge. Another way in which the campus house was to serve was to train. The campus house was to give students practical experience running a church, caring for believers, and reaching out to others. Training leads into gaining-gaining students not of WELS background. Pastor Diener addressed these issues right away.

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<sup>6</sup> Schroeder, Eugene. Telephone Interview. 12/03/2005.

<sup>7</sup> Diener, Robert. Personal Interview 11/26/2005

Every person I have talked to has told me Pastor Diener was a man who loved his job. He was devoted to reaching out to the students. It was evident that he loved it when I interviewed him about five years after he had taken another call. As a result we see some busy years with Pastor Diener. Almost immediately after Pastor Diener arrived he began to produce monthly newsletters called "Love Alive." He faithfully distributed the newsletter month after month for over twenty years. This newsletter gives a good insight to the happenings of the Campus House. The newsletter always began the school year with an introduction of what the Campus house's purpose and function were. Then there would be a listing of all the Bible classes, services and events which were to be conducted within the month. To page through the volumes of newsletters shows that the activity during the school year never stopped. The Campus house in Oshkosh was instrumental in several fields.

One field which the Campus ministry influenced WELS was in periodicals. Pastor Diener saw the value in the new gadget, the computer. He spent many hours with students and secretaries compiling the first database of College students for the WELS. Eventually this was taken over by the Synod. Because they had this database of all the WELS college students Pastor Diener was able to do mass mailings. The Campus house took over the distribution WELS national periodical for collegians called "Handout" now named "Lightsource." Pastor Diener served as the editor for eleven years.<sup>8</sup> The students took a great deal of pride in gathering information and publishing "Lightsource."<sup>9</sup>

While the Campus family continued to help with the Lightsource another thing called TCW, or travel-canvas-witness was started. Pastor Diener recalls that Travel Canvass Witnessing was not some new concept he invented. It began some time in the 1960s but it died out.<sup>10</sup> Pastor Diener resurrected the program. In 1981 the first TCW team went to Orange Park, Florida. The students from Oshkosh would go on a TCW trip each year while Pastor Diener was there. The trips offered the students opportunities to learn how to confess their faith. It also gave them a different look at culture in the United States.

With fun in the sun you can imagine a few students being tempted to stay active for those free trips. Yet this was not a main focus of the campus house. There was also much time devoted to worship and study.

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<sup>8</sup>Diener, Robert. A History of the University Wisconsin Oshkosh WELS Campus Ministry. 1994

<sup>9</sup> Diener, Robert. Personal Interview 11/26/2005

<sup>10</sup> ibid

Because of the uniqueness of college students, tending to shift quickly with the times, Pastor Diener continually wrote new Bible studies and worship formats. Pastor Diener had time in the summer to produce Lenten series. In fact this became a way to fund the Campus house ministry for a short time. There were new songs, dramatic readings, and student participation in many of these new services. A local musician worked closely with Pastor Diener to produce original settings for Lenten services. With a great deal of time put into proclaiming the gospel in an effective manner, the Campus house only continued to grow. Even with ever-changing membership, the campus house grew. The campus house began with attendance in the low teens in the early 1970s but by the mid 1980s the number of people attending worship on Sunday was up to seventy people. A lot of growth was accomplished in the seventies and eighties.

As the Campus house family grew, the need for better and larger facilities had to be addressed. As early as 1983 the thought of expansion was in the air. The house next to the campus house was on the market. The owner of the house came to Pastor Diener exclusively and told him he wanted the Campus ministry to have the house. All he asked was that his mortgage be paid off. This was passed through the different boards of Synodical control and the house was purchased for \$48,000.<sup>11</sup> At about this time Diener writes, “We see our “congregation” numbering ultimately more than 500. This could mean an average weekly attendance of more than 150 per week, ranging from 125-200 and possibly more.”<sup>12</sup> There were big plans for Oshkosh at this time.

By 1984 the whole site was scheduled to be demolished and then building was to begin, but Synod put a halt on the project. In 1985 the house on the other side of the Campus house went up for sale. This time the home owner wanted to make some money from the Synod. The owner tried to hold out for as much money as possible. Yet, Pastor Diener was wise to the man’s conspiring; he was able to talk the man down to a reasonable price. \$53,000 dollars later the Campus house now had two properties. For a few years both houses were rented out to students.

Since 1983 the new chapel had been in the works. It took five years of debating to finally get the go ahead to build a new chapel. By 1988 both houses adjacent to had been razed and the chapel plans were being

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<sup>11</sup> Diener, Robert. Personal Interview. 12/3/2005

<sup>12</sup> Diener, Robert. Wisconsin Lutheran chapel, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, New Chapel Feasibility Study. No specific year dated, the author guess the dating is in the early 1980s.

finalized. In 1988 they had a ground breaking ceremony. On September 10, 1989 the new chapel was dedicated. It seemed with this advancement the Campus ministry was here to stay. Yet at this time tensions between Diener and the synod started to become more noticeable. Pastor Diener reports how when the district board came to the dedication and they saw the wood work they asked how Diener could afford this. The pulpit, altar, and lectern were all donated by a local craftsman. Synod officials voiced their concern because the project ran over budget.

The thought of running over budget in a building project is not all that uncommon. Why did this raise so people's eyebrows? The reason the additional money brought frustration was because of a lack of communication. Pastor Bob Hoepner the former head of Campus Ministry Committee (CMC) said at the time of the addition the CMS and the District Mission board were all involved. It may have been difficult for Pastor Diener to know who needed to be told about extra expenses.<sup>13</sup> Despite this mild irritation during this time the ministry of Oshkosh Campus ministry continued. We note the lack of communication because it will come into play a little later.

Life at the university Chapel continued on as normal for a few years after the chapel was built. The Lightsource continued to be produced at the campus house. The TCW trips continued to be planned and experienced. The database of students continued to be compiled. After some consideration by the CMC of the stress and the requirements for producing the Lightsource and the database it was decided that the responsibility of these things be transferred to the CMC. Pastor Diener had expressed some concern about the workload and that he may need additional support. The CMC decided it would be better to take over the production of the Lightsource and the compiling of the database for students. As a result of this move Pastor Diener was once again given the privilege to begin focusing more energy back into campus ministry.

Pastor Diener went back to working on Campus ministry. He began to focus on the international students on Campus. He was also involved with some ground work for a possible Campus ministry in Fond du Lac. Throughout the early 1990s the gospel continued to be spread to the students in Oshkosh. Yet there continued to be a lack of information sharing between Pastor Diener and the CMC. Patience was used by both

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<sup>13</sup> Hoepner, Robert. Telephone Interview. 12/6/2005 He was the head of the Campus Ministry Committee.

sides as they worked together. The CMC was interested finding out the situation at the University Chapel so that proper aid could be granted.

In the mid 1990s, the CMC adopted the policy that every Campus ministry had to have a five year plan. This was a plan to focus the ministries and to set the subsidy that they would need. In the dealings with the University Chapel, the lack of communication was again apparent. Pastor Hoepner recalled that the University Chapel in Oshkosh was one of the first groups to be directed to participate in the five year planning. Pastor Diener showed some reluctance in finishing the plans. In fact Oshkosh became one of the last Campus ministries to have a plan drawn up.

1994 brought out a report which had difficult ideas to comprehend. The "Meitler Report" was an evaluation of the Campus ministries in the WELS. New ideas came from this report which may not have been thought of before. The Meitler Consultation group looked at the objectives of Campus ministry and found many areas in which there was deficiency. For instance, 68% of WELS students in college did not participate in any form of Campus ministry at all. The fault of this statistics cannot rest completely on the shoulders of the campus ministry. One that is more startling was the fact that very few students who came to church were involved in Christian education programs. Almost no one was going to Bible class. In some campus ministries the number of people involved in the Bible classes did not break the single digits. Seeing these deficiencies the Meitler Report suggested some changes.

1. The Campus Ministry Committee should develop criteria by which it would evaluate all campus houses. The criteria should be used to determine if the campus house is needed or if its use should be discontinued.
2. One important criteria by which to judge the need for a campus house is whether there is or will be a full-time or a part-time plus pastor assigned to that campus. If there is not now or is not likely to be in the future a paid campus pastor, it is unlikely that the house should be retained.
3. Several campus houses need a thorough assessment of immediate and long term needs. Deferred maintenance needs to be addressed. All facilities should have current five-year plan for maintenance and capital improvements.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Meitler Report" Observation about the current status of WELS Campus Ministry. 1994. page 2 The third point is not applicable to our situation.



Some ideas were then purposed about individual campus ministries. Out of this report came two things, first a need to be able to evaluate each ministry, and second a plan for each campus ministry. Both of these ideas were implemented by the CMC.

The CMC took this report seriously and began to require five year plans. This is the five year plan that we talked about earlier, the one which took Oshkosh a considerable amount of time to complete. The practical aspect of ministry was looked at. Each campus was evaluated to see if we were being good stewards of our money. As a result some changes were made. The Milwaukee Campus ministry was scaled back. The Minneapolis Campus ministry was looked at and then maintained. Oshkosh also went through the same process.<sup>15</sup>

For almost twenty-five years Pastor Diener was the full-time called worker at Oshkosh. He in fact was the only full-time campus minister in Oshkosh. The numbers at Oshkosh needed to be crunched. In 1994 there were 284 WELS students enrolled in Oshkosh. A total of 80 students did something at the campus all year. There were only six in bible class and thirty at worship.<sup>16</sup> When the District mission board had originally thought about buying the house on Wisconsin there were 600-900 WELS Students enrolled at the University. The hope at that time was to get more students involved. The goal having 120 students at worship on any given Sunday now seemed farther away. As time progressed the situation did not get better. The attendance hovered around thirty for worship. Other ministries which were part-time were having just as much success as Oshkosh. The CMC looked at Oshkosh and proposed part-time staff.

Pastor Diener had resentful feelings. It is hard to see something you have poured your heart into now seeming down-graded. Some would like to blame the change in ministry on Pastor Diener because of his lack of communication at times. Other wanted to blame Synod for the change. These were difficult times for many people. New ideas are hard to handle when it means the reevaluation of something that has existed for decades. Still, the dynamics of the University called for a change in the approach for campus ministry. Pastor Hoepner talked about a survey he came across about the students of Oshkosh University. A majority of students in

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<sup>15</sup> Hoepner, Robert. Telephone Interview. 12/6/2005

<sup>16</sup> "Meitler Report" page 1

Oshkosh lived within an hour's drive from the university.<sup>17</sup> The suitcase campus continued into the present day. The students that were WELS could easily go home and be taken of spiritually there.

With the University Chapel being directed by Pastor Diener often the Campus ministry functioned on its own. It did not interact often with the congregations. Many of the students came from the churches in the area. The church needed to be involved. The churches needed to show concern for the spiritual welfare of the college students. The CMC saw the need for more people to support and be active in the care of the college students. The move was made to a part-time staff. Pastor Diener took a call to Readfield, Wisconsin in 2000. Many were left with the impression that this new idea was a step back and not forward.

It seems like this might be the end of campus ministry, but it wasn't. Shortly after Pastor Diener left, Pastor Sawall took over the part-time position until 2002. While he was in charge the campus house did see a significant decrease in attendance. This is due to the illness Pastor Sawall's wife had. Her illness consumed Pastor's time. The students attending dwindled down again to the single digits. As the CMC had hoped, local congregations stepped in to help. Pastor Daniel Krause from Grace in Oshkosh stepped in to fill the gap. Under his leadership the campus rebounded. He served until 2004.

Now Pastor Nathan Ericson has been called to serve part-time at the University Chapel and at Martin Luther Church. Pastor Ericson is actually living in the campus house. With the possibility of someone permanent at the University Chapel the numbers are rising slowly. The Synod gives a small portion to help fund the Chapel.<sup>18</sup> This is not anywhere near as much as the chapel once was funded. Yet the chapel is open and functioning, the gospel is being proclaimed. The goal of the chapel now is to regain the confidence of the congregations around it and also to begin regaining its presence among the students on campus.

Pastor Ericson has a lot of work ahead of him. The University of Oshkosh is a unique case with unique problems. Does the Campus ministry of Oshkosh disband and sell the chapel? Do the congregations of Oshkosh continue to support the ministry and reach out to the students? Pastor Ericson's goals are similar to Pastor Diener's. He wants to retain and gain. It is vital that the chapel retain the WELS students. It is critical to also

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<sup>17</sup> Hoepner. 12/06/2005

<sup>18</sup> Berg, Jeffery. Personal Interview. Submitted written comment on the status of the chapel 11/26//2005

gain non WELS students. An idea is to reach out to the international students just like Madison has done. Yet Oshkosh does not have as many and many do not stay around after they graduate? Where will the Campus ministry end up? We must answer most of these questions with, “only the Lord knows.”

One thing is certain; the gospel must continue to be preached to the student, the future leaders of our WELS congregations. As the Synod and the Congregations busy themselves with the politics of the University Chapel, Pastor Ericson needs to reach out to the students with the gospel. To predict the future of Oshkosh’s Campus ministry is pointless. To remember the students is vital. The form or means to which we reach out to our college students does not matter. The reality is it must be done. It must be done with the same dedication and zeal the generations before had. The gospel ministry must continue to the college students. The manner it is done may change as needed.

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