

THE HISTORY OF NORTHSIDE
LUTHERAN MINISTRIES

Jon Bilitz

Professor Brenner

CH-332

May 1, 1996

In the 1970's, many of our Wisconsin Synod's congregations which were located in Milwaukee's inner-city began to stumble. Technological and economic advancements of the previous years had enabled many in the middle-class to move from the crowded housing of the city, (built that way originally to reduce travel distances), out to the spacious suburbs. The value of the old houses in the city declined, because the market was flooded with them. They were sold for cheap or rented out, usually to people who could not afford to live elsewhere. "Thus the neighborhood declined, from middle class to poor, a neighborhood we now call the 'inner city'" (Westendorf, "Amazing" 21). Because the majority of WELS members were middle class, they, too, left the city and moved to the suburbs, often forming or joining congregations in those areas. With the reduction in members and the absence of their offerings, the city congregations experienced a financial crunch.

There was a deep need for the Synod to help these congregations in some way, but the general expectation was that these churches would relocate. Pastor Rolfe Westendorf gives three reasons for this expectation. He feels many thought that since the inner-city areas were becoming more black, the WELS did not belong, because "emotional blacks" would not be happy in a Lutheran service. Many also perceived that the Baptists already had a strong hold on the inner-city. With the churches that already existed there, we would be stealing sheep. This thinking represented an

inconsistency: The WELS was sending missionaries to Africa, but did not appear to be helping the blacks in her own back yard (Westendorf, personal interview).

A few of the inner-city churches dug in, refusing to consider relocation as an option for survival. The District Mission Board of the Southeast Wisconsin District received a request from these congregations for subsidy. But a major stumbling block existed. Home Missions in general had discovered recently limitations on congregational dependence, because new opportunities to start missions had arisen. Conservative members of LCMS, LCA, and ALC churches were looking for a church which was conservative. The Mission Board seized this opportunity. On the other hand, the standard question concerning the ability to become self-supporting did not fit when considering the situation in the inner-city. The result: The Board for Home Missions formed ^h ~~the~~ Inner-City Mission Committee (ICMC). It was formed to organize the inner-city congregations, present workshops, and discuss the possibilities (Westendorf, personal interview). The ICMC would eventually give birth to the outreach tool, Northside Lutheran Ministries.

The previous serves as background information to the advent and subsequent history of the ~~program~~ Northside Lutheran Ministries (NLM). This thesis will trace the history of NLM, looking at the problem in the inner-city (why NLM was created), the program (what NLM is), the people

(who has served and been served at NLM) and the power, (how God has blessed this ministry).

I. The Problem

The major problem that existed and still exists in the inner-city has already been mentioned, namely poverty. (It should be noted here that while the majority of those served by NLM are black, this poverty cuts across racial lines). The congregations who remained on the inner-city scene were able to canvass their immediate neighborhoods, but the poverty limited the travel of the residents. Without a car or some means of transportation, no way existed for these people to get to a WELS church to worship. By 1984, the WELS had pulled up stakes from its central city office buildings, moving to Mayfair Road. That move made the absence of a WELS congregation in about a five-mile radius of the inner-city very evident. There simply were no churches for these people to attend.

Poverty seems to have a simple solution: Get a job and earn some money. Unfortunately, that is not as simple as it sounds. Poverty occurs for several reasons. Some people are poor because of economic circumstances over which they have no control. Prolonged illness can lead to poverty. Many people became poor after World War II. Some people become poor because the factory in which they worked shut-down or cut back workers. Others are poor because of physical and mental deficiency. A physical handicap or mental slowness may prevent a person from having a well-

paying job, or any kind of job. People like those mentioned in this paragraph often seem to find help, because their need is obvious. Many will get back on their feet in a short period of time.

Another type of poverty exists, which, to the working individual, may seem inexcusable. This poverty is the result of emotional or social damage. Pastor Rolfe Westendorf, in his paper "Ministry to the Poor -- A New Frontier", explains this poverty:

These people had the misfortune of being born into a family, a neighborhood and environment that did not nurture self-esteem. . . These people are for the most part physically able to work for a living. But they quit their jobs for petty reasons. They waste good earning opportunities because they don't feel like going to work. They seek escape from reality and spend what little they have on drugs and alcohol. And they struggle to conjure up a little self-esteem in a brief love affair that produces another child, who has less chance of escaping poverty than its parents had.

These are the "undeserving poor", who are poor through nobody's fault but their own. . . Only with the body are they able to work. Their spirit feels neither the desire nor the possibility for earning a living. (pgs. 3-4).

The poverty of the people dictates a different approach.

Another problem that had to be addressed is the difference in culture. This had to be addressed in connection with the blacks who needed to be served. Slavery has had a major impact on the black culture. As a whole, the black race is still recovering from being told, in both words and actions, that their race was inferior to that of the white race. If a person is told or made to feel something enough times, he begins to believe that it may be true. Many blacks resent whites simply because they have

been made to feel inferior to them. This "cultural barrier" makes bringing blacks into predominantly white congregations difficult. They may have no desire to be there.

Another part of the culture is the "matriarchal system" by which this culture seems to operate. Many trace this system back to slavery. While the fathers were out working in the fields or sometimes sold to other farms, the mothers often worked around the home with their children. Today, the welfare system provides opportunities for mothers and their children, but not many for fathers. The attitude of the black man has been changed, that he no longer looks at himself as the provider for his children. The mothers have secured that role, and in the process have made the male expendable. Many men go back and forth to different homes and different women, looking for a place to stay or family to fit into.

One more difference in the inner-city culture and that of most WELS members was considered. Often the culture of the underclass has no time orientation. Since a person does not have to be at work at a certain time, the time of day becomes unimportant. Opportunities for receiving food or help take precedence, so that if a person does have an appointment at that time, it can be put off until later. Since time is less important, the person in this culture who is told that church begins at 10:30 AM may have difficulty arriving at or before that time, even if that person has every intention and desire to be at church.

With the different culture come temptations which, although common in both cultures, seem pronounced in the inner-city. Satan has a good handle on which temptations seem particularly alluring. Alcohol and drugs seem to get a handle on many people, perhaps as a way to forget their situation. Both are readily available, and food stamps and the little money that may be earned are often traded for these pleasures. Living together outside of marriage is another problem. Two rent payments are more than one, so living together is the preferable option. Sex outside of marriage is also a big temptation. Experiencing one night of "love" is better than nothing. This leads also to many children being born out of wedlock, a good number of whom are unwanted. Crime, for some, becomes a way of life, a way for survival on the streets.

All of these problems had to be addressed, and when the ICMC did so, they came to the conclusion that a different type of program was in order. That program became known as Northside Lutheran Ministries.

II. The Program

The Inner-City Mission Committee gave birth to the program in an around-about manner. The ICMC had been having workshops and quite a bit of discussion in the multi-cultural area. Pastor Roger Sprain was realizing the same difficulties in his cross-cultural work among the Hispanics in the Madison area that the ICMC was facing in the inner-

city of Milwaukee. A common denominator among the two groups was recognized: poverty. This conclusion led Pastor Westendorf to his writing of the above quoted, "Ministry to the Poor -- A New Frontier" in 1985. (Due to this focus on cross-cultural work, the Inner-City Mission Committee had previously changed its name to the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee (MC²) in its meeting in August of 1983. In 1989 it would revert back to its original name.) Following the production of Westendorf's essay, a decision was made that something had to be done to reach out to the inner-city residents.

On May 24, 1986, the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee "resolved to assign Rolfe Westendorf to prepare a proposal regarding engaging seminary students to do research on mission outreach to the economically deprived in the Milwaukee area" (meeting minutes). On November 8th of that same year, the committee "resolved to request Rolfe Westendorf to present his program proposal, "WELS outreach to the Poor", to the Milwaukee inner-city pastors for comment and to develop a tentative grant request" (meeting minutes). This program was later given the name "Mission to the Economically Deprived" (MEDCOM). About one year later, the Committee received a report that Siebert had agreed to fund this pilot program (Nov. 14, 1987 minutes). The Siebert foundation would fund \$10,000, and the project fund of the committee would provide \$2,000-5,000.

The summer of 1988 saw all the planning come to fruition. The originally stated purpose was as follows: "With this program we are attempting to reach into a culture that cannot respond to the invitation to hear the gospel in a traditional 'church' way" (June 11, 1988 minutes). Two Seminary students were recruited to do the initial work. Pastor Westendorf sent a letter to President Armin Panning of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to ask for names of people he would recommend for the job. Brian Ewings, a junior at the Seminary that year, recalls that about 15 men received letters from Westendorf. From those fifteen, only two showed interest, Ewings and Jon Vieths. Following a couple days of training, the two set out in an inner-city neighborhood. They "walked and greeted people who were out on their porches" (Ewings, phone interview). They introduced and identified themselves, explaining their purpose, to reach out with the Gospel, to tell about Jesus Christ and what he had done.

In the August 27th meeting of MC², Westendorf reported on the summer's work:

B. Ewings and J. Vieths, who will be middlers at the Seminary this year, reported on the Lord's blessings on their efforts to share Christ in an area bounded by 20th to 35th and North Avenue to Vliet. They also follow-up on any who move from this highly mobile area and with whom they are able to maintain contact. They were able to first get started in July. Efforts are being made to establish an atmosphere of trust, canvass/witness in a porch to porch manner and follow up on every opportunity to share Christ. Have had ca. 225 contacts so far of whom 60-70 are prospects. Bible classes are being held with those interested in individual homes. . . Slow but steady progress is being made. The plan is to keep going...

Helping hands are being extended through the distribution of food vouchers and by helping people with the social services system (Meeting minutes).

The Mission to the Economically Deprived had begun.

When the program started, the work was done by Seminary students. Almost eight years later that continues to hold true. Until the fall of 1993, two Seminary students served as the man-power for NLM. After the initial start-up with two middlers (second-year students) used for the first two years, the program utilized a senior student and one middler. The students each work 20 hours per week during the school year and forty per week in the summer months. In May of 1994, the decision was made to use a third student during the school year. In this way, the hours of operation per week would drop less during the school year. Eighty summer hours, which were reduced to forty during school months, were now reduced only to sixty hours. This arrangement is still operational.

At the beginning, the missionaries (students) used Siloah Lutheran Church (21st and Nash) as their home base. They made telephone calls from there and kept materials there. In 1990, the office moved to 26th and North Avenue. Roger Stock, a WELS member, owned a convenience store on the corner of those streets called The Smoke Shop. When a small upper apartment became vacant, he offered it to NLM for the price of \$1 per month. To this day, that office is used for the same price. To me it has always been a bit ironic that the office for NLM is less than 10 blocks away from where

the heart of the Wisconsin Synod once existed. The Synod office buildings were located at approximately 35th and North. From that office building the work of NLM is conducted.

Following the first two years of the program, Siebert no longer funded the program. That foundation wanted ^{to} remain primarily as a helper for pilot projects. Because the Board for Home Missions was overseeing the project, the members looked for another source. In the mean time, NLM survived off of a rapidly depleting ICMC project fund. Professor Valleskey spearheaded a fund-raising effort which covered the shortfall. From there, Kingdom Workers stepped in. They had some difficulty deciding whether or not they wanted to fund NLM, but when David Timm took over as chairman, things fell into place (Westendorf, personal interview). Kingdom Workers completely funded NLM. The yearly expenses, which started at approximately \$18,000 per year, are now over \$30,000.

The primary goal of the program has remained the same: "To bring the Gospel in a meaningful way to the economically deprived who are normally beyond the reach of our existing congregations because of their socio-economic situation" (Goals and Objectives of NLM, office files). While the faces who have done this ^{have changed?} remain the same, the way they have gone about this goal remains unchanged. Bible classes are conducted in individual homes, using various materials. The first book used is usually the adult instruction manual "By

Grace Alone", written by Rolfe Westendorf specifically for inner-city residents. From that point, different studies are utilized, including: "Communicating Christ", "New Life In Christ", and studies of books of the Bible with the help of The People's Bible series. Many times, the missionaries read portions of Scripture which seem to apply directly to the current situation of the parishioner with whom they are meeting.

With that description of the program in place, it is time to meet the people of Northside Lutheran Ministries.

III. The People

The process for selecting the students who serve at NLM has remained the same throughout the eight-year history of NLM. A list of candidates from the junior class (first year) has been sent to Pastor Westendorf of Siloah, the pastoral advisor of the program, by the Seminary president. These students are invited to the Westendorf household for orientation and an excellent meal cooked by Mrs. Westendorf. After the orientation each student has the opportunity to apply for the open position (The others are filled by seniors returning from their vicar year). If more than one application is received, the current team at NLM and Westendorf make the decision.

As was mentioned earlier, Jon Vieths and Brian Ewings both served during the summer before and throughout their middler year~~s~~. That was in 1988-1989. Following them, two

more students who would be middlers the next year were selected, Tom Kock and Tim Kuske. They served during the 1989-1990 school year. The men who covered the 1990-1991 year were Jon Vieths, back from vicaring, and Earle Treptow. Tom Kock and Tim Wempner served in 1991-1992. Earle Treptow and Phil Kieselhorst were NLM missionaries in 1992-1993. In 1993-1994, Jon Bilitz (middler) and Dave Bitter (senior) joined Tim Wempner. Tom Spiegelberg and Jim Turriff teamed with Phil Kieselhorst in 1994-1995. This school year has been a bit different. Jim Skorzewski joined the NLM team as the middler, Mark Gabb as the new senior and Jon Bilitz as the returning senior. Mark Gabb received an emergency call to tutor at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, prompting the selection of middler Mike Kober as his replacement. In each case, the middler students also served the summers on both ends of ^{their} ~~his~~ middler year.

Before meeting a few of the people that are served by NLM, the following will describe how contacts are made. A secondary function of the program is to assist the parishioners with food. This done through a voucher program. While the Smoke Shop was in business, money for vouchers or certificates to be redeemed there was prepaid to Roger Stock. Sentry vouchers were also printed, ordered from the Fleming Company. These vouchers were good for \$5 worth of groceries, excluding alcohol, tobacco and lottery tickets (this was printed right on the voucher.) Often contacts are made with people who are seeking social help

first. The missionaries then explain the purpose of NLM, and ask if the contact is interested in Bible study. They request a name, address, and phone number, if possible, and follow up the initial contact. Contacts are also made through non-perishable food drives and clothing distribution, which are carried out through the office. The other main way contacts are made is through word of mouth. Some parishioners invite friends and family members to join their Bible study; others give the office phone number to contact the missionaries.

In these ways contacts are made.

Now to introduce you to a few of the members which make NLM unique. Here this history will take on a bit of a personal flavor. Three of the missionaries who served at NLM in the past contacted me. They reflected on their year(s) of service and remembered the individuals they served.

Brian Ewings recalled meeting with Tammy Oliver, a member of the first family served by NLM. He related this story as one that demonstrated to him the power of the Word, the power of the message he had the privilege of bringing to that house. Tammy's boyfriend, Willie Young, would dash out the back door every time Brian was coming through the front door. It was frustrating to know that Willie did not want to stay for Bible class. Then came the day when Willie did not dash out the back door for some reason. He stayed for the lesson. The Spirit worked in his heart. He was

confirmed and eventually married Tammy. Pastor Westendorf performed the ceremony at Siloah (phone interview).

Tim Kuske also included several memories in his letter. The one I will share here also displays the power of the Word. Tim relates the story of ^a woman who had one young son. She described herself as a "backslid Baptist." Tim helped her move and continued to have studies with her. Tim says:

She had been very inquisitive during our previous lessons. But this day was different. She was not as talkative. Although a wonderful mother, she had reacted much more shortly with her wonderful son who often sat on my lap during our lessons. About half way through our lesson for the day, she stopped short. She looked up at me, her eyes were full of tears about to spill out and she asked, "Tim, can I be forgiven for having had an abortion?" What an opportunity to make Christ's death and resurrection real for her! I told her that what she did was a serious sin, but that it was obvious that she also understood that. I assured her of Christ's forgiveness. What a joy! . . . She knew once again a God of grace" (letter).

Phil Kieselhorst included his fondest memory in his letter to me:

My favorite classes were with Willie Cunnings who's known to everyone as "Chili". Chili is a very flamboyant individual who gave me a ton of illustrations to support our lessons. He always had a smile on his face when I met him on the street or at his home. But quite often during our studies together he would start crying. At first this took me by surprise, but after awhile, I knew these weren't tears of despair, he just needed to hear about Jesus' unconditional love for him on a regular basis. Like most individuals in the inner-city, Chili had some big problems he had to deal with. Alcohol was his greatest weakness. His family also caused him pain (one daughter was arrested for attempted murder). He was married for 10 years, but his wife didn't share his faith in Jesus. However, she would often sit in the next room where she could hear everything Chili and I talked about. Toward the end of my time with NLM,

Edith began to ask if she could join us. I never saw Chili smile so big. Chili worked on a regular basis, but the alcohol kept getting in the way. We talked regularly about alcohol and the sin of abusing it. During my second year at Sem., Chili finally decided for himself that he needed help with his alcohol problem. I drove him to the treatment center for sessions after he became an out-patient. When I returned from vicaring, I found Chili and was very pleased to find that he was staying away from alcohol. Not once did I smell alcohol when I went to his house that last year. He also had a regular job working as a construction welder-- a dangerous job you couldn't perform if you were drinking. I'm looking forward to hanging out with Chili in heaven one day (letter).

Ella Rae Coleman will always be the person I will remember. Her faith was as strong a faith as I have witnessed. She has seven children, six of whom live with her. She had her troubles with alcohol and drugs, but she went for help and was able to stay clean during the pregnancy of her last child. She knew her sins and felt them deeply, but she knew the grace of God even better. She had seven perfectly healthy children in spite of her carelessness. She knew that God's Son had paid in full the price for her sins. She loved to study and always had nice things to say about NLM. She is one of the communicant members of the mission. I have no doubt I will see her in heaven.

Many more stories could be told about individuals and events. Four workers have had their cars broken into. Almost everyone has been eyed by a prostitute. Many have refereed fights between couples. We have visited prisons and courtrooms, shelters and half way houses. We have tried outings to get the people together, like picnics and Brewer

games. Some have more success than others. The one constant that always remains is the Word, the power behind NLM.

IV. The Power

Of course the one thing, above all, that has given results to this ministry is the Word of God. Each student who has worked can testify that the Holy Spirit's presence is very visible. The conditions in which we worked often seemed impossible for the gospel to work, humanly speaking. But the Spirit worked through the Word to change hearts. This is evident in the numbers. After one year, the progress report showed 59 active parishioner (1989 report, NLM files). Today, NLM serves about 200-250 parishioner§, The Lord has been gracious indeed. Many baptisms have been administered and a total of nine parishioners are communing regularly.

In addition, the Lord has seemingly opened doors for growth of NLM. In November 1995, Roger Stock closed the Smoke Shop. What at first seemed to be the end of our area office turned into an even greater blessing. Roger offered to give the building to the Synod. We are still waiting for a decision, but the possibilities are immense. Getting our office on the ground floor would help for identification. Having a space so large would enhance the clothing distribution and, more importantly, allow us to conduct Sunday School or worship services in that building. Only the Lord knows what he has in store.

Serving at Northside Lutheran Ministries has been very rewarding. I'm sure all the students who served would agree with Phil's statement, "While NLM does much for the people in the inner-city it reaches, it does just as much if not more for the guys who work there and experience what we have experienced and who learn what we have learned" (letter). The Lord has also, I believe, used NLM as a training ground for future pastors. And despite the sometimes dangerous situations we encounter, he has kept us all under his protecting hand. Above all, the Lord has allowed me to see a great picture, a perfect definition of what grace is. When I see how materially blessed I am in comparison to the parishioner, I am very humbled. And yet God's message of full and free forgiveness in Christ is the great equalizer. His grace pulls people from literally the depths of despair to the heights of joy through his Son! What an awesome God we have! What a blessing he has made NLM!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ewings, Brian. Telephone interview. April 16, 1996.

Inner-City Mission Committee minutes. Available from
Pastor Hagedorn, Board for Home Missions, Synod
Office building.

Kieselhorst, Phil. Personal letter. March 22, 1996.

Kuske, Tim. Personal letter. March 20, 1996.

Northside Lutheran Ministries meeting minutes. Available
in files at NLM, 2533A W. North Avenue.

Westendorf, Rolfe. "Amazing Grace In the Inner-City."
Available from author.

Westendorf, Rolfe. "Ministry to the Poor -- A New
Frontier". Available from author.

Westendorf, Rolfe. Personal interview. March 28, 1996.