

THE "HOPE CHURCH INCIDENT" IN FOND DU LAC, WI.

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"In the annual meeting of 1946, the pastor advocated further expansion by starting a new congregation on the south end of Fond du Lac. Having seen the blessings of the first undertaking of that type in the founding of Redeemer congregation, the congregation immediately voted favorably on the suggestion and did it unanimously. The pastor felt so encouraged by the action that he ventured forth with another suggestion, namely to try to acquire a site for a third congregation on the northeast side of the city."

This is a quotation from "Celebrating a Century in Christ, 1858-1958," the Centennial booklet for St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The booklet was written by Pastor Gerhard Pieper, the pastor of the congregation at that time. There have been some people who have suggested that Pastor Pieper had another motive in suggesting the establishment of the two new mission congregations. Some have suggested that Pastor Pieper started the new congregation to get back at the Missouri Synod for their efforts in trying to establish Hope Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, a new mission. This suggestion intrigued me because Faith Lutheran Church, one of the daughter congregations started by St. Peter's, is my home congregation. Although I found no evidence to support the idea that Pieper started these new missions in a devious plan to thwart the mission efforts of the Missouri Synod, it is clear that the efforts of the Missouri Synod had a profound effect upon Pastor Pieper. In this paper I would like to examine how "the Hope Church incident" soured Pastor Pieper on the Missouri Synod, turning him from a loyal supporter of Missouri to a man bitterly disappointed in our then sister synod. In this paper we will especially center on a meeting between Pastor Pieper and Missouri Synod officials which marked the turning point in Pastor Pieper's opinion of the Missouri Synod

History of Mission Expansion in Fond du Lac

The Lord of the Church has certainly blessed St. Peter's congregation over the years. Established in 1858, it is one of the older congregations in the Wisconsin Synod and over the years, especially in the early 1900's, has played a leadership role in our church body. Her interest in Christian education is evidenced by her long established day school and her important role in the founding of Winnebago Lutheran Academy.

Early in the history of the congregation, St. Peter's took an interest in local mission expansion. Shortly after the Lord brought Pastor G. E. Bergemann to Fond du Lac as pastor of St. Peter's, he also brought the railroads to the village of North Fond du Lac. The tiny village was made the division headquarters of the Wisconsin Central Railroad and many men were transferred to North Fond du Lac by the company. The leaders of St. Peter's thought it would be a good idea to start a new church in the village. Through the help of the congregation, land was purchased and the daughter congregation, St. Paul's of North Fond du Lac was formed in 1901.

For a time, the enthusiasm for mission expansion waned until 1928, when Pastor Gerhard Pieper arrived in Fond du Lac as co-pastor with Pastor Bergemann. In his own notes on the subject Pieper writes, "I put this question to the Church Council in one of the very first meetings, 'How large are we going to let St. Peter's grow?' The members of the council were quite stunned by this question wondering what the pastor had in mind. He quickly advised them that it was not good policy to build a congregation to such a size that it might

become unwieldy, but advocated that a program of mission expansion be considered and undertaken. The council did not at once become enthusiastic over the proposal in view of the fact that there was much work to be done right within the congregation which had just completed its new grade school building in 1925. The congregation was also battling a debt of nearly \$ 62,000 on which the interest alone at the time amounted to just about \$ 4,000."

In the following year, the depression came and so naturally the enthusiasm for mission expansion did not increase. The following years brought a fearful attitude about the future. Throughout this period, Pastor Pieper kept the idea of mission expansion in the mind of the congregation. He kept reminding the council of the idea with the result that the congregation took an option to purchase on some desirable land on the south side of the city in 1936. Although the deal for the property fell through, it resulted in a seven member Mission Expansion Committee which met and formulated plans for future expansion.

Shortly after this committee was formed, Pieper received a letter from E. H. Schmidt, then of Sheboygan. Pastor Schmidt was a member of the Missouri Mission Board. In his letter, Pastor Schmidt inquired if St. Peter's would have any objections to Missouri's starting a mission on the west end of Fond du Lac. Pastor Pieper immediately wrote back and expressed gratitude to Pastor Schmidt for his letter but also advising that it would be best not to disturb the undertaking St. Peter's had in mind at this time. Schmidt acknowledged the letter in a kind spirit and he too stated that it would be best for Missouri not to interfere in the Fond du Lac area. Pastor Pieper quickly brought

Missouri's inquiry to the attention of the congregation. There is no question that it gave impetus to the local mission expansion.

The congregation was still somewhat fearful of losing many members in the process of forming a new congregation. Pastor Pieper kept on gently encouraging the congregation to expand. The congregation developed a hopeful spirit and formed Redeemer Lutheran Congregation in 1939. The first service was held of Sept. 17th. The mission congregation grew rapidly and today is a large congregation.

During the subsequent three years or so, no special efforts were made toward further expansion, although the thought was by no means forgotten, especially in the mind of Pastor Pieper. In public meetings and private conversations, Pieper reminded the people again and again of the need for mission expansion in the Fond du Lac area.

During this time Pastor Pieper was interviewed on several occasions by representatives of the Missouri Synod inquiring if they could start a mission church on the north or east side of the city. Although he was not averse to this happening, Pastor Pieper made it very clear that he thought it best for St. Peter's to mother any new congregation. Pastor Pieper felt that St. Peter's as the mother congregation would be able to bring about harmonious cooperation, especially in regard to its school system. Missouri's representatives recognized the advisability of this plan and stated that they would await further action on the part of the congregation.

At the congregation's annual meeting in 1946, Pastor Pieper said in his annual report that he felt the time had come to start another mission congregation. The congregation agreed so wholeheartedly that they decided to open two new mission churches, one on the south side

and one on the northeast side of the city. They began a search for land in these areas. A nice parcel of land along Johnson St. (Hwy.23) was bought for the eastside mission. The congregation had hoped to build a basement church before the fall of 1946 but the building permit was denied due to the pressing needs of the G.I. housing program.

In May of 1946, the congregation presented its plan to the Synodical Committee of the Wisconsin Synod. The Synodical Committee approved the request and Pastor John Raabe was called to serve as a missionary in Fond du Lac. Pastor Raabe accepted the call and began canvassing the south and northeast sections of the city. The group the northeast side of town organized as Faith Ev. Lutheran Church and obtained permission to build a basement church on its lots. Pastor Raabe had also been busy on the south end of town, but this group was handicapped in organizing and holding regular worship services because a suitable place of worship had not yet been found.

II. Missouri's Efforts in Fond du Lac

While St. Peter's mission expansion was unfolding quite nicely in 1946, a couple from Green Bay, affiliated with the Missouri Synod there, moved to Fond du Lac. Mr. and Mrs. Walter Heck moved to a house near St. Peter's and Pastor Pieper called on them expecting them to join St. Peter's. After some hemming and hawing, the Hecks told Pieper that they preferred a small church and would probably join Redeemer on the west side of town. Pieper said that was alright with him but suggested that they might wait a month or two for the

northeast side mission to get going since it would be only a few blocks from their home.

In the next several weeks, Mrs. Heck and another woman, Mrs. Stark, began to approach members of St. Peter's to stir up interest in the forming of a Missouri Synod mission in Fond du Lac. Mrs. Stark also had a Missouri Synod background. This led to rumors flying all over that Missouri was starting a mission in Fond du Lac. Pastor Pieper wrote in his notes that he simply dismissed the reports as unfounded rumors because he thought that the Missouri Synod "would never think of coming in here or giving any support to such a move without conferring beforehand with the established congregation."

Pastor Pieper received quite a shock when Pastors Schwertfeger and E. H. Schmidt, representatives of the Missouri Synod, visited him on the evening of Oct. 17, 1946. These men told Pastor Pieper that the Missouri Synod intended to start a mission in Fond du Lac and had already bought land in Fond du Lac for this purpose.

The fact the Pastor Pieper had very close ties to the Missouri Synod added to his shock at this seeming stab in the back. Pieper's family and educational background had been in Missouri. He said in his notes, "My whole background had been in the Missouri Synod, referring to my father as a trusted assistant to Walther and to my mother as having lived in the Walther's house for some years; of my uncles Francis and Reinhold Pieper and Dr. Stoeckhardt; of the fact that I studied at Concordia, Milwaukee; and that in all the years of my ministry I had always made it a point to foster brotherly relations with the Missouri Synod; How it hurt to be dealt with in this rather high-handed manner!"

III. The Meeting on Oct. 17, 1946.

The following is a summary of the record of the visit made to G. Pieper by Pastor F. Schwertfeger and E.H. Schmidt which was written down by Pastor Pieper.

At about 8:00PM District President Schwertfeger and Pastor Schmidt, a member of the district mission board came to the parsonage to see Pastor Pieper. After a few generalities, Pieper asked them what they wanted. Pres. Schwertfeger stated that "a number of our people in Fond du Lac" had been in touch with him for the purpose of starting a new mission in Fond du Lac. The two men had now come "to advise Pieper that they had bought a piece of property in the southern section of the city."

Pastor Pieper wrote down the way the conversation went from there:

Immediately I asked Pres. Schwertfeger whom he meant by "our people in Fond du Lac," stating that this was something new to me that they had people living here where there was no congregation of the Missouri Synod; and if people from the Missouri Synod had come to live where we of the Wisconsin Synod had been established for years and if our churches were open to them, I could not understand how he could speak of "our people in Fond du Lac." I emphasized that I thought we were one in doctrine and practice and that a constant interchange in our members was taking place in the churches belonging to the Synodical Conference. "Well," he said, "you know what I mean." I said, "No, I don't; you don't hear me speaking about 'our people' in Sheboygan." I pointed out to them that the Missouri Synod is not represented in Fond du Lac just as the Wisconsin Synod is not represented in Sheboygan, and that it is our duty to advise one another of the presence of members in such localities in order that we know where to find them, and not continue to regard them as "our people" after they move into the territory of sister synod.

Pastor Pieper went on to tell the men about the Hecks and the Starks and how rumors had been flourishing concerning the start of a Missouri mission church. Pieper also told them, "I in turn told my informants that there existed such a brotherly relationship between the Missouri Synod and ours that no official of the Missouri Synod would think of getting anything started here without consulting with us first. In fact, I told my people that there existed a definite agreement between the two synods which would make such a procedure impossible. All further advice brought to me along the same line was simply discredited."

Pieper was right. There was a definite agreement between the two synods which regulated this kind of problem. The resolutions adopted by the Synodical Conference in 1944 stated on p.107 of "Proceedings," "In territories in which an orthodox synod is already laboring, a sister synod shall not without good and cogent reason undertake to do any work, 'lest it build on another man's foundation' and secondly, that wherever good and cogent reasons seem evident for beginning work in such a field, the work be initiated only after brotherly consultation with the local pastor as well as with the President or Mission Secretary of the district in which the new field lies."

The meeting between the men became more heated as the conversation unfolded as Pieper relates;

I expressed real shock at the information brought to me by Pastors Schwertfeger and Schmidt in that they had actually given ear to people, who because of their recent arrival in Fond du Lac, could not be acquainted with the program of St. Peter's, but who wanted Missouri to start a mission here; that the officials had dealt with these people and given them hope and encouragement to support their project without as much as advising or conferring with

either Pastor Bergemann or me or any other member of the Mission Group of St. Peter's or the District Mission Board. I stated that while we have no corner on Fond du Lac, I did consider this procedure of the Missouri officials a violation of all brotherly consideration, not only unbrotherly on the face, but downright unchristian and a direct interference with a definitely arranged program of St. Peter's congregation and the Mission Board which had been contemplated for years and was now being carried out, Redeemer Congregation having been established and two others under way.

"Why!," they retorted, "how can you call our action unbrotherly?" "We have been called here, and we came to speak to you about this." I answered in surprise, "Do you mean to tell me that you have come here to consult with me after what you have already done and the encouragement you have given the people you claim to have? You didn't come to consult with me, but you state that you 'have come to advise me that you bought a piece of property for a new mission.' How can there be any talk of consulting after you advise me of an accomplished fact?...I do not want you to consider this a threat, but let me emphasize that this is going to have very serious repercussions, and I plead with you to desist from your purpose."

After this there was some verbal sparring back and forth between the men in which Pieper expressed surprise that Schmidt would be involved in such an unbrotherly action. Schmidt had years earlier written Pieper regarding starting a mission and had graciously agreed that the Missouri should stay out of Fond du Lac. Pieper was not at all surprised that Pastor Schwertfeger was involved since Pieper had little respect for the way Schwertfeger had handled similar situations in his district.

Pastor Pieper reasoned that there might be friction between the conservative Wisconsin Synod Church and a more liberal Missouri Synod pastor. He says in his notes, "I told the two men to imagine what it would mean if, for instance, they started a congregation here and called a pastor who was 'easy going' and who might promote the Boy Scout movement."

Pastor Pieper sensed that this matter was going to have a big impact on his congregation. He called witnesses to verify the fact that the Missouri men had been there and informed him that they were going to start up a mission in Fond du Lac. He called his associate Pastor Bergemann and a young upstart basketball coach, Prof. E. C. Fredrich Jr., to witness this startling disclosure. Both of these men expressed surprise to hear of Missouri's action.

The men from Missouri also were told by Pieper that he had heard rumors for a long time about Missouri's actions in the city. He had simply dismissed them as unfounded gossip. However, the rumors were growing so persistent that Pieper had decided to address the congregation on the matter only the Sunday before this meeting. At the last moment, he decided against speaking to the congregation, but he did read his prepared notes to the two Missouri men;

"We certainly do not take the position that we of the Wisconsin Synod alone have a right to this field, but we do wish to emphasize very emphatically two things; one is that we in St. Peter's have had a program of church extension underway for years that we are trying with God's help to carry out in new missions in the northeast and southern sections of our city; the other is that we know enough about the good and brotherly policy of our sister synod of Missouri that it would not attempt to undertake any work in Fond du Lac which might be interpreted as interference with our program."

Pastor Bergemann was very astonished to hear of Missouri actions in buying the land for a mission. He told the men "that their duty to those coming to them would have required them to admonish them against disruptive work and intentions stating that "such Maulwurfsarbeit would spell Fraktur."

Ironically enough, it was a member of St. Peter's, a real estate broker, who had negotiated the deal with the Missouri Synod for the land they bought. This acquisition of property infuriated Pieper the most since by buying land, the Missouri Synod gave hope and encouragement to the group trying to start the new mission.

The meeting broke off that night with the Wisconsin men pleading with the Missouri men to reconsider their action. The Missouri officials stated that they would keep St. Peter's aware of any further action.

IV. The "Beer in the Bowling Alley" Group

During the meeting on Oct. 17, Pastor Pieper made this statement, "Your procedure would be extremely dangerous in view of the fact that people were involved in the group who desired a new mission who were being admonished in a disciplinary way and I have written evidence which would be most uncomfortable for them." Pastor Pieper was referring to an incident which involved a member who was now giving support to the new Missouri mission. Pieper retells the story in his notes;

"About ten years ago, Pastor Pieper raised his voice against the fact that beer was being dispensed and sold at the bowling alleys of the Men's Club which are in our school building....Complaints reached him that St. Peter's was developing a bad reputation on this account....When Pastor Pieper attempted to persuade the management of the bowling alley to discontinue the sale of beer, he met with considerable opposition so that he was compelled to bring the matter to the church council of the congregation. This created much

dissatisfaction with those who like to bowl and have their beer and so the matter came up for discussion at the annual meeting of the congregation. One man permitted himself to become the spokesman for the dissatisfied group and then publically made unexpected and very grave charges that were intended to impugn the character and work of Pastor Pieper, among them was the charge that "no mission work had been done in this congregation for ten years." Pastor Pieper was so taken back at charges of this type coming out of the clear sky, and made in a public meeting, that he expressed real shock and stated that he would refuse to remain in the meeting, and he left at once. Within a few minutes after he had gone home, four or five of the Council members who were present at the meeting came to the parsonage to express their sorrow over the fact that any man could dare to make charges of that type and assured Pieper that they had squelched the man making them. This man had always acted in a most friendly manner and had never given the slightest impression that he had anything against Pieper. It was surprising to Pastor Pieper and others at the next congregational meeting several weeks later when the man brought up the same charges again. The chairman ruled the man out of order and lectured him on his unchristian behavior, in which the congregation concurred. In view of the fact that this was now the second public occasion on which these charges were made by this man, Pastor Pieper insisted on one of two things, either that the man retract the charges in writing and attach his signature or, that he go through with the charges and substantiate them. The result was that a special meeting of the council was called in which this man was made to appear. Since he could not substantiate his charges, he was asked

to retract them. He squirmed and hesitated and did not do that until Pastor Pieper interviewed him privately the next day, and then he apologized....After being admonished, the man's attitude toward the congregation changed....His interests leaned toward establishing a congregation that would be associated with the Missouri Synod."

The matter seemed to have calmed down a bit after the man was admonished. However, even as the mission committees of St. Peter's were at work, the opposition group was also working hard. Early in 1946, the following letter given to Pastor Pieper by an alarmed member.

"Suggestion, to Accomplish Best Results in Missionary Work
Due to the Location & Competition of other churches
Join the Missouri Synod, to get the best Co-Operation as a
Mission Church, as Minister with best Mixing and Church
Oratory, Bible Classes & Social Activities,
To build up faster with such Co-Operation,
As name, would be a good suggestion, Mt. Olive, or more.
If you get one hundred members to join you, as active
members, a Friend is willing to offer,
provided these members put up altogether 5,000.00 or more,
an encouraging gift, that will be worth while to work for---
Are you willing to do your Part?

Missouri Synod is Largest Synod

Mt. Olive Luth. Church

A Friendly Church Welcomes You

Plenty of Parking Space all around our church for you

Bring your Family all, we have room for all

With Provisions to take care of them

Bring your Friends and Relatives

God invites you to do missionary work!

At the bottom of this letter were the names of those who were interested in starting a Missouri mission in Fond du Lac. Included in this list of names were the names of some of the men involved in, along with son of the man disciplined in, the "beer in the bowling alley incident." When this man was approached by Pastor Pieper he stated that he did not believe in sending his boy to a Christian

parish school and that he would like to have his boy join the Boy Scouts which he could readily hope to do in the new group starting out as a mission and being supported by the Missouri Synod.

What Pastor Pieper had feared might happen was now indeed happening. Members looking for a more liberal stance on the Boy Scout and other issues were now requesting transfers to the new Missouri Synod. As you page through the minutes of the church council and voter's meeting, you can see that there were a number of members who requested transfers to Hope. The policy of St. Peter's in this matter was that they would not grant a transfer to Hope because of the unbrotherly way in which it was established.

V. Appeals to Missouri Fail

The days, weeks, and years following that meeting were hard years for Pastor Pieper because he anxiously awaited some kind of agreement through a appeal to the Missouri Synod and he received no satisfaction.

Perhaps the low point of these appeals for Pastor Pieper was at a mixed conference in Oshkosh in 1947. Pastor Pieper ended his remarks to the Missouri men by saying, "it is my prayer that the Holy Ghost cause you such uneasiness at heart when you preach to these people and such qualms in your conscience that you will see your wrong and come to repentance." What the Missouri men say they heard was a different matter. The Missouri men, especially E. H. Schmidt heard, "I pray that the Holy Ghost would make you feel uneasy in your conscience and confuse me when I preach to the people attending services at ou place of worship." This only added to the hard feelings between Missouri

and Wisconsin. It should also be stated that many of Missouri's pastors in the Mixed Conference were ashamed of the Missouri Synod's dealings in this matter.

Conclusion

The Lord of the Church has his own way of healing the many wounds of his Church caused by unthinking and unbrotherly actions. The Wisconsin Synod churches were not harmed by the presence of Missouri in Fond du Lac. St. Peter's is still a large and flourishing church. Her three daughters are all doing fine. Faith, one of the daughter congregations has experienced dramatic growth in the past few years. In fact, Faith has even picked up a substantial number of members who left Hope, the Missouri Synod church.

It is with a note of sadness that we have to say that Pastor G. Pieper left the Wisconsin Synod during the 1960's and joined the CLC. Still, we have to thank God for the blessings which he gave his church in Fond du Lac through Pastor Pieper.

Material for this paper was gleaned from the St. Peter's Church Archives. Church Council and Voter's Meeting minutes were also used to prepare this paper. Also of great help to me was a paper which Pastor Pieper himself wrote and presented to the Winnebago Mixed Conference in 1947.