

A PIONEER CONGREGATION MOVES OUT OF THE FRONTIER
-- A STORY OF EARLY TRINITY, NICOLLET

by Marcus Bode

for Senior Church History

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Every congregation moves. Even when the location stays the same, it moves. When there is no change in doctrine, it moves. When it is attacked, it moves. When it has peace, it moves. The motion, though it is not always recognizable, is there. The motion is in the hearts of God's people. God has said ~~(it)~~ would be there. He says, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Is 55:11). God's Word, moving in the hearts of men, shows itself.

That motion may show itself in different ways. Numerically, a church may move downward, while moving to a greater spiritual strength. God's Word, moving in men's hearts, may move them to change a church's location. God's Word moves men to call a pastor or remove one who does not abide by His Word. God's Word moves congregations.

Such moves showed themselves also in pioneer congregations which formed in the middle years of the last century. God's Word moved pioneer congregations to thankfulness and willingness to "teach all nations," beginning at home. In order to teach all nations, however, it

became necessary to get on their own footings and to establish themselves. This period of establishment is a pioneer congregation's immediate frontier. When a congregation has centralized geographically and finds herself able to look at herself as a mature body which can reach out to her fellow Christians because the immediate necessities at home have been relatively quieted, she has become established. A pioneer congregation has moved out of the frontier.

Trinity, Nicollet, Minnesota is just such a pioneer congregation. It faced the frontier for some years until 1898. Trinity moved from a frontier church to an established church. Whether these formative years seem long or short is unimportant. What is important is the road along which our Lord guided that church in her pioneer years. Like the ruts of wagon wheels etched on the mud road, this motion can be recognized by two tracks which it has left: its geographical locations and the pastors which represented Trinity.

I. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

The motion of God's Word on the hearts of Trinity, Nicollet can be traced by watching the changing location of its worship site.

Originally, Lutherans in Nicollet and Courtland townships worshiped together in homes prior to 1863. After that time, wagons, sleighs, and horses headed to a focal spot on the line separating Courtland and Nicollet town-

ships. The congregation worshiped in an old two story frame store building which had been moved three miles west of Old Nicollet, its original location. (Old Nicollet is three and a half miles southwest of the present Nicollet village.)

The congregation's mission for this time period was simply to gather the Lutherans in the area. The focus of the congregation's mission, however, became centered and magnified in 1867. For practical reasons, one portion of the congregation incorporated and moved further west toward Courtland. A number of Nicollet area people realized that this move would unduly lengthen their trip to church. They held back from incorporation, but retained the use of the church. Pastor E. Schaller in 1944 assesses the situation in the following manner:

A portion of the congregation resolved to adopt the constitution, thus formally organizing and at the same time felt it advisable to re-establish their church home farther westward in order to consolidate their strengths with certain Lutheran families, living toward and in Courtland. A number of Christians living in Nicollet township, aware that this westward move would unduly lengthen their distance to church, refrained from taking part in the organization. Instead, they retained the use of the old church for themselves, and determined to continue as a separate group. The historical records available to us are not as clear upon this important phase of our congregation's development as might be desired. And the various accounts at hand offer facts that appear somewhat contradictory. What proportion of the original group of Lutheran Christians served by Pastor Rennicke adopted the new plan of organization and supported the decision to move to the new location westward? According to one account these numbered seven members or family heads. Another account leaves

the impression that the newly organized group formed the majority of the people involved, while a minority withheld their approval, and that some of this minority later rejoined the organized congregation in its new home. In general these facts seem well established.¹

The congregation's mission to go and teach all nations hadn't changed. If the congregation were to have a strong home base, it could go all the better. These concerns of the congregation were only practical. Their mission was first to those closest them. On the frontier, Christians found it expedient and practical to draw the line where the most would be the best served. Would the congregation be spread too far, management could become unwieldy and regular congregational functions prohibitive.

The Nicollet group which remained continued to worship at the township line for a while after the 1867 split. Since the people served by the building on the Nicollet-Courtland line were generally and predominantly in the Nicollet area, it was only practical that the building or the location be changed to a more central spot which would better suit the majority of the members whom it served. The building to which they now moved was a log schoolhouse about a mile south of present-day Nicollet.

But the log schoolhouse move was only temporary. After formal organization in early 1869, building plans were being discussed.

The erection of a church and parsonage was determined upon and the site chosen was Old Nicollet, about three and a half miles southwest of Nicollet village, where Trinity cemetery is being maintained to the present day. Selection of this site was undoubtably influenced by the belief that a town would develop at that spot.²

By June of 1870 the congregation had erected a 30' x 46' structure. There was no steeple; but inside, was a balcony which ran along three sides of the church. This increased the seating capacity.

Clearly, the choice of the site and size of the church indicated that the congregation's interest was in finding an easily accessible spot that would readily serve its mission in the Nicollet area. On the basis of the facts given, the move was wise. The church in what is now known as Old Nicollet adequately served Trinity for a good twenty-eight years.

The choice of the spot was not to be considered prime by the railroad. When the surveyors laid the course for the railroad somewhat to the north, the hope that Old Nicollet would become a thriving town died.

With the coming of the railroad, the frontier was moving closer to being fully established. Communication was becoming more rapid along the tracks, travelling easier. The present site of the village of Nicollet grew gradually over the next twenty-eight years. Newcomers and outsiders would naturally find it easier to either go elsewhere or not at all. Pastor and congregation found themselves worshipping away from more and more of the township's population. The door was open to other churches to usurp the mission of Trinity Lutheran. An attempt was made to serve area Lutherans. Trinity had to make a decision.

The congregation wisely decided to move from its rural location to the village of Nicollet. The move was prompted by another new church in Nicollet that bore the Lutheran name but taught other than Lutheran Biblical doctrine. Trinity was determined to do all that was possible to

keep false teaching under the Lutheran name they cherished so highly from gaining a foothold here. By September 4, 1898, the new 38' x 70' church was ready for dedication.

The church clearly understood its mission and acted in accord.

The geographic location of the congregation's mission was centralized. No longer was Trinity, Nicollet a pioneer congregation. It had moved out of the frontier.

II. TRINITY'S PASTORS

As Trinity congregation was moving from a frontier church to an established one, the Holy Spirit's motion on the hearts of her members showed itself in the pastors which represented Trinity.

The Nicollet group had had the services of a pastor for a long time before they formally organized on February 2, 1869. These services had been conducted by travelling missionaries roaming through the area. There is one gravestone marking the final resting place of a Lutheran missionary (perhaps from the Ohio or Iowa Synod) to be found in the Old Nicollet cemetery. Perhaps he was just passing through the area or perhaps he had conducted services in the Old Nicollet area. Whatever the case, he was killed by Indians. What is certain, however, is that in 1859 Pastor Winter of Henderson and Pastor Kenter of New Ulm served them, travelling long miles. Pastor A. E. Winter was associated with the Missouri Synod and Pastor Kenter with the Minnesota Synod ^{a later} at the time.

The needs of the congregation could not be handled completely by pastors who were not there full-time. It isn't then surprising that the Nicollet-Courtland congregation extended a call to Pastor Rennicke. The effect of God's Word moved ^{them} to seek a full-time shepherd. Pastor Rennicke accepted the call.

When the Courtland group headed west, however, the Nicollet congregation was left unorganized and unshepherded. The remaining families then needed to find someone to feed them with Word and Sacrament. Since the services of a pastor could not immediately be found, an elderly single man who had been a schoolteacher in Germany led the congregation in a reading service. As much as he could, Teacher Schmidt also taught parochial school. Not long after this type of service began, it ended. Mr. Schmidt took ill and died in the St. Peter hospital. The cause was illness and old age.

The Nicollet group had only occasional pastoral care for the next year or so. Pastor Paul Rupprecht, with whom the congregation had come in contact in 1860, preached for them after they had moved into the log schoolhouse. It was under the guidance of Pastor Rupprecht that the congregation was formally organized on February 2, 1869.

Now that the congregation had formally organized, their next move was to call a pastor. A call was extended to a Pastor Kopelke on March 18, 1870. A seventy-fifth anniversary ^{booklet} sums his call and ministry up in these words:

Events seem to indicate that somewhat less care may have been exercised by the voters in the selection of a shepherd than was devoted to the mere outward establishment of the parish, for the building stood and served well, but the pastor did not. Whence he came and whither he went is no longer known among us. But it is unfortunately well-remembered that between his coming and his going serious trouble reigned in the midst of the flock. Kopelke was a wolf, rather than a shepherd. His teaching was unscriptural, his walk of life offensive. During the one year of his ministry, seven members withdrew from the fold rather than suffer spiritual abuse. ...Kopelke was summarily deposed.⁴

The congregation's mission to serve its people was severely damaged by such an offensive called servant. No doubt, they would avoid calling anyone like this in the future. To avoid calling such a one as this, they made attempts not to make the same mistake. But how and where this man came to them could not be traced. A Minnesota Synod Fiftieth Anniversary^{book} in speaking of the forty year old congregation shows the trouble they had in analyzing where they had gotten his number. Pastor F. Koehler writes thus: "Wie und wo die Gemeinde diesen schwarzen Geist aufgestoebert hatte, ist dem Schreiber dieses nicht bekannt."⁵ Little is known of this matter because accurate congregational records were not kept until 1873.

Yet, what seemed to have been a curse, narrowed the congregation's mission further in more exact terms. They did not simply want a pastor who would lead them; they wanted a pastor who would teach them God's Word properly and exhibit an example they could follow. What before was a strong stand on the use of God's Word, now became

even stronger. Their mission to spiritually feed the Lutherans in the Nicollet area included the necessity of having not just any pastor, but a faithful pastor.

More care was taken in the selection of their next pastor. During the two year period between July 1871 and 1873 Trinity was served by pastors she knew to be faithful. Pastors Stuelpnagel and Schulze successively served them during this period. They were Missouri Synod pastors serving the sister Courtland church, Immanuel.

This awareness kept growing. Such growth was evidenced by the congregation's signing of papers of incorporation on January 16, 1871. These articles established its existence and Confessional position as a congregation adhering to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530.

Pastor G. A. Ahner was the next to be called. He accepted and was installed July 1, 1873. Like Pastors Stuelpnagel and Schulze, Pastor Ahner was Missouri Synod. It is truly amazing how the Lord uses troubles to strengthen the Christian congregation! During Pastor Ahner's term of service, the region was ravaged by locusts (summers of 1874 to 1877). The Trinity, Nicollet congregation suffered. To the recent confessional stand the congregation had adopted was now added the comfort that stand exhibited. In times of trouble, God draws His children closer to Him. The Word among them had been clearly grounded and appreciated, but it was also to be tested. That test also occurred during the pastorate of Pastor Ahner. A recent influx of Methodists had brought with it a wave of Methodist ideol-

ogies. These sought to creep into the homes of Trinity's members. Pastor Ahner stood side by side with the Immanuel, Courtland pastor to stoutly defend God's people against this heresy. *He was to be* *that much* *in the* *body*

Thus a pioneer congregation faced frontier dangers in Old Nicollet. It really is remarkable that the motion of God's Word in a congregation be evidenced by the defense stand taken by one of their servants.

Once the truth had been defended, the Lord moved to promote it among all -- its members and those yet to come. To this end, the Lord blessed Trinity with a period free from internal strife and external attack. The next two pastorates were marked by a period of peace.

Heinrich Dagefoerde, a Wisconsin Synod pastor spent the last nine years of his ministry (1879-1888) faithfully promoting the Word in the Nicollet area and congregation before he resigned because of old age.

Dagefoerde's successor was Pastor J. A. Hoyer, another Minnesota Synod pastor. Again, the congregation enjoyed a remarkably peaceful pastorate without inward or outward dissent. God's Word, which had been grounded, defended, and promoted was now further evidenced by the congregation's joining of the Minnesota Synod during Pastor Hoyer's time in 1891. The congregation had come through its pioneer problems. It now took on responsibilities that reached outside its immediate township borders.

Trinity, the pioneer congregation, had grown out of the frontier. No longer did the emphasis of its mission

need to be centered on its own needs. She took upon herself an even larger responsibility in Synod membership.

CONCLUSION

Although Trinity ceased to be a frontier congregation, she still had and has frontiers to be conquered. Each soul, an enemy of God, is a frontier mission for the Christian congregation. God's Word still moves Trinity Nicollet to conquer these frontiers and befriend each pioneer to Christian maturity.

E N D N O T E S

1. A Brief History of Trinity Ev. Lutheran Congregation,
Nicollet, Minnesota (1869-1944).
2. Ibid.
3. Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Nicollet, Minne-
sota (100th Anniversary booklet).
4. A Brief History of Trinity Ev. Lutheran Congregation,
Nicollet, Minnesota (1869-1944).
5. Geschichte der Minnesota-Synode und ihrer einzelnen
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1909) p. 173.