

"The Significance  
of  
The Church Cemetery  
As An Inherent Part  
of  
The Church"

Senior Church History

Prof. Fredrich

Prepared by

Russ Weir

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"I. Christians are accustomed to bury their dead in a Biblical manner. For this they have the example of:

- A. God, who buried Moses, Dt 34.6;
- B. Christ, who allowed himself to be buried and thereby hallowed our graves;
- C. The old Christians. Gn 23.4 (Sarah); 35.19 (Rachel); 50.7 (Jacob); Acts 8.2 (Stephen); Mt 14.12 (John the Baptist).
  1. Thereby we Christians express our faith and hope of the resurrection. We plant the dead in God's acre as we would a grain of wheat, 1 Cor 15.37.
  2. Among the heathen it happens that they throw their dead to the dogs or birds, or burn them."<sup>1</sup>

Invariably, when you drive into the parking lot at Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of West Mequon, you cannot help but notice the cemetery. Unless you intentionally ignore its presence, you have to actually look at it as you park your car. And when you get out of your car, you cannot help but cast a glance at the numerous markers and wonder, "How did that cemetery come to be there?"

Nowhere had this writer ever read or heard an explanation concerning why some churches - especially WELS churches - do have cemeteries. There had never been such a need or a desire to know this prior to this time. None of the churches he previously attended had cemeteries, so why even bother to think about them, right? That fairly accurately characterized his thinking on the matter of church cemeteries in times past.

But on one Sunday morning as this writer parked his car in Trinity's parking lot, he purposely took time to walk toward that cemetery. Sort of haltingly, he crossed the imaginary fence (which was a reality in Medieval times and served to protect the churchyard as an adjunct of the church itself<sup>2</sup>) and entered the cemetery proper. Then he knew how the young girl Mary must have felt in The Secret Garden when she entered it for the very first time. Cemeteries were not unknown to him, but this was

different....special. From that time on he was determined to learn more about that cemetery - or more specifically, as it would turn out, more about church cemeteries in general as they are related to early Lutheran churches mentioned in this paper.

This is by no means a definitive study. It has opened doors to knowledge this researcher never knew prior to this effort, and has left considerable "ground to dig into" for subsequent investigation. This latter fact became apparent at the very onset of his research.

For example, in this paper words like cemetery, burial place/sight/grounds, and churchyard/graveyard will be used interchangeably to convey the same idea. Historically speaking, a case could be made for distinguishing among those very terms and perhaps several others, like "Gottes Acker" and "friedhof." Conforming to contemporary Greek and Roman customs, early Christian burial places lay outside the community. This remained the custom until a precedent was set for urban burials - even within the church itself - by rulers like Constantine the Great, Augustus, and Trajan. This was followed by eminent church leaders like Ambrose, martyrs and saints and persons of worldly distinction. As marks of special honor their bodies were buried in neighborhood churches; by the end of the fourth century what had originally been the exception appeared to be the general rule.<sup>3</sup> Both secular and religious leaders were forced to discourage this practice. A compromise situation developed: in exceptional cases burial inside churches was still permitted, but otherwise was confined to the church grounds - the "atrium ecclesiae" or churchyard. Burial in this ground did not convey the same honor as did the church interior, but it was consecrated as holy ground. There is reason to speculate that the concept of "Gottes Acker" or God's acre, which is significant for this paper, had its roots in the former concept.

The medieval church exercised absolute authority over the churchyard, which it regarded as an adjunct of God's house. When a new church was dedicated, there followed a new consecration of the churchyard. As the church was frequently involved in political contests, it was necessary to fortify it. This included fencing or hedging in the graveyard as a part of the overall protection of the church.

That "the Reformation consistently broke with the medieval conception of the cemetery as 'locus religiosus'" (religious place) is contended by the Schaff-Herzog article just quoted above. This is not at all consistent with what is about to follow in greater detail. For the present the following excerpt is cited to counter the above contention with the assertion that cemeteries remained as integral parts of parish churches - and this from a Catholic source. "The cemetery was an important part of the parish grounds in early country churches here (U.S.A.), as in Europe."<sup>4</sup> Early grave marker dates in this cemetery correspond to the church organization date of 1842.

Enough said on what could be done as an offshoot of this project. Let us concentrate on the mechanics of this paper. Numerous interviews were had with pastors and laypeople who are associated with area Lutheran churches which have adjoining cemeteries. The majority of the churches belong to the WELS; the exception is Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Freistadt, which is LCMS. Consult the last page of the bibliography for a listing of those individuals interviewed. A major portion of the material discussed in this paper will be drawn from the pastors interviewed. Except in two instances their anonymity will be maintained.

A specially devised questionnaire comprised of thirteen parts was used with each of the pastors and with Messrs. von Briesen and Suelflow

where it was applicable. The interview with Mr. Luck was conducted for obtaining general information. That questionnaire is reproduced here in the form in which it was employed for the interviews.

1. Can you account for the cemetery's presence? (Was it included as a part of the original church plans?)
2. Is it regulated in any way by state/local laws?
3. Does the church have a cemetery association to regulate and maintain its use?
4. How is its use/availability made known to church members?
5. Is there any need for publicizing its availability/use?
6. Does the cemetery's presence influence church members not to move away or transfer?
7. Do church members use it, as opposed to a non-church cemetery?
8. Are church cemeteries a thing of the past?
9. How is the cemetery maintained by the church?
10. Who is responsible for keeping the records?
11. Does the presence of the church cemetery make serious inroads upon your time as pastor?
12. What advantages do you "see" for having church cemeteries?
13. Are there any disadvantages?

These questions were asked in an effort to get a more thorough understanding of what is expressed in the title of this paper: "The Significance of The Church Cemetery As An Inherent Part of The Church." Let us proceed to examine the answers to these questions and make some generalizations about them.

QUESTION 1: "Can you account for the cemetery's presence?" Sometimes this was asked in the following manner: "Was it included as a part of

the original church plans?"

One respondent did not hesitate with his answer. "The cemetery is a part of the concept of church! It is 'Gottes Acker' - that is, God's acre. The church cemetery is for God's people - not for anybody else."<sup>5</sup>

Reinforcing this comment is a quote taken from a piece of literature obtained from Graceland Cemetery, which is administered by three Milwaukee area WELS churches: "From its early centuries the Christian Church observed the burial of the dead as a religious rite. Quite naturally, when local congregations began to erect their own houses of worship, they set aside a part of the grounds around the church for burials, and dedicated them to that sacred purpose. Early settlers in America brought this custom to our shores...."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a quote describing the history of cemetery development in the Middle Atlantic region is useful here:

"In Grandfather's time, there was no cemetery as we know it today. In fact it was not called a cemetery - it was a 'graveyard' or 'churchyard' or 'God's Acre.' As our forefathers settled this section of the country, they set aside a part of their own land for their own families. It was God's acre, and kept as such. This little tract of ground so hallowed, was convenient and necessary....The churchyard then became the logical place for burial...."<sup>7</sup>

The contention is that the churchyard was included with the actual church site at the time early congregations were formed. Can this be applied to Evangelical Lutheran churches that developed in this area of Wisconsin? Apparently so. The following are typical comments quoted or paraphrased from special anniversary booklets published by these churches:

"The congregation has from the day of its organization bought and maintained spacious ground, planted with several beautiful shade trees, as a resting place for its members."<sup>8</sup>

"The congregation purchased four acres of land and built their first

church. This took place in the summer of the year 1869....A cemetery was also laid out on the purchased church grounds and has ever since been used as a burial place for the deceased."<sup>9</sup>

"This was an old custom brought over from Germany (committal first, followed by the service in the church) where the cemetery was on the church property and located next to the church."<sup>10</sup>

"In the spring of 1840 the settlers built a church, which was also used as a school....That same year the congregation also laid out and fenced a cemetery plot."<sup>11</sup>

Another way of supporting the contention that the graveyard was included with the original church site is to observe the actual dates on the cemetery markers and compare them with the church's founding date. This is not always possible to do, as this observer noticed when he walked through several churchyards. Wooden markers which were originally used have deteriorated over the years. Even inscriptions on some stone markers have become too weathered to be read clearly. But there remain some that can be read! "The cemetery of our congregation started with the organization of our congregation in 1859, in fact, our oldest official record tells us of our first funeral, that of Mr. Christian Fritz. He was born June 4, 1792, and died November 17, 1859. A plot of ground next to the present south part bears his tombstone."<sup>12</sup>

Several of the pastors interviewed said essentially the same thing. Having become familiar with the markers on their churchyards, they too verified gravesite dates which correspond to founding dates of the churches.

This first point has been dealt with at some length, but not without special reasons. The "Gottes Acker" idea cannot be denied as a common practice, not only in colonial America in general, but also among the

pioneer Evangelical Lutheran churches which developed in this geographical area. That idea had to be borrowed from somewhere....it had its roots in Europe, no doubt in Pommerania and Prussia where a great number of German Lutheran émigrés came from. These details serve to contradict the earlier claim made in the Schaff-Herzog article that "the Reformation consistently broke with the medieval conception of the cemetery as 'locus religiosus.'" In fact the opposite appears to be true!

QUESTION 2: "Is the church cemetery regulated in any way by state/local laws?" First let us consult the state laws to see what is legally prescribed that falls within the scope of this paper.

#### Chapter 69 - Collection of Statistics

##### Section 69.42 - burial and removal permits

"The register of deeds, city health officer, and the clerk of any incorporated village are authorized to issue a burial or removal permit."<sup>13</sup>

##### Section 69.45 - duties as to death certificate and burial permits

"The funeral director shall deliver the burial permit to the sexton or person in charge of the place of burial before interring the body...."<sup>14</sup>

##### Section 69.48 - sexton's duties

(1) "No sexton or person in charge of any premise in which interments or cremations are made shall inter or cremate or permit interment or cremation of any body unless it is accompanied by a burial permit...."

(2) "The permit shall contain the date of interment and signature of the sexton and shall be retained as part of the sexton's records."

(3) "The sexton shall keep a record of all interments made in the premises under his or her charge, stating the name of the deceased person, place of death, date of burial, and name and address of funeral director."<sup>15</sup>

#### Chapter 157 - Cemeteries (There are fifteen sub-points in this



chapter, many with numerous paragraphs. most do not apply to this paper. those that do are listed below.)

Section 157.05 - holding property

(1) This provides for maximum sizes of cemeteries according to two criteria: acreage and assessed valuation.<sup>16</sup>

Section 157.06 - cemeteries, location

(1) This delineates how cemeteries are to be laid out. Of particular note are the conditions for expanding cemeteries established prior to April 30, 1887.<sup>17</sup>

Section 157.11 - improvement and care

Essentially this provides for perpetual care of the cemetery.<sup>18</sup> Years ago it was customary for the next of kin to care for the individual graves. Since people cut the grass at different times, the cemetery's appearance never looked trim. Some graves were neglected completely. Perpetual care establishes the regulations for the management and care of the cemetery. The cost involved is included in the plot price. It provides for uniform care of all lots and graves.<sup>19</sup> Money received for perpetual care is invested with the intent that the income derived be used for upkeep of the cemetery. The principal may not be used for perpetual care, but only to generate income for it.

An example of how this idea took root and developed is recorded as follows:

"When the present church was under construction, the Kratzsch family donated a sum of money with the understanding that their five graves in the town cemetery be perpetually cared for. Some years later other requests were made for this same kind of grave care. The church council had charge of the perpetual care fund which was begun at that time. Later a three-man board was appointed to handle all of the affairs of the cemetery."<sup>20</sup>

Mequon's municipal code, Chapter 15, provides for the management of

its one public cemetery - the G. Optiz Mequon Cemetery. It is located on Mequon Road just north of Cedarburg Road. No mention of church cemeteries is made in that chapter, so one could think that the city does not really regulate churchyards. A phone conversation with Mr. Robert Wilke, Mequon's Zoning Administrator, corrected this naive assumption.<sup>21</sup> The city's zoning code is what really would regulate church cemeteries, because they are considered as a part of the entire church operation. For example, if a church wanted to expand its present cemetery boundaries to include lands it already owns, then a special hearing would be needed to obtain approval for this move.

Of these various legal considerations just listed most pastors who were interviewed were aware of the ones concerning burial permits and perpetual care. To that degree they admitted there was governmental regulation of their churchyards. All of them did not really consider this to be regulation per se; in fact the commonly expressed idea was that the church was free to administer its cemetery as it saw fit.

QUESTION 3: "Does the church have a cemetery association to regulate and maintain its use?" The intent of this question was to determine exactly how the churchyard is managed currently. The interviews revealed answers that varied widely. In each case except one the church's constitution, by-laws, or special cemetery rules and regulations contained some kind of provision concerning this matter.

1. One has a Cemetery Committee of five members, appointed by the Church Council.
2. One left the overall administration of the cemetery in the hands of the Church Council.
3. One said the Church Council would act as Trustees and Finance Com-

mittee of the churchyard, but should appoint someone from the Council to act as "Superintendent," who would have supervision of the entire operation.

4. One listed as among the duties of the Church Council, a council member would be the "Sexton." His duty includes being custodian of the cemetery and all related funds.
5. One has a Cemetery Board - two men, although elected to this position, remain responsible to the President of the Church Council for the care of the cemetery.
6. The one exception provided for no committee, no board, no one particular individual to administer the affairs of the cemetery. The entire congregation - that is, the voting body - is the cemetery association. If a particular problem arises, then the Church Council decides the matter, according to its power to control the corporate property of the congregation. Evidently this has proved to be a satisfactory arrangement.

QUESTION 4: "How is its use/availability made known to church members?"

The reason for including this question stemmed from the fact that when this writer joined his church here, no one said anything to him about the churchyard. No written material was given him to read. He knew the cemetery was there, but could not help but wonder: "Why is not anything being said about it to this newcomer?" Let us see what the interviews revealed relative to this question.

To one degree or another each of the churches involved mentioned something about its churchyard in its constitution or cemetery regulations. This ran the gamut from detailed explanations to brief references. But how many members of a church are really familiar with the contents of their church constitutions or by-laws or cemetery rules?

Again and again this interviewer thought: "Are the members of these churches really aware of the presence and purpose of their cemetery?" Several of the responses he received indicated the really down-to-earth truth of the matter. Sure, there were annual reports that each family received, and cemetery regulations (when available) were supposed to be in the possession of each household. But the prevailing attitude was: "Why be overly concerned about making known the use of the cemetery? The church members see it regularly....when the need is there, they ask! Besides, word-of-mouth works better than anything printed, whether you are a newcomer or an oldtimer in the congregation!" The point that became quite evident to this learner was simply that the church cemetery was used when it was needed by those who chose to have their loved ones buried there.

QUESTION 5: "Is there any need for publicizing its availability/use?"

While this may sound like a repetition of the previous question, it really is not. That question asked: "How is the cemetery publicized?", whereas this one asks: "Is there a need to do this?" In keeping with what is implied with the term "Gottes Acker," it did not surprise this writer that the response to this question would be a negative one. "There is no need to publicize the cemetery - death determines the need." This was a commonly expressed attitude, as well as the fact that the cemetery was commonly used.

However, there was a note of disconcert evident....a reaction that could be expressed like this: "Now that you mention it...." The thought that caused several of the pastors interviewed to reflect upon their answer was pointed toward the younger generation in the congregation, where tradition does not seem to be as important as it was with previous

generations. Yet one pastor admitted that no member of his congregation is obligated to be buried in the church cemetery. The fact that the family was buried there was also cited as a reason for not being concerned about publicizing the churchyard. Yet several pastors noted that municipal or proprietary cemeteries have attracted some of their members to bury their dead in them because "that is where the family plot is located," and family here includes non-members of the church which is usually a condition for non-interment in the churchyard. This was evident even in one of the rural congregations, where one might expect tradition to be more prevalent.

Recall that this point was like an exception to the rule; the rule being: "Burial in the churchyard is taken for granted. When somebody dies, he is buried there." Future generations and the advent of proprietary cemeteries could be challenging this tradition of the church.

QUESTION 6: "Does the cemetery's presence influence church members not to move away or transfer?" In other words, "How much of a bond does the cemetery have upon church membership?" This is a significant factor with the older people in the congregation, but not necessarily so with those who are not tradition-bound and may prefer a place like Graceland Cemetery or Wisconsin Memorial Park if you live in or around Milwaukee. For that matter if your church is in the Town of Herman, Dodge County, you just might prefer the services of the municipal cemetery in Hartland!

Where the church cemetery regulations permit, a member may transfer to another WELS church - close by or at some distance - and still maintain burial rights in his home congregation's churchyard. Since this does not appear to be an uncommon allowance, and since our society is becoming more and more mobile - especially with the likelihood of retirement in a more "hospitable" climate than Wisconsin's - it would appear that whereas the

churchyard once may have encouraged members not to transfer, this may not necessarily be the case in light of thinking that characterizes our society today. This development might cause grandma to turn over in her grave! Seriously though, it could be interpreted as additional evidence of an eroding bond of the church in light of secular trends in our modern society.

QUESTION 7: "Do church members use the cemetery, as opposed to non-church cemeteries?" The answer to this question has already been alluded to in the previous question, but some of the specifics the interviews brought out revealed additional reasons than tradition.

Without hesitating every pastor claimed that his members did use the churchyard. The degree to which they used this service revealed the growing influence of proprietary cemeteries. "The majority of our members uses our churchyard" was a prevailing answer, especially where families have been buried in the churchyard over the years. Usually this was followed up with an admission that "some have family plots elsewhere, especially the newer members." Several pastors indicated that "family" here included individuals who were not members of our synod.

Four of the six pastors interviewed claimed that the cost of a churchyard burial site was less expensive than purchasing one elsewhere....that the financial consideration was an important one. Information gathered revealed that a churchyard grave site costs in the range of \$75 - \$165. Some congregations include this as a right of membership with no cost. Bear in mind that the profit motive is not a factor here, and that where there are church cemeteries the church is simply providing a burial place for its members. Monies collected from the sale of plots are usually placed into the perpetual care fund. If the church were selling plots for profit, this would allow for additional governmental regulation, perhaps

in the form of a broker's license to sell real estate....maybe even causing the church to lose its tax exemption status.

In instances where families have chosen not to bury their dead in the churchyard several pastors indicated they noticed some degree of apprehension on their parts shown by the "reasons" given for not using that facility. It was as though such people did not want to "offend" anyone with their choice. However, one respondent put at ease any such feelings with a remark already alluded to: "There is no obligation to use the cemetery. It remains a privilege to be buried here."

QUESTION 8: "Are church cemeteries a thing of the past?" When this writer originally included this question, it was with the idea that with the advent of proprietary cemeteries the churchyard was really an anachronism - something out of its proper historical role. To a degree this was a correct assumption; to the degree it was not, it was a display of naivety on his part. How so? Past and present histories have influenced the answer to this question.

"The first settlers to arrive about 20 miles north of Milwaukee to Town X, which was later called 'Kirchhayn,' the church in the woods, because of the dense forest, claimed 80-acre government grants....They also claimed 80 acres for a church and school.... land cost ten 'shillings' per acre, \$50.00 for 40 acres or \$100.00 for an 80 acre government grant with a promise to pay within five years."22

In keeping with what was established or contended earlier concerning the concept "Gottes Acker," the churchyard was included in this parcel of land. In fact that term implies the land immediately adjoining the church as opposed to "friedhof" which simply means cemetery and could be located anywhere.

At any rate the state is not dedicating any new lands for such use. So, as several pastors put it, "There will not be any new cemeteries with

the high costs of real estate being what they are!" It is becoming progressively more difficult to obtain land for starting mission congregations, let alone including additional land for a churchyard. The economics would militate against such moves in the future.

But what would the situation be for an established congregation with a cemetery that needed to be expanded? Success here depends on whether additional land is available. One of the pastors interviewed represents a case in point. The cemetery is reaching its maximum capacity of gravesites, adjoining land is owned by a farmer who is reluctant to sell a portion of it to the church, so that congregation may have to look elsewhere for some additional cemetery property or use the facilities of its sister congregation's cemetery several miles away. This latter consideration is at best only a temporary solution. But the costs of purchasing additional property elsewhere could prove to be too much of a financial burden for the congregation to bear.

Another pastor was more fortunate. The family of the farmer who in this instance originally donated the land for the churchyard still attends that church. As members they would contribute more land when the time for that decision became apparent.

An additional point to consider that our early church fathers did not have to contend with would be local zoning restrictions and current state laws regulating the locations of new cemeteries - especially in residential areas. In the case of churches located in the county one condition that might even prevent a church from using its own land to expand its cemetery into would amount to failure in meeting percolation standards established by the Department of Natural Resources.<sup>23</sup> Is not progress wonderful!

Still another point that made itself felt in several of the interviews



was this: "People today do not have the same values as people used to have." This writer could not help but interpret this as meaning that, yes, even this aspect of "church" is being eroded away during our very lifetimes. Perhaps the churchyard will be like a museum piece in the future, and people will comment, "How quaint," without realizing that those buried loved ones now at rest are awaiting the promised resurrection of the body.

QUESTION 9: "How is the cemetery maintained by the church?" Obviously, perpetual care costs. It is difficult enough to get volunteers to do regular church maintenance without expecting the cemetery to be included! At the turn of the century, according to one of the pastors interviewed, this problem was remedied by fencing in the churchyard so farm animals could graze on the grass and thereby keep it regularly trimmed. In comparison just consider what progress costs in terms of cemetery upkeep!

Whatever provisions exist for regulating the churchyard include those for its maintenance. Such maintenance can be classified as regular and special. Regular involves trimming the grass and weeds. The association, committee, or person in charge usually hires someone to do this, although some families still prefer to take care of their own plots. One congregation paid its male teacher to do this work. Special involves the occasion of a funeral, where a site must be located, marked, dug, temporarily cleared for the committal, backfilled and replanted. In one instance, where the voting members represented the cemetery association, the president of the Church Council is automatically responsible for measuring the gravesite from where the last one was determined. If someone in the congregation has a backhoe, his services are hired. If not, the funeral director hires outside labor for this and includes these costs on his regular bill.

Once again we are in an area where there are as many different ways to get the job done as there are jobs to be done. It would suffice to say that in no instance was the job of maintaining the churchyard a problem. The work involved got done. Usually some form of delegated, hired authority was involved and supervised to make sure the job was done and done properly.

QUESTION 10: "Who is responsible for keeping the records?" According to Chapter 157 of the Wisconsin Statutes, Section 69.48, paragraph (3), the sexton is responsible for keeping the burial permit records. According to information this interviewer obtained, there exists some variance to that law in several instances. This involved who did the job. The job was always done. Where there was a sexton and he was responsible for recording burial permits, this was done. In several instances the the group involved or its representative performed this task. In other instances the pastor kept these records.

An interesting feature about most kept records is that few are really complete. Early records were not kept, or were kept on a "hit or miss" basis, or were kept but have disappeared since being recorded originally. Several churches had official churchyard records dating from the 1930's and 1940's which were complete. One church had 119 years of accurate record keeping! That was an exception.

One might think that a current cemetery plot map would be kept. This would be advisable for future use as demands for new gravesites are made or to have a record of whom is buried where. It remains a question in this interviewers mind as to the existence of such a record in several of the churches visited, or if such a document did exist, it appeared from the nature of the conversations conducted that it might need to be "updated."

The impression he was left with in a few instances was that there be a hole in the ground on a funeral day so the pastor could do his job!

Where perpetual care funds had been collected (either through the sale of gravesites, outright gifts, or collection envelopes) and these monies have been subsequently invested, there existed another record keeping job related to the church cemetery. These records are subject to audit like any other financial records are.

QUESTION 11: "Does the presence of the church cemetery make serious inroads upon your time as pastor?" Earlier this writer admitted that aside from his present church affiliation he had never been a member of a church where there had been an adjoining churchyard. Having been denied this experience, it only seemed natural to wonder about the demands a cemetery would make on a pastor's already limited time schedule.

Generally speaking, none of the pastors interviewed admitted or complained that his churchyard was costing him valuable time. In fact one commented, "It makes this aspect of being a pastor more convenient!" The reason for this is easily discernable: where the congregation is organized so that some organization or individual other than the pastor is responsible, then there really are no special demands made upon the pastor's time than what a funeral would demand of a pastor whose church had no cemetery. Once the business of "cemetery" is so organized, it is no burden for the pastor. But pity the pastor who accepts a call to a congregation whose cemetery records have not been carefully kept, or whose constitution, by-laws, or cemetery regulations cause him to be more or less involved. Until things are put in their proper perspective there definitely are drains made upon the pastor's time. Two of the pastors interviewed could easily attest to this latter point.

There is a trend in our society though that proves this point:

no matter how organized you think you are, you are not! That trend can be identified as the family-tree enthusiasts, and wherever there is a cemetery and the pastor's residence is close by, you can make a safe bet his doorbell will be ringing more often than not....his mail will include special requests....his phone will ring at the most precious of times - all with this appeal: "Can you tell me if you have a record of so-and-so being buried in your cemetery?" One pastor said his congregation now charges \$10 per inquiry just to make the effort worth his time or to discourage such requests. Another pastor simply puts such requests at the bottom of his priorities, which could be interpreted as meaning he gets to them only when the really important and necessary jobs get done....which could mean those requests may not be answered for some time!

QUESTION 12: "What advantages do you 'see' for having a church cemetery?" Quite honestly, this question and the one that follows it were intended to serve as catchalls for anything that should be mentioned, but up to this point had not been.

One such response amounted to this: "It allows me to add local color to the final rites." The family met with the pastor prior to the funeral service for a Bible reading and prayer. Then the normal funeral service was conducted upstairs in church. After this there was a procession to the cemetery with the church bells tolling. After the committal the family, friends and relatives were served a meal in the church.

While this was unique at this church, the idea behind it was prevalent among all the pastors interviewed - the churchyard provides a psychological and emotional advantage for the family at the time of the death of a loved one. This holds especially true if there are loved ones

already buried there. Its presence tends to draw the people closer to their church emotionally with the idea of "from the cradle to the grave, right here."

Another advantage commented upon was that the presence of the churchyard adds to the beauty of the "church campus." It makes the church cemetery appear "park-like" in appearance, not cold like other cemeteries are. This would lend itself to obvious sermon application.

An additional advantage centers upon the theme of immortality - that death really is a part of the Christian's life....that the presence of the churchyard provides the pastor with an added element of educating his congregation about Christian burials and the resurrection of the body.

Lastly among the advantages would be one cited by most of the pastors interviewed: the presence of the churchyard makes the entire business of funerals more handy and convenient for the pastor.

QUESTION 13: "Are there any disadvantages?" There appeared to be some variance of opinion here. Several pastors admitted to no disadvantages at all...."The churchyard has only plus values." Several admitted to conflicts arising from a misunderstanding involving the administering of the cemetery rules and regulations. An example might involve interpreting precisely who can and cannot be buried in the churchyard: what about the spouse of faithful Mrs. So-and-So, who never joined the church? What about the father of the dead soldier who claims it would be disrespectful if his son were not given a military funeral with the honor guard, military salute, and gunshots? Can conflicts like these be resolved without hurting feelings at a time when feelings are already hurt?

One pastor recalled a conflict that had its roots in the church's history. There was a farmer who had volunteered his horses to graze in the fenced in churchyard in order to keep the grass looking trim. When

the congregation voted to take the fence down, the farmer got so upset that he took his horses and family and left that church!

On the serious side there is an aspect present in our society that that is making its mark felt upon church cemeteries. It is called vandalism, and involves knocking grave markers over - sometimes breaking them. Sometimes the engraving on the markers is obliterated. Whatever form the vandalism takes vandalism insurance is virtually priced out of the market. This obviously is a disadvantage to have to contend with.

Then nature and time take their toll in the churchyard. Old markers list and lean; spring thaws cause the ground to "heave" which upsets some markers. Professional services have to be hired to correct these occurrences, and that kind of service is expensive. Last year one of the congregations this writer visited spent close to \$3000 having its cemetery markers righted and secured.

Up to this point the church cemetery has been discussed in terms of a parcel of land adjoining a particular church. It was noted that the term "Gottes Acker" (God's acre) described this type of arrangement. Quite different from that was what developed as cities began growing to metropolitan size. It became impractical to establish a small burying ground adjacent to each of the churches being built within the city limits. It also became apparent to farsighted members of churches in the heart of a growing Milwaukee that some other arrangement must be made to carry on this religious rite in appropriate surroundings. So in the middle of the last century the Catholic Archdiocese established Calvary Cemetery on Bluemound Road and St. Paul's Episcopal Church established Forest Home Cemetery southwest of the city.<sup>24</sup> "In 1881 six central cemeteries were available to the citizens of Milwaukee which city was probably fairly

typical."<sup>25</sup> One of these has its roots in the WELS. Its history is unique and is related here.<sup>26</sup>

1851 - Members of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church acquired a parcel of land to start "St. Johannes Friedhof"....St. John's Cemetery.

1865 - St. John's Cemetery was seen to be inadequate for its growing needs. The German Evangelic Lutheran Grace Church in Milwaukee was invited to join hands with St. John's in creating a non-profit church cemetery. It was called Union Cemetery, and required a special act of the state legislature to empower the two congregations to undertake this joint effort since each of them was a separate corporation according to law. A separate Cemetery Board of three trustees from each church was to manage the new cemetery and provide burial plots "for all Lutherans and their Christian friends."

1867 or 1868 (sources do not agree) - The Johannes Friedhof and Union Cemeteries are united and the Lutheran Trinity Church of Milwaukee was taken into the corporation with another special act of the state legislature.

1912 - The corporation could envisage that the space in the 90 acre Union Cemetery was nearing depletion, so a new site was obtained at Mill and 43rd. It was an old farm and was at first called Grace-Union Cemetery. Later the additional 140 acres were simply called Graceland Cemetery. Single grave spaces are still available at Union Cemetery, but family plots are not. It appears that the black population which has developed around Union Cemetery has taken advantage of these single burial plots and continues doing so. Graceland Cemetery is not operated for making profit. People buy

a burial rite which lasts in perpetuity. Land is not sold. The monies accumulated go into a fund for current maintenance and future maintenance once all the lots are sold. This fits in with the perpetual care concept which did not affect Union Cemetery since it preceded that law. At Graceland perpetual care is included in the plot price. At Union people were supposed to take care of their gravesites. This failed to happen, so the Cemetery Board approached the families whose names were on their records, asking them to contribute money into a perpetual care fund. There were so few lots left to sell, and the Board did not want to turn the cemetery over to the city, so it raised the principal for a perpetual fund by tracing names from previous records. It worked. Union Cemetery now has guaranteed perpetual care. For the future Graceland has land in reserve extending far beyond its presently improved area. It is estimated that a century or more of service is available from this improved area alone.

Thus we see a modern adaptation perpetuating the idea that Christians are accustomed to bury their dead in a Biblical manner. Perhaps it would be well to conclude with a comment on this very thought. A Christian burial takes place when the dead is buried with Christian honor, with singing, prayer and a message from God's Word. In the past "Gottes Acker" allowed for this to be done or practiced. In the present we see this being practiced where churchyards still exist, but even here the influence of secular thinking is seen threatening this tradition. And what about the future after the churchyard becomes a thing of the past and modern cemeteries become filled to capacity? The answer may be found in a subsequent research effort which would concern itself with cremation and the Christian ethic!



ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Rev. T.N. Teigen, "Burial," Clergy Bulletin, vol. XVI, no. 3 (Nov., 1956), p. 17. (Note: this article is a translation of the section "Begrabnis" in E. Eckhardt's Reallexikon, vol. I, pp. 284-289. Translation is by Rev. A. Schulz.)
- <sup>2</sup> "Churchyard," The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, vol. III (Grand Rapids: 1950), p. 113.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 113-114.
- <sup>4</sup> 125th Anniversary Booklet (1842-1967), St. Mary's Catholic Church of Hales Corners, WI, p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with Pastor Erwin Schewe, Zion and St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Churches of Allenton, April 16, 1981.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted from the first page of typed copy provided by Graceland Cemetery, entitled: "Graceland Cemetery - Meeting Present and Future Needs with An Historic Background," no date given.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Habenstein and William Lamers, "The Pattern of Late 19th Century Funerals," The History of American Funeral Directing (Milwaukee, 1955), p. 425.
- <sup>8</sup> Centennial Anniversary Booklet (1852-1952), Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Huilsburg, WI, no pagination.
- <sup>9</sup> Diamond Jubilee Anniversary Booklet (1869-1944), Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church of the Town of Scott, Sheboygan County, WI, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> 100th Anniversary Booklet (1853-1953), First Immanuel Lutheran Church of Cedarburg, WI, p. 17.
- <sup>11</sup> 115th Anniversary Booklet (1853-1954), Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Freistadt, WI, p. 8.
- <sup>12</sup> 100th Anniversary Booklet (1859-1959), Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church of Farmington, WI, p. 17.

- 13 Orlaw Pestegard, ed., Wisconsin Statutes, vol. 1 (State of Wisconsin, 1977), p. 1737.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1884.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 1885.
- 18 *ibid.*, pp. 1886-2888.
- 19 Quoted from typed copy provided by Graceland Cemetery, entitled: "Rules and Regulations, Graceland Cemetery," p. 6.
- 20 100th Anniversary Booklet (1859-1959), St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church of Newburg, WI, p. 33.
- 22 125th Anniversary Booklet (1843-1968), David's Star Ev. Lutheran Church, Kirchhayn-Jackson, WI, p. 8.
- 21 This phone conversation was made on April, 23, 1981.
- 23 Interview with Pastor Delmer Kannenburg, Trinity of Huilsburg and Zum. Kripplein Christi of Iron Ridge, WI, April 16, 1981.
- 24 Habenstein and Lamers, *op. cit.*, pp. 424-427.
- 25 *ibid.*, p. 424.
- 26 The material in this section is capsulized from the source quoted under endnote 6; 90th Anniversary Booklet (1848-1938), St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, p. 22; an interview with Attorney Ralph von Briesen on April 21, 1981 - he is a member of Grace Ev. Lutheran Church of Milwaukee.

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with An Historic Background," no date given.

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Freistadt, WI. 115th Anniversary Booklet  
(1839-1954), p. 8.

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Hullsburg, WI. Centennial Anniversary  
Booklet (1852-1952), no pagination.

#### INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

##### Pastors:

Elwin Fredrich, Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of South Mequon.

Martin Janke, David's Star Ev. Lutheran Church at Kirchhayn.

Delmer Kannenburg, Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of Hullsburg and Zum  
Kripplein Christi Ev. Lutheran Church of Iron Ridge.

Reginald Pope, St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church of East Mequon. (Note:  
this was conducted prior to his accepting a call to Ascension Ev.  
Lutheran Church in Mitchell, S.D.)

Erwin Schewe, Zion Ev. Lutheran Church and St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran  
Church of Allenton.

Robert Uttech, Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of West Mequon.

##### Others:

F. Winston Luck, President - Wisconsin State Old Church Cemetery Society,  
Milwaukee.

Harry Suelflow, archivist and member of Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church of  
Freistadt.

Ralph von Briesen, attorney and member of Grace Ev. Lutheran Church of  
Milwaukee

#### PHONE CONVERSATION

Robert Wilke, Zoning Administrator for the City of Mequon.