

Our Synod's First Mission Overseas

By E.H. Wendland

[WELS Historical Institute, May, 1984]

- A. Formation in Poland
- B. The Interim - World War II
 - 1. The Polish Persecution
 - 2. The German Occupation
 - 3. The Regrouping in Germany
- C. Reestablishment in Germany
- D. Absorption by SELK

When requested to look into some mission topic of historical interest for presentation here, it was suggested that "Our Synod's First Mission Overseas" might be worthy of special interest. It's a story that hasn't received much publicity in the past, and I assume one of the purposes of a historical society is to dig into crevices, nooks and crannies where sufficient dust has gathered to make one curious as to what lies underneath. At least whenever I see in the seminary library one of my colleagues noted for his historical expertise, he's usually digging around in ancient, leather-bound volumes which nobody else has looked at in years!

The story of this mission, moreover, is that of a church body which we can observe from its inception practically to its very completion. It's like a book we can open, peruse its contents, close, and then muse over for awhile to see if it has left us with any noteworthy impressions. Like a coal of fire this mission came into life, flared up brightly at times in spite of elements which threatened to extinguish it, and then gradually diminished in intensity so that only a few embers remain, glowing silently in a darkened surrounding.

One might question whether or not this mission was a mission at all in the accepted sense. No doubt it would be better to call it an effort on the part of our synod to support true Lutheran confessionalism in another area of the world, and perhaps that's a mission as important as any other these days. Whatever the case, it presents to us a story which becomes more and more compelling as we get into it, often a tragic story as we see our fellow Christians up against odds which seem all but insurmountable at times, a story with an unusual and an ironic twist as it nears its close. But let's get into the story itself.

Time of Formation in Poland

Germany, as we were reminded so frequently last year (Luther's 500th Anniversary Year), is known as "the cradle of the Lutheran Reformation." As a result German Protestants the world over have usually been identified as "German Lutherans." Unfortunately the "Lutheranism" which they have come to profess after a lapse of nearly 500 years is often a far cry from that which the Great Reformer professed.

This was especially true of many of the Germans scattered throughout Poland after World War I. A certain Lutheran consciousness, perhaps, was preserved. Staunch Lutheran confessionalism, however, was rare. Pastors trained in state-controlled universities were greatly influenced by the rationalistic and liberalistic trends of the times. As a result many of the poorer people sought a religious outlet in self-organized meetings led by people with little theological training. Although the Lutheran Church of Poland called itself the "Augsburg Church," its state-controlled practices tended to serve the interests of the rich rather than the poor. Armin Schlender describes the situation as follows:

The care for souls (in the Augsburg Church) among the common people left much to be desired. In addition to spiritual indifference the social differences so prevalent in the land were reflected

in church life. Pews for Sunday attendance were rented to the more opulent. Tariffs were introduced for baptisms, weddings and burials. This practice of favoring the wealthy aroused much restlessness among the common people, who turned to their own prayer meetings and assembled in private homes to find spiritual help (*Durch Kreuz zur Krone*, April 1974).

One such group began to meet in the city of Lodz under the guidance of Gustav Maliszewski, a school teacher and evangelist in the Augsburg Church, who somehow had acquired books and periodicals from Dr. C.F.W. Walther and from the Saxon Free Church in Germany. Further contacts led to Maliszewski's enrollment in the Theological Seminary of the Saxon Free Church, located in Zehlendorf, Germany. He writes of this experience:

In Zehlendorf I soon became aware that the Holy Spirit was in charge, and that its theology was rooted in the Holy Scriptures, a theology which I had never before been privileged to learn. Although I had studied sufficiently to serve as a licensed preacher, I was never fully satisfied with my theological studies. A doctrine of conversion which depended upon a person's own will or lack of it, a teaching of predestination which led to despair, teachings relating to baptism and Lord's Supper which failed to satisfy, and then especially matters pertaining to the last things and the millenium confused me to such an extent that I longed fervently to escape this labyrinth. Zehlendorf gave me what my heart desired (Op. cit.).

Having enjoyed a "Zehlendorf experience" of my own shortly before World War II, I can appreciate Maliszewski's words. I studied under one of the same teachers who influenced Maliszweski, namely Rector Martin Willkomm, a man whom I shall always treasure as one of the great church leaders and theologians of our time.

Returning to Lodz in June 1, 1923 after completing his studies in Zehlendorf, Maliszweski undertook to rent a hall in order to found a Lutheran Free Church. Since the government denied him the right to hold public services, he resorted to meeting in private homes in Lodz and in Andrespol, gathering small groups of people and instructing them in the teachings of the Bible on the basis of Luther's catechism. His appeals for help in founding a Lutheran Free Church, directed toward the Saxon Free Church in Germany, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod resulted in a response from our synod, which promised to assist in this work.

The fact that our synod became directly involved came as a result of a visit to Poland by Pastor Otto Engel of Randolph, Wisconsin, who was authorized by the synod to go to Poland and investigate requests for help coming out of this country. Pastor Engel reported personally to the 1923 Convention of our synod, stating that the situation in Poland was "very sad" (*sehr traurig*), that "thousands upon thousands were without a shepherd," and that "the hunger for the Word was great." The convention responded by resolving to assist the work in Poland "with utmost energy" (*energisch*), and voted the sum of \$10,000 annually by way of support (cf. Proceedings, 17th Convention, 1923).

In the meantime Maliszweski was granted permission by the Polish Ministry of Culture to hold public services, and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Poland was organized on May 11, 1924 in the home of family Edward Gnauck in Lodz, in the presence of 35 adults. Since Director J.P. Koehler of our Wauwatosa Seminary and his son Pastor Karl Koehler were planning a trip to Germany in the summer of 1924, our General Board for Missions requested them to study further the free-church situation in Poland with Pastor Engel. The Koehlers agreed with Pastor Engel's evaluation, and the three men from our synod participated in the first large public service held in Lodz by the Lutheran Free Church on August 3, 1924, a service in which Pastor Maliszweski was officially ordained and installed as the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

During the course of the next 15 years (1924-1939) this little group in Poland spread out into various places in and around Lodz, and Warsaw. 12 congregations and 14 preaching stations were established, gathering in nearly 3,000 souls and 2,000 communicants. 10 congregations erected modest places of worship; others met

in rented halls or private rooms. Pastors who served during these years were Gustav Maliszewski, Heinrich Mueller, August Lerle, Leopold Zielke, Karl Patzer, Armin Schlender, Edward Lelke, Helmut Schlender, Alfons Wagner, Alfred Reit and Arthur Napp. Most of these men were trained at the Zehlendorf Seminary of the Saxon Free Church. August Lerle came to the church by way of colloquy, following doctrinal differences in Neuendettelsau, where he had received his first theological training.

Pastors from our Wisconsin Synod who represented us and supervised the work in our behalf during these years were Otto Engel (1924-1925), Adolf Dasler (1926-1928) and Wilhelm Bodamer (1929-1939). Pastor Engel did much travelling, seeking to gain students to study for the work of the ministry. Pastor Dasler concentrated on inner growth and on the organization of pastoral conferences. Pastor Bodamer served the longest of the three and is described by Pastor Maliszewski in these words:

With the arrival of Pastor Bodamer our young church achieved its real growth, both inwardly and outwardly. All his many God-given gifts, his time and his energy were devoted to the work of our church. Wherever a need existed he jumped in. Work was his desire and his joy. He preached often and willingly. His sermons were deeply grounded in God's Word, accompanied with an inner warmth and deep conviction which one could recognize immediately. He understood how to place the truths of Scripture upon the hearts of his hearers in simple words. Under his leadership our work prospered and took on a real significance both for pastors and congregations. (*Durch Kreuz zur Krone*, May 1974).

This is not to say that this mission in Poland had an easy time of it during these years of growth. The greatest opponents of the free-church movement came from people within the territorial state-church, who tried in every possible way to hinder its progress. According to Polish law only Polish citizens could serve as pastors. Only acts performed in territorial state-churches were granted official recognition. State-church taxes were demanded of every citizen. Our congregations were sometimes refused the right to build their own churches. Others were padlocked after they were built. The only public cemeteries in existence were controlled by state-churches. Although the existence of our mission was seemingly suffered in some places by local authorities, in other areas situations arose where state-church members and pastors tried to harass the work in every possible way. A funeral procession, for example, was refused admission into a cemetery and the body had to be abandoned at the cemetery gate. A newly built chapel was padlocked on the day when it was to be dedicated and remained so for nearly three years. A confirmation service was interrupted by a state official and the pastor was told that he had no right to officiate in a robe. Usually these incidents arose as a result of some complaint issued by a member of the state-church. At one time it seemed that Pastor Bodamer's visa to reside in Poland would not be renewed, and it was only through the mediation of our U.S. embassy upon the request of our synod that his visa was extended.

In spite of these difficulties the work progressed. A monthly church paper, *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche in Polen*, appeared in 1930 with Pastor Bodamer serving as editor. In 1937 the "Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Freechurch in Poland, UAC" was formally constituted. An arrangement was worked out between Poland's Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Culture whereby local authorities were directed to accept records of official acts performed in organized congregations of our Polish Freechurch. During these years our Wisconsin Synod's support for this mission was renewed annually to the extent of nearly \$11,000, and in addition to this a number of loans were granted to make it possible for congregations in Poland to erect modest chapels and parsonages. This in spite of our Synod's "depression woes," when according to a report from the chairman of the Synod's General Mission Board cries were heard to "drop the mission in Poland."

It seemed that in 1938 and going into the summer of 1939 our mission in Poland had arrived at a point where it could look forward to a more settled existence, comparatively free from the struggles and harassments of its formative years. This was my own year of study in Berlin-Zehlendorf, a year brought to a close with the end of the summer-semester in early August, 1939. I was able to visit with Pastor Bodamer as he stopped by in Zehlendorf on his return to the U.S., where he again was to report to the 1939 convention of our synod. Of all

the students at Zehlendorf I appreciated most of all my friendship with Alfred Reit and Arthur Napp, and as they returned to their homeland I returned to mine, late in August of that year. Although there were strange rumblings and occasional incidents on the border between Poland and Germany, and although the verbal hostilities between the Goebbels' propaganda machine and the Polish press were heating up considerably, none of us could have predicted the events which began September 1, 1939, when Germany declared war on Poland and our mission in that country was to be uprooted violently and transported into the country of Germany following the war.

The Interim—WW II

With the beginning of World War II it was as though an impenetrable curtain had been drawn between the mother church in America and its adopted offspring which it had nurtured in Poland. Synodical Proceedings from the years 1941, 1943, and 1945 offer scant information. Director Bodamer, who had come to America to report to the 1939 convention, was not permitted to return to Poland. Because of rigid censorship mail service between the U.S. and Poland (renamed "Warthegau" by the German army of occupation) was practically non-existent. Funds requisitioned for the support of workers could not be processed. After the U.S. entered the war following Pearl Harbor there was the added danger that communications from our country would place those addressed in Warthegau into even greater jeopardy. All that could be done on this side was to pray - and await developments.

From those in Warthegau itself who experienced the years which followed - and who somehow survived - we now know what happened. Pastor Armin Schlender, who came through it all and later succeeded Pastor Maliszewski as leader of the refugees who reassembled in Germany, gives us a vivid description of these years in a series of articles appearing in the church paper *Durch Kreuz zur Krone* (April through September, 1974). From his report we shall bring excerpts of this interim phase in the church's history, a phase which can be divided into three parts: the time of Polish persecution, the time of German occupation, and the flight to the West from the Russians and the regrouping in Germany itself.

The Polish Persecution

One can imagine the parlous situation experienced by German residents in Poland after Germany's declaration of war upon that country. Armin Schlender describes them as "days of terror, of extreme unrest, of indescribable suspense, unheard of spiritual misery." Polish excesses led to "lowliest bloodlust, satanic evil, devilish sadism and deeds of bestiality." A time of "open season" was declared upon all Germans, who tried to hide in every possible place of refuge. Hordes of released criminals swarmed over their villages, plundered their homes, terrorized their women. The Poles were according to his description like a people possessed, driven by instincts so lowly that one cannot even imagine it. "Kill the German spies," was the cry as the remains of martyred Germans were recognizable only through remnants of their clothing as their cries for help filled the countryside. People from our own congregations were not spared. According to official reports over 60,000 Germans were murdered as they were in the process of being deported elsewhere. It seems that in subsequent years much has been publicized about the Jewish holocaust, but very little of what went on here in Poland.

By virtue of the German *blitzkrieg* this time of persecution was mercifully ended in a matter of weeks, only to be replaced by another time of extreme uncertainty, namely the German occupation.

The German Occupation

Although a measure of order came with the German takeover, the spirit of National Socialism was not favorably disposed toward church activities. Special permission for holding church services had to be obtained from police authorities. No offerings could be gathered for the support of the church; no official church-papers could be printed; no contact with churches or organizations outside of Poland could be established.

On the other hand Armin Schlender reports that thousands of German refugees began to filter into the area, from the Baltic zone, parts of Russia, Bessarbia and Czechoslovakia. Many of these were attracted to the prayer meetings and services organized by our mission. In fact, many new preaching stations were begun, and after a time Schlender reports that “we were able to preach the gospel unhindered, administer the sacraments, hold instruction classes, make home visitations and provide pastoral care” (*Durch Kreuz zur Krone*, August 1974). The overall work grew to a total of 2,500 souls, 15 congregations and 30 preaching stations. Pastors could not be salaried and lived from whatever help their members could provide in gifts of food and clothing. It seemed for awhile that out of the horrible confusion following the declaration of war a time of great blessing was emerging.

And then from the eastern front in Russia came reports of a German retreat and a massive Russian offensive. Schlender writes: “In a spirit of fearful anticipation we still celebrated Christmas and New Year, 1945, when the great offensive struck and brought the entire eastern front into a state of flux. Millions of Germans either upon their own initiative or by way of official order fled and sought refuge in the West. Among these were most of our people. Therewith also our church in the east ceased to exist, this after two decades of visible blessings of the Lord in the activities of his church” (*Durch Kreuz zur Krone*, August, 1974).

The Regrouping in Germany

During the course of the year 1945 after what Schlender describes as a “grueling never-to-be-forgotten journey” - time and again under the fire of advancing and retreating armies - the stream of refugees flowed into Germany. In this devastated land they lived as unwelcome guests. Our own people were scattered throughout the four zones of military occupation, as one report has it, “ragged; emaciated and unwelcome beggars” (Proceedings, 1947).

Five of the surviving pastors from Poland - Maliszewski, Lerle, Mueller, Zielke and A. Schlender - managed to find each other in Zwickau, Saxony, where the Ev. Lutheran Free Church of Saxony had its publishing house. Since many of the pastors of the Saxon Free Church were in German military service, our pastors were prevailed upon to serve this church in the emergency. This they did gladly.

After the Second World War finally came to an end, Pastor Maliszewski managed to invite the remaining pastors from our former Polish Free Church to a conference in Memmingen, Germany, which met there in February, 1946. They decided to search out their people who had fled into Germany, and in a subsequent meeting in June resolved to become reestablished as the Evangelical Lutheran Refugee Mission.

The following summer, 1947, Supt. Bodamer and Executive Secretary A. Maas were finally granted permission to travel to Germany and reestablish the ties which had been severed by the war for over a period of 8 years.

Reestablishment in Germany

In the ensuing years, 1947-1975, a new free church gradually developed, with the remnants from Poland serving as nuclei. The first years were a matter of relocating our scattered people, finding facilities for holding services, and concentrating on centers where most of the refugees could be assembled. At first it seemed that a new era of unprecedented growth was in store for this refugee mission. The 1949 Convention Proceedings of our Synod reports a total of ten thousand souls assembled in the Western zones alone, and the 1951 Proceedings gives the figures of 3,000 souls gathered in 14 congregations and 110(!) preaching stations in the Russian zone, served by 5 pastors and 24 lay teachers, and 18,000 souls gathered in 11 congregations and 100 (!) preaching stations in the Western zones, served by 11 pastors. Additional pastors came to this mission from the Saxon Free Church, from training at the seminary established at Oberursel by cooperating free churches, and by way of colloquy.

One has to marvel at these figures, also wondering in the light of subsequent developments whether or not they were grossly exaggerated. At the time they seemed no doubt to be realistic. Refugees flocked together

in this time of mutual need, receiving the physical aid which was extended to them so bountifully by relief agencies. Our own synod's Relief Committee reported in 1951 that it had within the past few years shipped the following amounts either through Lutheran World Relief or directly: 25,000 CARE packages, 80,000 pounds of flour, 300,000 pounds of clothing, 1,000 pairs of eye glasses, and countless Bibles and hymnals. For many refugees, however, the situation was temporary. Many emigrated to Canada, the U.S., and South America. Others were scattered throughout Germany, and as they became more permanently established returned to the more familiar atmosphere of a territorial church rather than to remain classified as free church adherents. Still others, no doubt, lost much of their temporary religiosity as their need for help diminished. Much of this hand-out type of Christianity simply went the way of all flesh.

As our Refugee Mission took on signs of greater permanence in those places which were served by pastors, a reorganization took place during the 1950s in which the church was renamed "The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Confession in the Dispersion" (*Ev. Luth. Bekenntniskirche in der Diaspora*) and eventually "The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Confession" (*Ev. Luth. Bekenntniskirche*). Pastor Alfred Maas of Sodus, Michigan served as this church's non-resident Director. Pastor Armin Schlender succeeded G. Maliszewski as President. Through aid from our synod most of the established congregations gradually acquired modest chapels and parsonages at a cost of approximately \$5,000 per unit. Church membership settled down to a total figure of about 3,000 souls and 2,000 communicants in the Western zones and about half that amount in the Eastern zone. The annual cost to our synod for the support of this venture came to about \$75,000, most of which went to subsidize the salaries of the 10 pastors in the West and the 5 pastors in the East.

It was in the mid-1950s that I became personally involved with this mission as a member of the Board for World Missions and the Executive Committee in charge of the work in Germany. My chief qualification, it seems, was the I was conversant with the German language, an ability that was severely put to the test in a number of personal visits to this mission between the years 1955 to 1960. A number of experiences on these visits left a lasting impression.

On my first visit I attended a pastoral conference which almost ended in a serious split within the church. Several pastors accused Pastor A. Wagner of having transgressed fellowship principles when his new chapel in Varel was dedicated, since some pastors there were not in fellowship with us. Pastor Wagner protested that these pastors participated without his foreknowledge, and was so upset that his sound practice as a pastor should be questioned that he abruptly left the meeting in a huff. A big argument resulted, and it was only through the tearful mediation and fervent appeals of Pres. Armin Schlender that peace was restored. I'll always remember a comment made by Pastor H. Forchheim at this occasion: "*Wir ersticken uns in unserer eigenen Atmosphaere!*" (We are suffocating ourselves in our own atmosphere).

On my next visit I presented a paper to the conference on how they ought to strive more energetically toward self-support rather than to rely on our Wisconsin Synod to pay their salaries. A lovely topic! I can remember old Pastor Maliszewski standing up and declaring: "*Ihre Worte sind mir gerade durchs Herz gedrungen!*" I never quite understood what he meant by that. In any case my zealous exhortation didn't seem to do very much good. They still continued to bring generous offerings toward unnecessary bell-towers for their chapels rather than to pay off the debt on the chapels themselves!

Perhaps my most difficult task was to try to explain to Dr. Ernst Lerle that his use of Wilhelm Moeller from the territorial church to teach his theological students at Leipzig didn't agree with our fellowship theses. The full impact of this discussion I'll probably never know. Two weeks after our Berlin meeting the Russians built that detestable wall, and all further direct contact with our men on the other side became all but impossible.

An unforgettable character at those Berlin meetings was old "Opa" Lerle, venerable pastor from the days in Poland who was still serving numerous congregations and preaching stations in spite of his advanced age and of being 90 percent blind. When asked how he could still manage to get around on a bicycle he simply declared, "When they see me coming they should have sense enough to get out of the way!" At one meeting he related how the Berlin border official insisted on going through all his "documents." His Bible was his only "document," and he told the official, "Go ahead, read! I'll sit here all day if you want to study the whole thing!"

Other memories are vivid: preaching in a home where there was scarcely enough room to stand and where people were straining their ears while standing on the outside near the windows. Visiting all the church councils in the congregations in an all-out effort to encourage them to be more mission-minded, knowing all the while that if the pastor wasn't going to get out of his study during the week and do more visiting, my appeals would be fruitless. Somehow through it all having the feeling that the hearts of many of these people were still in the old Polish homeland ("*die alte Heimat*"), and that the struggle of becoming established in this new Germany was a losing battle.

In my own report to the 1957 Synod Convention I expressed some of the problems in these words: "Everything in Western Germany is bustling with activity. Cities which ten years ago were a mass of rubble have been rebuilt to such an extent that the traces of war are scarcely in evidence. But the average German has again lapsed into a materialistic way of life. Church attendance in the Evangelical Landeskirche is lamentably weak: Parishes with memberships reaching into the thousands have less than one hundred people in attendance at a service. Still the average individual considers himself a member in good standing Surrounded by this depressing atmosphere of spiritual darkness and indifference is our mission, with its 12 pastors and 3,000 souls. Opportunities for doing intensive mission work are restricted by the fact that most people in Germany already consider themselves to be church members. The appeal of our mission must be made primarily to refugees, and the surge of refugees is diminishing rapidly. Thus the outward growth of our mission is practically at a standstill. If anything, there is a slight decrease in membership" (1957 Proceedings, WELS).

In 1962 I left for Africa and was spared the depressing experience of having to see a church body go through a period of relentless and inevitable decline. While reports from the 1960s and into the 1970s show that the Bekenntniskirche was making strides toward reducing subsidy from our synod, its membership continued to decline rather rapidly so that by 1973 both Eastern and Western zones listed slightly over a thousand souls in each zone. The absorption of our people by other free churches in Germany, effected in 1975, was but a step away. The way in which this amalgamation took place deserves a closer, final look.

The Absorption by SELK

The history of our synod's first mission overseas tells of ups and downs, surges of optimism when sudden growth seemed to be in prospect, followed by crushing disappointments when these hopes were suddenly dashed. When the wave of refugee prospects in Western Germany began to vanish during the 1950s, synodical reports pertaining to our Bekenntniskirche began to take on a much more sober look. As the "Care-Package Lutherans" became absorbed in new interests and defected to other areas, and as efforts to interest German nationals in a conservative Lutheran free church became increasingly difficult, real concern for continued stability and even future existence began to make itself felt among pastors and people. Church membership was diminishing instead of growing. Nostalgic ties with the former homeland were becoming less important. Other Lutheran free church organizations in Germany were experiencing similar difficulties and were taking steps toward amalgamation in order to avoid duplication of effort in certain localities and also to strengthen one another in a common cause for Lutheran confessionalism. It was only natural that our Bekenntniskirche should also be interested in pursuing the possibility of closer ties with other free churches as a way of self-preservation.

Already in 1957 three other Lutheran free churches began to take steps toward a closer working agreement (Arbeitsgemeinschaft). They were the Ev. Lutheran Free Church of Germany (Saechsische Freikirche), the Old Lutheran Church of Breslau (Altlutherische Kirche), and the Independent Lutheran Church of Germany (Selbstaendige Kirche). Our Bekenntniskirche was in fellowship with the Saxons and with Breslau, but protested the position of the Independent Church on the doctrine of verbal inspiration and on its unionistic practices with the Territorial Church of Germany. It should be mentioned in this connection that our people whom we supported in the Eastern zone could only receive their support from us as a district of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church of Germany, this because of governmental regulations in the DDR.

This whole situation was further complicated when our synod discontinued fellowship relations with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in 1961, since Missouri was actively supporting the Ev. Lutheran Free Church and Wisconsin was supporting the Bekenntniskirche. How long could this “three-cornered” fellowship tie continue?

On the one hand efforts toward clarifying our Wisconsin Synod’s fellowship relations with the Lutheran free churches in Germany were intensified. On the other hand our people and the Saxons were being brought closer together through having little flocks in the same community. Why two churches and two pastors? The future of our mission in Europe, as reports indicate, was becoming more a matter of concern for our Commission in Doctrinal Matters than for the Executive Committee for Germany. When in 1969 our Commission on Doctrinal Matters reported favorably on meetings with Breslau and the Saxons and also accepted an invitation to meet with the Independent Church, our Synod in convention resolved “that we encourage and urge the Church of the Ev. Lutheran Confession in Germany, in consultation with the Commission on Doctrinal Matters and the Board for World Missions, to strive for closer relationship and eventual amalgamation with other Lutheran Free Churches in Germany and other European countries” (Proceedings, 1969). Our congregation in Oldenburg, it seems, took this resolution very seriously and soon after merged with the Independent Church in that city.

In 1973 the three other Lutheran free churches mentioned previously joined in a church body known as the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (SELK), and in June of that year our Commission on Doctrinal Matters met at Mequon with representatives of this newly-formed church body. Discussions at this meeting were extremely propitious. It seemed that agreement had been reached on all points of doctrine that had been in question. Unfortunately this agreement between representatives at this Mequon meeting, as it later developed, was not shared by members of SELK’s Kirchenleitung in Germany, who later on refused to endorse and even repudiated the agreement which had been reached.

But affairs in our Bekenntniskirche’s efforts toward a merger with SELK had in the meantime progressed to a point where our people no longer felt that they wished to withdraw. At Hohnhorst in June of 1975 the Bekenntniskirche unanimously resolved to declare fellowship and organic union with SELK. There is certainly a strange, perhaps tragic twist in this denouement. Through an unfortunate combination of unusual circumstances a fellowship which we helped nurture for 30 years for confessional reasons came to an end rather abruptly, through actions which were taken in good faith but which took on another direction.

Statements which have been subsequently issued by SELK’s Kirchenleitung and by its church periodicals continue to indicate that we are still not agreed on the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures and on matters relating to church fellowship.

There still remains the group of pastors in East Germany, behind the iron curtain, who are reportedly still struggling with issues relating to SELK and who want to study the doctrinal differences which prevent our Commission on Inter-Church Relations from recommending fellowship with SELK. Further discussions with these men from the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany are still pending, and we are still sending them our financial support. This group consists of possibly 7 pastors and about 1,000 communicants.

Concluding Observations

A historical survey of this kind leads to a few closing observations:

- Our synod’s first mission venture overseas followed an appeal for help, a “Macedonian call” if you will, at the same time a call strongly confessional in character. The fact that we entered this field in response to a call was stressed in many later reports justifying our involvement in this work. Most of our subsequent ventures overseas have followed a similar pattern (Jonathan Ekong and Edet Eshiett to Nigeria; Martinus Adam to Indonesia; Peter Chang to Hong Kong; Orea Luna to Mexico; Seth Eerlandsson to Sweden; Luiz Rauter to Brazil). Work in Japan, Puerto Rico, Central Africa, and Colombia began on our own initiative and on the basis of our own preliminary study.

- From beginning to end our prime motivation for helping this mission was deeply confessional in nature. This was our “Existenzberechtigung.” Although a greater promise for evangelism and ingathering opportunities through this mission seemed to present itself at times, these quickly vanished and the confessional tone of our work again became the chief emphasis. In one synodical report Karl Krauss emphasized: “The Church of the Ev. Lutheran Confession is not strictly a mission It is a subsidized church” (Proceedings, 1963). It is ironic, therefore, that a venture which began out of confessional conviction had to be separated from us for confessional reasons and because of steps toward amalgamation which we at first may have encouraged.

- The designation for this mission’s official church periodical, *Durch Kreuz zur Krone* (Through Cross to Crown), aptly describes its existence. Severe crosses and tribulations were a part of its lot from the very beginning and continued throughout most of its history. One must marvel at the trials which its members were called upon to sustain again and again. The phrase “in the Diaspora” attached to its name for a time reminds one of the Epistles of Peter, also written to suffering Christians, yet “God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1: 1).

- Because of its lack of outward success and at times considerable expenditure in funds (as high as \$75,000 annually) this venture met with much criticism. Voices were frequently heard to abandon it and “spend the money more profitably elsewhere.” No one who became personally involved with those who were supported by this effort, however, could help feeling deeply sympathetic with their cause. It was a work of Christian love in a very real sense, regardless of what some critics might have said.

- My own service on the Board for World Missions as a member of the Executive Committee in charge of the work in Germany was also my introduction to direct participation in world mission work. Sitting in World Board meetings at the feet of Edgar Hoenecke, one could easily become infected by a world mission spirit which was both compelling and irresistible. And so when the call to Africa came along, how could it be declined?

Bibliography

Continuing in His Word (History of WELS), Northwestern Publishing House.

You and Your Synod (History of WELS), Northwestern Publishing House.

Synodical Proceedings, WELS, 1923 to 1975

Durch Kreuz zur Krone, by Armin Schlender, May to September 1974 (Official Publication of the Ev. Lutheran Bekenntniskirche)