

Trends in WELS Church Names Over the Past 50 Years

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If I wanted to take a tour of the WELS churches in the area where I grew up, I could start at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Oakfield, my home congregation. I could take County Trunk Y to Brownsville and visit St. Paul's. Driving east on 49 and then south on 175, I would come to St. John's in Lomira. Highway 41 north would be my route up to Fond du Lac. There I could view Faith congregation's new church building, where my grandpa attends. Good Shepherd is on the southeast side. St. Peter's, the oldest Wisconsin Synod congregation in the city, is downtown just a couple blocks away from Brauers Home Furnishings. Before heading out of Fond du Lac, I could stop at the city's fourth WELS church, Redeemer. I would not have to drive too far to visit other area congregations: St. Paul's in North Fond du Lac, Grace in Waupun, Mount Zion in Ripon.

St. Luke's, St. Paul's, St. John's, St. Peter's, Faith, Good Shepherd, Redeemer, Grace, Mount Zion. There is quite a diversity in names just in the Fond du Lac area. Maybe we do not always put a lot of thought into why our church has the name it does. Maybe we take the name for granted. During my vicar year in Rockford, Michigan, my bishop, Pastor Tim Gauger, suggested a church history topic for me. He thought it might be interesting to find out why church names have changed over the years. Years ago names such as St._____ and First German dominated the scene. Within the past three years names such as Lamb of God, Victory in Christ, and Star of Bethlehem have appeared. Why the shift in church names?

I want to focus on trends in church names over the past 50 years in the Wisconsin Synod. The research has been done by e-mail and letter, by analyzing lists of church names, and by reading current articles on how to name churches. This paper will cover the topic in three parts: (1) What goes into naming a church, (2) Analysis of new WELS church names in the last half-century, and (3) Conclusions.

1. What goes into naming a church nowadays?

In the last half of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, saint names were most prevalent. This of course had tradition behind it. Roman Catholic churches had been taking on the names of saints for years. It was not uncommon in a community to have the big Catholic St. Mary's or Joseph's or James', a First Baptist or First Presbyterian around the corner, and a St. John's Lutheran down the street. Rural Lutheran churches also used the names of saints. It is hard to say exactly how much thought or planning went into the names of those Lutheran churches, but it is safe to say that the objective was not to canonize a saint. No doubt the thought behind a St. Peter or St. John was the passage, "Consequently, you are...members of God's household, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*" (Eph 2:19-20). The saint names stressed the importance of the Word of God.

Saint names, however, are not popular for new churches these days. In the last two decades, only four new WELS churches used a saint name.

While it may be difficult to understand what went into naming a church years ago, today's criteria for naming a church are well publicized. Lyle Schaller comments, "Ideally the name will be short, easy to spell, simple to pronounce, attractive, and appealing. The name should not carry any negative connotations."¹ I am not sure what Schaller means by "negative connotations," but maybe Church of the Anti-Missourian Brethren would be an example (see the church history notes).

Our synod follows some of the thoughts Schaller expressed. Pastor Harold Hagedorn sent me a worksheet with guidelines for a new mission on how to name a church. It is obvious the emphasis is on keeping the unchurched person in mind. The worksheet states, "A name which creates a good first and lasting impression is: *Catchy, Creative, Indigenous, Related to Purpose, Related to Style.*" Almost as important as the church name is a professionally designed church logo that "fits the character and image of your church." Church name and church logo combine to reach both ears and eyes.

The best way to understand how a new church is named is to look at real life examples. In 1997 seminary graduate Michael Geiger was assigned to exploratory work in Cary, NC. Pastor Geiger said he thought three criteria were important for him in naming the church there: "1. The name would be a witness to people what our church was all about. 2. The name would fit the area we were working in. 3. Something unique."² He chose Tree of Life

¹ Lyle Schaller, *44 Ways to Increase Church Attendance*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 111.

² Michael Geiger, e-mail interview, Feb. 1999.

Lutheran Church. The name is unique. It fits the area, which is wooded with pines, maples, and oaks. Most importantly, it serves as a witness to the church's purpose. Pastor Geiger pointed out how the tree of life forms the bookends of the Bible, in Genesis 2 and Revelation 22. Tree of Life serves as a basic evangelizing tool. The name describes what was lost by man through sin and what was regained for man by Christ. The catch phrase his congregation uses is 2 Peter 3:18: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Seminary graduate Matthew Vogt was assigned the same year as Michael Geiger. Matt was sent to Las Vegas, NV to do exploratory mission work. Pastor Vogt wanted to pick a name "which would be filled with meaning and could serve as a wonderful gospel witness tool."³ His younger brother Tim came up with the name Water of Life. The name obviously fits the desert environment. Water of Life keys off Jesus' statement, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14).

In 1998 Doug Tomhave was assigned to an exploratory mission in Verona outside Madison, Wisconsin. He said, "I wanted to pick a one or two word name that stated a simple message and gave us an opportunity to explain a little bit about ourselves."⁴ He wanted to stay away from saint names because the ELCA and Catholic churches already in town had names

³ Matthew Vogt, personal correspondence, Feb. 1999.

⁴ Doug Tomhave, e-mail interview, Feb. 1999.

like that. He chose Resurrection Lutheran Church. It is our sure Christian hope. He wants to have a logo designed around the name with a Bible passage as a quote.

These three new pastors and new congregations illustrate what goes into naming a Wisconsin Synod church nowadays. The names show creativity, a sense of purpose, and if possible a relation to the surrounding area. It seems the most important consideration is choosing a name that serves as a ready-made witnessing package, both for the pastor as he makes his outreach calls and for the churchgoers who will be telling other people about their new church.

2. Analysis of new WELS church names in the last 50 years.

With an understanding of how churches are currently being named, now it is time to look at trends in church names throughout the last 50 years. For this project I contacted Charles Skeels, the WELS statistician. He sent a 12-page list of all the churches which have been founded in the last 50 years. The list goes year-by-year, gives the name of the congregation, and also gives the location.

The last 50 years have been a time of eager home mission outreach. According to Mr. Skeel's list,

81 churches were started in the 1950's,
137 in the 60's,
208 in the 70's,
109 in the 80's,
80 so far in the 90's.

While looking through the names of the churches decade by decade, I was able to come up with seven categories that cover just about all the bases:

1. Names of saints (primarily apostles).
2. Names that relate to the area (e.g. Cutler Ridge).
3. Names of God (Trinity is the dominant one).
4. Names about the Word (Abiding Word, Sola Scriptura, etc.).
5. Names of Biblical places (Bethel, Gethsemane, Zion, etc.).
6. Names of Christian concepts (Faith, Hope, Grace, Atonement, etc.).
7. Names of the Savior (Christ, Prince of Peace, Lord of Life, Risen Savior, etc.).

In the 1960's 15% of churches were still being named after saints. By the 1990's only 1% of new names were saint names. Wisconsin Synod churches have not jumped at creating names that incorporate the surrounding area. The percentage of churches that do this has remained consistent over the decades—only about 5%. Names of God were popular in the 1950's (11%), but that has steadily declined to 3 or 4% by the 1990's. Names about the Word have not been too popular on the whole, but up to 5% of the 208 new churches in the 1970's used a name about the Word. The split with the Missouri Synod just 10 years earlier may have prompted a sudden interest in names that show faithfulness to the Word.

One of the categories that has slipped steadily over the past 50 years, maybe unfortunately, are names of Biblical places. In the 1950's 15 of 81 new churches were place names from the Bible. If it was Mount Zion, the people

saw their church as the place where God dwelt and where they came to worship him. If it was Gethsemane, it was the place where they came to hear about God's saving will and pray that it be done. If it was Calvary, it was where they came to sit at the foot of their Savior's cross. By the 1990's, however, only two churches had a Biblical location in their name. It is maybe unfortunate that these names have dwindled so much. Their use seemed to reveal a certain amount of Bible knowledge.

One of the two most dominant categories is names of Christian concepts. Faith, Hope, Love, Grace, Redemption, and Atonement are examples. Sometimes the noun is paired with an adjective; for example, Abiding Love and Amazing Grace. Incidentally "abiding" is a popular word for a church. It appears first in the phone book and Yellow Pages. Naming churches after Christian concepts has remained consistent from the 1950's through the 90's. One out of every four churches receives a name like this.

The most dominant category is names of our Savior. Christ, Beautiful Savior, Lord of Life, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, Our Savior, Redeemer, Good Shepherd—the list goes on. Church names that reflect our Savior have increased dramatically over the years. In the 1950's 21% had a name involving the Savior. In the 1980's 49% did (53 out of 109 new churches), and in the 1990's 43% have (34 out of 80).

One type of name that gained attention especially in the 1970's was Shepherd of the.... It got a lot of mileage especially outside of the Midwest.

Churches out west, out east, and down south all have used the name. Pastor Peter Kruschel had this comment:

Certain names or "families" of names are repeated within districts or regions of the country. Most "shepherd" names are outside the upper Midwest, for example, both because the congregations are newer in the saltwater districts and because they sound familiar and familial to people in those districts.⁵

3. Conclusions about church names.

In an attempt to come to some definite conclusions about why there have been trends in church names over the past half-century, it might be beneficial to look at one particular case. As I mentioned above, I spent my vicar year in Rockford, Michigan, at a church named Christ Our Savior. It is interesting to note why that church has that name.

Pastor Gauger explained the reasoning behind it. The name was picked by a woman named Arlene Walski, one of the handful of the people in the core group in the late 1980's. The name stuck and fit very well. It had a certain cadence to it and also formed an acronym (COS). No other WELS church in the region shared that name or a similar one. The most important part of the name, however, was the way it stood out in the community. Rockford is just north of Grand Rapids, perhaps the most Reformed area in the United States. Pastor said he preferred not to have a name like Christ the King or Lord of Lords. He did not necessarily want a name that stressed God's sovereignty or power in that Reformed environment. He liked Christ

⁵ Peter Kruschel, e-mail interview, Feb. 1999.

Our Savior because it stressed the Savior. The name breathes out God's grace in that area. It expresses where that grace is focused—in Christ. It expresses a Savior from sin. It makes a confession: He is *our* Savior.

I use that example because it leads to my conclusions. Why the trend in church names from St._____ to the names we see more often today? The first factor is the religious environment of our nation. Grand Rapids is a unique area. Not many areas of our country have as many people in Christian churches as that area. Yet the WELS church in Rockford had a name that made a statement to its environment. It is a Lutheran church that thrives on bringing God's saving grace and the forgiveness of sins through the means of grace—smack dab in the middle of a religious environment that has little regard for the means of grace.

In other areas of the country, it is not enough today to project the name "Lutheran" and attach a saint's name to the front. That does not say much to a religious environment that does not understand basic Christianity and denominational differences. WELS names today attempt to convey a basic Christian message that serves as a springboard for witnessing. The name brings something the unchurched individual does not have. Pastor Jim Radloff has a fine summary:

It is always appropriate, I believe, to choose a name that speaks a message of Hope and Life to people or which addresses a spiritual need that people might have, even though being spiritually dead they do not realize or recognize the spiritual significance of the name. Names also afford excellent opportunities for witnessing.⁶

⁶ Jim Radloff, e-mail interview, Feb. 1999.

The second factor in the reason for the trends is the advertising industry. Names have become a little more catchy and more creative. A church name seems to come in a package deal with a passage, a slogan and a logo. The name appears on church stationery, newsletters, public advertisements, mass mailings, and many other products. Public image and first impressions have become more of a consideration than in former times.

The third and most important factor for the trends in church names is the message the Wisconsin Synod proclaims. Up to 75% of new WELS churches receives a name that focuses either directly on the Savior, his work, or the result of his work. As home mission work has boomed, the Wisconsin Synod has been especially blessed to proclaim a clear, consistent message in a very unclear, confused and inconsistent society. That message is Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of all our sins. WELS congregations have valued that message so highly they cannot help but name their churches accordingly. I do not want this conclusion to sound simplistic, but analysis of the trends reveals this fact. New WELS churches are increasingly picking names that include Christ and his cross. The Third Article gets attention in church names, but the Second Article is receiving more.

It will be interesting to track where church names go in the next decade or so. No doubt there will be changes in which names become popular and which ones diminish. Much more important than the name, however, is

the message inside. By God's grace, may our Wisconsin Synod churches continue to value and proclaim that message faithfully to the glory of Christ.

There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.

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