

An Amazing Century!*

By John F. Brug

The 20th century undoubtedly brought about more changes in the material life of the world than any other century in history (unless you want to include the centuries of Adam and Noah in the contest, but they belong in a category of their own). This feat took some doing, because the 19th century was a tough act to follow. The 19th century had revolutionized transportation (the steamboat and railroads) and communication (telegraph and telephone). By 1900 the capabilities of electricity and of internal combustion engines had amazed the world and brought civilization to the brink of even more astounding advances. The 19th century had been truly amazing, but it was easily topped by the 20th century - air travel, space travel, harnessing the atom, a revolution in medicine, the computer, to name but a few of the great leaps of progress accomplished in the 20th century. The outward circumstances of human life have changed so drastically in the last two centuries that the material lifestyle of people in 1800 was closer to that of the apostles than to ours. In the 20th century the stately march of progress became a wild dash. People who are alive today have experienced more change than any other generation that ever lived on the earth.

Because Christians are in the world, though not of it, changes in the material environment that surrounds us can have a profound effect on the work of the church. How have the amazing changes of the 20th century affected the work of the church? From the material side of things, how is the work of a WELS pastor or missionary different in 2001 than it was in 1901?

The Demographic Revolution

The demographic situation facing a WELS pastor in the United States in 2001 is in one way almost identical to that in 1901. In 1901 our nation was being flooded with immigrants who were bringing with them many languages, many cultures, and many religions. They were coming faster than the "melting pot" could blend them in. Some citizens were concerned that America's unity would be lost in a Babel of cultures and languages. But the "melting pot" kept melting, and the immigrants became Americans without a hyphen.

Conditions are pretty much the same in 2001 as they were in 1901. The only significant change is the WELS' position in the spectrum of the cultural rainbow. In 1901 we were part of the foreign horde that was alarming "real Americans" with their resistance to the English language and their foreign ways. We had difficulty communicating the gospel to many of our neighbors because we in WELS were not assimilated into American culture enough to swim in the mainstream. German-Americans would experience sharp hostility because of their desire for continued bilingual education. During both World Wars German books were burned. In 2001 German Lutherans in America are in the mainstream linguistically, politically, and socially. Americans claiming German ancestry are by far the largest ethnic group in America (58 million). Lutherans are the fourth largest religious denomination. But now we have difficulty communicating the gospel to some of our neighbors because they have not yet melted into the mainstream linguistically, economically, and socially. The mission demographic problem is the same in 2001 as it was in 1901, but we are looking at the problem from the other side of the barrier. In 1901 we were in the early stages of the struggle over how much and how fast we needed to switch to English in order to retain our own children and to reach our neighbors with the gospel. In 2001 we are in the relatively early stages of the decision concerning how much and for how long we need to use immigrant languages to reach our neighbors.

* This is the third of a series of four articles reflecting on change in the life of the church as we move from the 20th to the 21st century. The first two articles considered doctrinal and outreach challenges facing WELS at the turn of the century. The final article, which will appear in the next issue of the Quarterly, will consider changes anticipated in the 21st century. [For links to these three articles, see <http://www.wls.wels.net/library/Essays/Authors/b/BrugAmazing1/BrugAmazing1.htm> - WLS Library Staff]

There is no evidence that the American melting pot has stopped melting. It merely has a lot of new ingredients to work on. Governmental efforts to slow up the melting process through a more prolonged bilingual approach to education seem to be faltering, and the pendulum is swinging back toward more rapid assimilation of immigrants' children into the linguistic mainstream. Immigrants receive considerably more help with rapid assimilation in 2001 than they did in 1901. The rate of social, economic, and marital integration of Hispanic and Asian immigrants into the American mainstream will very likely be much faster than the integration of German Lutheran immigrants was a century ago. It seems unlikely that the bulk of Asian and Hispanic immigrants coming to America will become blocs in a coalition of minorities that becomes the new majority in America. Much more likely is the possibility that within a generation these immigrants will be a part of the mainstream majority, with immigrants of Hispanic background replacing Germans as the largest single component in the melting pot. The lessening of racial and religious bias will speed the integration of such immigrants. In the 19th century Irish, Italian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants faced as much or more prejudice as immigrant groups do today. Which is the more likely occurrence - that a WELS member in 1911 would marry an Italian Catholic or even a German Catholic for that matter, or that a WELS member in 2011 will marry the son or daughter of an immigrant from Asia or Latin America? In the United States 65% of Japanese-Americans marry non-Japanese. The figures are also quite high for other immigrant groups. Projections are that by the end of this century nearly 40% of African-Americans will be listing multi-racial identity on their census forms. It seems likely that the melting pot today is melting faster, not slower. Even special cases, such as Muslim immigrants, who may be very resistant to religious integration, will likely be integrated economically, politically, and, to a degree, socially. How long the process will take depends largely on how long the stream of immigrants is allowed to flow and at what volume, but studies of immigrant children in general show that the impulse to assimilate is as strong today as it was 100 years ago.

All this, of course, has an effect on how we go about reaching our new neighbors with the gospel. If this generation of immigrants follows the well-established pattern of dispersing from ethnic enclaves into mixed communities as they become more affluent, it seems that, long term, the best way to reach immigrants with the gospel is to integrate immigrants and their children into existing WELS congregations which are located in neighborhoods that are receiving many immigrants. Some use of immigrant languages for the immigrants themselves and, in cases where there is a very heavy concentration of one ethnic group in a neighborhood, a temporary ethnic "congregation-within-a-congregation" can serve as a bridge while the melting pot continues to work, but many neighborhoods with a high concentration of immigrants have such a diversity that linguistically distinct congregations for each group will not be an option.

One major change in the demographics of missions is, of course, the sheer number of people to be reached. This is largely due to the revolution in the prevention and treatment of disease that was one of the major advances of the 20th century. In developed countries lifespan increased from 50 to 75 years in the last century. Gains in some developing countries were even more dramatic. In 1901 the population of the USA was about 76 million; in 2001 it is about 275 million. In 1901 the estimated population of the world was 1.6 billion; in 2001 it is more than 6 billion. In 1901 the communicant membership of WELS was about 100,000; in 2001 it is about 300,000. Intense urbanization in all parts of the world is another significant shift in mission demographics that confronts the church (in 1900 42% of Americans worked in agriculture, in 2000 2%).

The Political Revolution

At the start of the 20th century things looked bright for democracy. Many were speculating even then that the 20th century would be the American century. The world's most powerful monarchy, the British Empire, was a democratic society. Some of the most despotic of the remaining monarchies (the Russian, the Turkish) seemed to be on their last legs. The 20th century brought some bitter disappointments (tyrannies in Russia, China, and Germany that unleashed horror on an unprecedented scale), but at the end of the 20th century there is again some guarded optimism for the strengthening of democracy in the world.

The greatest political revolution of the 20th century has been the fall of colonialism. In 1914 Europeans, especially the British, French, and Russian empires along with an assortment of other powers, controlled 84% of the earth. Most colonial empires are now reduced to a few scattered enclaves. This has had a dramatic effect on world missions. In 1901 missionaries could pretty much "follow the flag." The end of colonialism has closed some doors, but it has opened the way to a greater commitment toward nourishing sister churches around the world, rather than founding daughters.

The Social Revolution

The most profound social change affecting the work of the church in America (and in many other parts of the world as well) is the decline of the stability of the family. Far fewer children grow up in stable, two-parent homes than in 1901. In the past many children lost a parent through early death, but usually the family remained intact and stable. Often, a new, stable family unit was formed through remarriage of parents who had lost their partner. In addition, the loss of a parent through early death does not normally have the same long-term negative effect on a child as the departure of a parent through divorce or desertion. Even secular society is starting to become alarmed at the long-term negative effects of the loss of family stability, but it seems clear that this will remain a serious problem for the church in the foreseeable future.

The importance of group loyalties has greatly diminished in our society in the last century. The acceleration of this move away from group-centered society toward an individual-centered society also has had a predominantly negative effect on the work of the church. This breakdown is, however, a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes it easier for the church to do outreach among people of other religious and ethnic groups, but it also makes it easier for people of Lutheran background to jump to other groups as they adopt a more "shop-around" attitude in respect to church affiliation.

The Communications Revolution

The first great communication advances of the 20th century had a less profound effect on the work of the church than they did in other areas of life. Radio and television made it possible to rapidly spread a message to a large number of people, but they have not had a major impact on the day-to-day work of the church. Though some radio and TV evangelists have achieved fame and fortune, radio and television have not had great impact as outreach tools in most of our congregations or in our synod as a whole. They have not been particularly effective in world missions. Broadcasting has served more as a supplement to the worship life of the church than as a replacement for personal evangelism and face-to-face contact. Movies and videos are nice teaching tools for the church, but they still are used largely in settings that allow personal contact and discussion.

It appears that the internet will have a much greater impact on the outreach of the church than either radio or television. The Internet will probably be the most significant new communication tool for the church since the printing press. Through broadcasting and publications WELS has always generated a certain number of contacts from people outside our fellowship seeking information about Christianity or about our church, but these have been quite limited in number. Though precise comparative figures are not available, it appears that there will be a rather sizeable increase in the number of such contacts. The internet makes people much more willing to inquire about our beliefs or to engage in dialogue about our beliefs. It also makes it more difficult for anti-Christian societies to restrict the flow of information to their people. Again, this is a two-edged sword, since every cult and weird religious philosophy is also sowing confusion over the internet. It remains to be seen whether this increased number of contacts can lead to ongoing spiritual relationships.

The communications revolution has also had a great impact on the lives of foreign missionaries. At the beginning of the century it could easily take four months to complete an exchange of letters between missionaries on a distant field and their loved ones or mission boards in the US. Today, with e-mail, people often expect an answer in four hours rather than four months (whether this is an unmixed blessing we will let

missionaries and their boards decide). With the advent of cell phones, it is often possible for a contact man sitting at a desk in the United States to talk to overseas missionaries even when they are sitting on a train traveling to a remote mission station. A stateside pastor with a cell phone can be reached wherever he happens to be (again, this is not an unmixed blessing).

The Transportation Revolution

When the "WELS Forty-niners" set off on their exploratory trip to southern Africa at mid-century, the voyage from New York to Capetown, South Africa, took thirty days. The return trip via a series of flights on KLM from Johannesburg to Detroit was three weeks shorter than the voyage over, but it involved fueling stops or layovers in Livingstone, Rhodesia; Leopoldville, Congo; Kano, Nigeria; Rome, Italy; Amsterdam, Netherlands; London, England; Glasgow, Scotland; Reykjavik, Iceland; and New York. Today trips from Chicago to Zambia or Malawi routinely involve two over-night flights with the possibility of a day on the town in London in between. In the 19th century missionaries often left for foreign fields with the expectation that they might never see home again or at best two or three times in their life (not to mention the fact that in the 19th century accepting a call to certain fields in Africa was likely a death sentence due to malaria and other diseases). Today missionaries even in the most distant fields can routinely visit the US every two or three years.

Though less dramatic, the effects of the transportation revolution on the home scene have nevertheless been profound. Though there were circuit riders in the 19th century, the kind of home mission expansion that WELS experienced in the 1960s and 70s, in which missionaries regularly started new mission congregations 100-200 miles from their home base and served them on a weekly or every-other-week basis, would have been unthinkable without the revolution in personal transportation brought about by the automobile. This revolution has also made it possible for regional congregations to serve isolated confessional Lutherans, with some members of congregations regularly traveling 50 miles or more one-way to attend worship every week.

Without a doubt the 20th century has been an amazing century, It has revolutionized life on earth. Will the 21st century top the 20th century, producing even more dramatic changes in the circumstances in which the church works? This will be the subject of the final installment of our change-of-the century series, which will appear in the next issue of the Quarterly.

Watershed Events of the 20th Century

<i>1901</i>	First trans-Atlantic wireless transmission
<i>1903</i>	Flight of the Wright Brothers
<i>1909</i>	First regular radio broadcasts in America
	The invention of plastic
<i>1912</i>	Movie attendance reaches 5 million a day
<i>1913</i>	Henry Ford and mass production of the automobile
<i>1920</i>	Women gain the right to vote in the USA
<i>1921</i>	Margaret Sanger and the American Birthcontrol League
<i>1928</i>	Penicillin, the wonder drug
<i>1940</i>	ENIAC, the first computer
<i>1941</i>	Regular television broadcasting begins in the USA
	First jet plane
<i>1945</i>	The atomic bomb
<i>1953</i>	The structure of DNA discovered
<i>1960</i>	The Pill
<i>1961</i>	The first man in space, Yuri Gagarin
<i>1963</i>	The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan
<i>1969</i>	Man on the moon
<i>1971</i>	The first e-mail
<i>1977</i>	The first mass-marketed computers
<i>1978</i>	Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby
<i>1991</i>	The world-wide web
<i>1997</i>	The cloning of Dolly, the sheep