

SHEPHERD OF THE LAKES
WELS Comes to Fairmont, Minnesota

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Every church, no matter how large or small, has a unique beginning. Though some may have a more abundant supply of interesting detail than others, each one can still tell its own special story. Shepherd of the Lakes in Fairmont, Minnesota is no exception. This mission congregation located in south-central Minnesota town ten miles from the Iowa border on U.S. I-90 has a brief, yet colorful background, one which I was eager to explore. My eagerness did not result from someone handing me a crumpled piece of paper with the church's title on it, taken from a grab-bag of topics for a church history paper; rather, I chose this subject because of personal reasons. For starters, my father's first teaching call sent him to St. Paul's, Fairmont, the huge Missouri Synod church; a church which played an important role in the events leading up to the founding of Shepherd of the Lakes. Therefore there is a small, family connection with the city of Fairmont. Along the same lines, another personal reason which influenced my choice was that a few close relatives were instrumental in starting the mission, and I could easily appeal to them to send me some information. Finally, a third reason which prompted this paper stemmed from a question I had often asked myself whenever I visited Fairmont: why wasn't the Wisconsin Synod in this significant and sizable town of 13,000? St. James, Darfur, Butterfield--small towns to the north all had WELS churches; why hadn't the WELS travelled a few mile markers to the south to establish a church? This curiosity, as well as any personal contact I have with Fairmont led me to do a little digging, and here is the result. And so that the following x number of pages won't be a mere rambling record of

important dates(though there will be a few), I have ^hosen to narrow down the scope of this paper to deal primarily with the events leading up to the founding of this first WELS church in Fairmont. Why did Shepherd of the Lakes begin when it did?

I. WHY NOT EARLIER?

In the fall of 1976, the WELS mission held its first service. Lutheranism reached Fairmont in 1883 when H. J. Mueller congregated St. Paul's, Missouri Synod. A simple subtraction problem reveals that Wisconsin followed Missouri ^{almost} 103 years later, ~~more than~~ a century. There were valid reasons, however, for the "delay." One of them (even unbeknown to me after 20+ years in Southern Minnesota) was that there was a tacit agreement between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods which restricted certain areas from each other. This valid, but ^rperhaps never documented "Gentlemen's Agreement" in the days of the Old Synodical Conference dictated that the Wisconsin Synod should stay north of Highway 60 and Missouri stay south. This east-west highway bisected the southern portion of Minnesota, halfway between New Ulm and Fairmont. Since WELS monopolized New Ulm, and because Missouri was strong in Fairmont and surrounding ^ucountry, the handshake was made. That this was not a watered-down consent can be demonstrated by the fact that when Missouri Synod chose to move to New Ulm in the late 1940's and early 50's, certain tension and hard feelings arose in the Wisconsin Synod. To illustrate even further that this agreement was for real, Shepherd of the Lakes itself was the first WELS church to step over that dividing line called Highway 60. Therefore it was the first WELS church in this very Lutheran area. This trespass, however, did not really sever

the agreement on our part, for the dividing line was dissolved when the Wisconsin Synod dissolved its relationship with Missouri in 1961. Prior to that break, though, we can understand why there was no WELS church in Fairmont. There wasn't supposed to be; or have to be, because of Missouri's established St. Paul's Lutheran. This is reason number one why WELS is new in Fairmont, Minnesota.

But even after the break between Wisconsin and Missouri, fifteen years elapsed before Shepherd of the Lakes sprung up. We can cite another reason for the "delay," if you wish to call it that. As mentioned in the introduction and just a few seconds ago, St. Paul's Lutheran strongly contributed a determining factor as to when Shepherd of the Lakes got started.

A major reason why St. Paul's played a role was because of its conservatism. It had always been that way. Even after the Synodical Conference breakup in 1961 WELS members moving to Fairmont had their memberships "transferred," or more properly, "released" and sent to St. Paul's. So conservative was St. Paul's even in the early seventies that other people within Missouri warned families moving to Fairmont to watch out for St. Paul's conservatism and dissenting (with the Synod) views. Such conservatism earmarked not only its members, but of course its pastors. ~~Pastor~~ Otto F. Krause (1945-66) certainly was of the conservative stripe, and his successor, Vernon Harley (1967-83) was perhaps more doctrinally conscious. It was under the latter that St. Paul's gained publicity as being the "strict" church, and it is his first ten years of his pastorate that we wish to review so that we can get on with starting Shepherd of the Lakes.

Vernon Harley was installed July 9, 1967. Two years later, when the newly elected president of the Synod, Dr. Jacob A.O. Preus declared that "he could live with ALC fellowship," Pastor Harley and his congregation reacted with great concern. On August 25, 1969, St. Paul's entered a "State of Confession," or "Protest" against the Synod that would continue for eight years. This "state" was in essence a warning that if doctrinal conditions did not improve within the Synod, separation would be very likely. This separation, always imminent, never took place. The events during this "State of Confession" will tell us why.

In the following March, 1970, Dr. Preus himself and Dr. Lieske of the Minnesota South District made the first of two personal appearances at the congregation and appealed to the members not to withdraw from Missouri. The congregation at this first meeting had mixed reactions, but in October of the same year Pastor Harley issued three important options: 1) They could leave or stay with Missouri; 2) Stay with the Synod even though errors continued, and thus he would feel obligated to resign; or 3) Divide, with part of the congregation staying with the Synod, the others leaving. Nothing definite was decided...yet.

The years 1971-73 for St. Paul's only intensified the doctrinal storm with the Synod. A most significant event occurred when a motion was forwarded in 1971 that called for termination with the Synod by August 1, 1973, if the 1973 Synod Convention did not begin to resolve the issues. By this time those issues not only focused attention on the ALC fellowship problem, but an equally disturbing problem vexed the Synod: what to do with those people (pastors and professors) who advocated the historical-

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critical method of Biblical interpretation, a method which questioned the inerrancy of the Bible. Another key event which raised some eyebrows during this year of 1971 happened when Pastor Harley and a few members attended an FAL (Federation of Authentic Lutherans) meeting in Libertyville, Illinois, in November. This ^{et} determined step which Pastor Harley and members took certainly exhibited their great concern over the issues which troubled Missouri and their church at the time.

But if there was one pivotal year in St. Paul's history, 1973 gets the vote. Remember: August 1 of this year was the date scheduled for terminating fellowship with the Synod if a major shakedown didn't occur. Not a major, but an acceptable shakedown did take place at the July convention in New Orleans. Decisive action undermined the "historical-critical method's" stance in Missouri; Dr. Preus's paper "A Statement on Scriptural and Confessional Principles" was finally accepted after years of rejection; and in general, Missouri seemed to be heading down the conservative track once again, though slowly. These measures taken in New Orleans were, of course, quick to hit the eager ears of St. Paul's members. Consequently, on July 31, one day before the target date for separation, St. Paul's voted to remain in the Synod. This "close-call" would really be the closest they would come in breaking with the Synod. So that I don't leave anyone wondering about the final years of the protest, let me add that when the Synod seemed to be moving in the right orthodox step in the mid 70's, and when it as a Synod protested the fellowship with the ALC in the 1977 convention at Dallas, St. Paul's was satisfied enough to drop its own protest late that year.

This brief (I tried, anyway) recount of St. Paul's history in the 1970's I felt necessary to include as a backdrop in the Shepherd of the Lakes' history. First of all, we can see why WELS members or even very concerned Missourians within St. Paul's wanted to wait to see what course it would take, for between the years 1969 to 1973 the possibility existed that St. Paul's could have become an independent congregation. But when the vote clearly indicated that St. Paul's would stay with the Synod, it forced WELS members and concerned Missourians to evaluate for themselves whether to stay or to leave. Certainly for two families, as the St. Paul's Centennial book reports, there was no choice but to leave. Later, other former WELS members were also released when the interest for a WELS mission grew and solidified.

From the standpoint of our Synod, it was furthermore easy to see why the situation at St. Paul's was important. Certainly it was in our Synod's best interests to watch the future of St. Paul's closely. On a more local level, the Minnesota District Mission Board held the responsibility to keep an eye on the situation; and according to Pastor John Miller, now pastor of the mission, the Board's action to move ahead with exploratory services in Fairmont was indeed directly related to the developments in the neighboring Missouri church. These were the primary reasons, then, why WELS did not move into Fairmont immediately after the parting of Wisconsin and Missouri in 1961.

II. EARLY BEGINNINGS

Just as 1973 was an important year for St. Paul's, it also can be marked as a memorable year in the history of our mission. It was the year that the interest for a new church began to bub-

ble. Alerted to this interest were two pastors in particular. The^{first} was Pastor John Miller, formerly pastor at St. Matthew's in Butterfield, about forty miles away, and now pastor of Shepherd of the Lakes. The second was Pastor Robert Kant, chairman of the Minnesota District Mission Board and pastor in S_enborn, Minnesota.

Discovering who had the first real contact with interested people in Fairmont is difficult to determine. Let us say that both Pastor Kant and Pastor Miller worked together to get things rolling. As Pastor Miller recalls, his first communication with anyone in the area of Fairmont was with a person from Ceylon, Mn., a little village southwest of Fairmont. This person named Winters and a relative visited Miller's congregation in Butterfield because they were concerned about a new, young Missouri Synod pastor in their home church. In talking with these Sunday visitors, Pastor Miller obtained a list of other people who lived around Fairmont who expressed like-minded concerns. This conversation Pastor Miller simply relayed to Pastor Kant who was responsible ~~fr~~_o this southwest section of the state.

Apparently, though, this was not Pastor Kant's first information concerning the Fairmont area. He had already accumulated a small list of names from other pastors in the district who had members move into the area. In 1973, Pastor Kant himself conducted a survey of Fairmont and also chatted with Pastor Harley of St. Paul's. To his surprise, Pastor Harley encouraged a WELS church in the area, stating that perhaps it would stir up some conservative thought among the people and area LCMS pastors. Certainly this welcome and the list of prospective

members in and around Fairmont seemed to be enough momentum to start exploratory services.

But not so fast. 1973 also brought some disheartening news: an appeal to the Minnesota District ^{Mission} Board to approve the exploratory work was refused. Apparently the list of names was considered too small to direct funding for manpower and time which exploratory work demanded. For now, the thoughts of a new church in Fairmont was put on hold.

III. 1974-1975

During these years of "limbo," so to speak, another Pastor's efforts ought to be noted. Pastor Eugene Roecker, pastor of St. Matthew's in Butterfield after Pastor Miller took a call away from there, continued to contact the folks in Fairmont. During these years Pastor Roecker even conducted a few Bible classes in Sherburn, a town eight miles west of Fairmont. In his return letter to me, Pastor Roecker noted that besides the few people in Fairmont, he also kept in touch with families in the immediate area: one couple in Welcome, one in Dunell, one in Northrop, and two couples and one individual from Blue Earth. How many visits, phone calls, Bible classes he held with this "dispersion" he did not say; however, by the time he began services in Fairmont in 1976, a 25-30 person potential was possible. Because of these numbers, no formal canvass was made when the church began. During this time also, members who were interested in the possibility of a church retained their membership with their former churches, joined Pastor Roecker's Butterfield congregation; or in the case of two families,

travelled sixty miles to the north and joined either St. John's or St. Paul's church in New Ulm.

IV. 1976: PROGRESS!!

1976 was the next notable year and was to be the most significant year for Shepherd of the Lakes. It was the year of their true beginning as a specific congregation of believers. In the report to the GBHM (General Board for Home Missions), Pastor Kant stated that New Ulm pastors once more pleaded to the Minnesota District Board to look into the Fairmont situation. Obviously their members from Fairmont had given them information concerning Fairmont's potential. Furthermore, the report listed three families and three individuals who were requesting service in that area, and two couples had even offered their homes as meeting places. These people were certainly demonstrating their eagerness to work for a mission! This eagerness and Pastor Kant's appeal combined to make headway. In this official report labeled "The Minnesota District Mission Board Request to GBHM for Status/Manpower," dated 4/13/76, I can finally offer some concrete numbers and names involved with the beginning phases of the mission. By the date above, the number of souls of interested people were: 18 total; communicants, 11; families, 7. This group represented the number committed ^{to} in starting a WELS church. Prospective numbers listed were: 3 for communicants, and 2 families. The original families and individuals ought here be mentioned: Mr. and Mrs. Paul Nolte; Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Blomker and family; Mr. and Mrs. L.D. Hale; Mrs. Rubie and her child; Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Deterling and family. Individual committed members included Miss Sandy Mueller, Miss Marshal Bohm, Miss Loretta Larson.

Three specific families (not named) were considered the strong nucleus of the group and one family, Mr. and Mrs. Paul Nolte, were the first people contacted in Fairmont and continued to be the primary contact people throughout the beginning years.

This second request to the GBHM fared much better than its previous attempt and dismissal in 1973. The numbers given the MDB and GBHM proved to be quite sufficient to initiate worship services. Already in the early fall of the same year, 1976, Pastor Roecker began to advance notice to the group that services would soon be conducted. In his records for September 29 he comments that 7 letters regarding the first service went out to his contacts. Twenty-one days later, another letter went out that broadcast to the group that the Minnesota District Board had by telephone approved of exploratory status. Three days later, on the evening of October 23, the first "official" service of the newborn mission was held in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Nolte. I called this service the first "official" one because Pastor Roecker felt that it was. However, from other information I received it appears that another home service prior to this one had been held at a trailer house in Sherburn. To close out this most eventful year, the GBHM also signaled the go ahead in November to proceed with exploratory status. A new church was beginning to take form!

V... 1977 and On

With the new year for this tiny mission came new and various blessings from the Lord. On February 10, Pastor Roecker received in writing the exploratory status for the congregation.

Nine days later, Pastor Roecker obtained a basement meeting room in the vacant Fairmont Sentinal^e newspaper building, where regular services could be conducted. On Sunday evening, March 6th, seventeen people worshipped in this new and unique setting. This would be their free-of-charge meeting place for the next one and a half years. In the winter months, the group gathered in this rather small room at 7 p.m. Sunday evenings, while during the rest of the year regular Sunday services at 11:15 were held. Pastor Poecker commented that these times proved ideal for him, for he often would eat lunch at the local cafe just down the street and talk either with the members of the nucleus or invite visitors to join him for lunch. In this way he could be better in touch with the pulse of the mission congregation and could acquaint himself with prospective members. Likewise, it also provided the worshippers an opportunity to get to know theirⁿ itinerant^e pastor.

Perhaps I could also at this time inject my own experience during this stage of the mission. Having relatives in Fairmont whom we often visited, I had the opportunity to worship one Sunday in that converted meeting room of the Sentinal^e building, and I consider it one of the most unique services I've been to. If my memory serves me correctly, no forty-four rank organ or even eighty-eight key piano led us in song (I'm absolutely sure about the organ; the piano not so certain); no mikes, one or two ushers at the most. To say that this hour was different than the one spent with 3-400 people worshipping in our large church at home would be an understatement. But to say that this service was not edifying or uplifting would be a false statement.

To be sure, at the time I probably did feel a bit self-conscious; after all, it was impossible for others not to notice the 6-7 new people (i.e. my family) in the service that morning. But as I reflect on the hour now, I realize even more now how special this service was. These Christians were demonstrating how truly concerned they were about hearing the pure Word of God, and if that meant meeting in the basement of a newspaper building, that suited them just fine. It was this type of Spirit-motivated interest that moved these Christians to start Shepherd of the Lakes.

As was mentioned before, these exploratory services in the vacant building lasted for about one and a half years. Already at the beginning of this term in March, 1977, a plea was forwarded to the GBHM asking for Mission Status. But, as with the exploratory plea, history repeated itself and the first one was denied. A year and one month past until the announcement was heralded that Mission Status had been granted. Now the group could formally organize. The response was quick; for at the May 8th meeting, the group formally changed into a congregation; and, as with any congregation, it needed a proper name.

In anticipation of the formal organization, the selection of a name posed little trouble. Pastor Roecker had already given the instructions to draw up a list of names that would be voted on once the organization occurred. The two frontrunning names were: St. Matthias and Shepherd of the Lakes. Pastor Roecker had submitted the latter with good reason: Fairmont was famous for its five connecting lakes (George, Sisseton, Budd Hall and Amber--I memorized their order when I was a kid); but more importantly, Jesus had shown himself to be the Good Shep-

by leading a small group of sheep to form a tiny flock. To his surprise, at the same May 8th, 1978 meeting, the men consented to that name.

Soon after this consequential meeting, other blessings from the Good Shepherd flowed in. A brief month later, the congregation was authorized to purchase a vacant Baptist church building, a solid, deep reddish-brown brick building built by the ALC in 1930. In October, the purchasing paperwork was finalized at the cost of about \$47,000. This building I have also worshipped in, and to my first impressions it certainly appeared to be a perfect-sized blessing for the new congregation. On November 12, this young, enthusiastic congregation consisting of thirty-three souls and twenty-three communicants dedicated this house of God. Certainly 1978 had given these people an ample supply of the Good Shepherd's work and accordingly they gave thanks for it.

In 1979, the Good Shepherd continued to lead this mission by providing their first resident shepherd, Pastor Robert Wilke, a graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. His assignment was due to the Mission Board's decision to grant manpower to the mission on May 9. On June 12, the assignment came to him, and his ordination/installation followed on July 22. Pastor Wilke remained at Fairmont until he received and accepted a call to Columbus, Wisconsin in March, 1984. Pastor John Miller, the first pastor to come in contact with Fairmont, is ironically now back in Fairmont, serving the mission.

As with any mission congregation, challenges welcomed the first resident pastor and the first parishioners. During the early years housing was in demand for the new pastor; remodeling ^{needed?}

needed much attention; ^{after} furniture was needed ^{for} on the bare chancel, and so on. These problems would with prayer and congregational support be taken care of, but of course they would take time. Growth of a mission was and is also of great concern; especially in Fairmont, where the 1800 member St. Paul's looms not more than a mile away, whose establishment well influences the town. According to Pastor Wilke's account, by the first of the year in 1983 Shepherd of the lakes had expanded to fifty communicants; by the end of the ^a same year nine more were added. The final figures which I received mark not a significant but yet a steady growth: sixty-seven communicants and three less than a hundred total members, as of May, 1986.

This is where I chose to break off with this already verbose account of the Shepherd's founding. I deliberately summarized the last seven or eight years in order not to digress from the original plan of this paper. That plan was to focus on how the church really came into existence; the reasons, the general context; why it started when it did. Hopefully I have ^a satisfactorily acquainted the reader with the causes. The questions are answered in my mind. Originally I had thought that the congregation resulted from an exodus from the nearby Missouri Synod church. Though the smallest nucleus of the mission were those disgruntled by Missouri Synod, by far the majority of the congregation consisted of an accumulation of WELS members in the area. There was simply nothing around, except to the North. To be fair, though, the original plea for a mission did come from the Missourians.

There is yet one final thought. As any reader can see, I

presented this paper from a "pastoral" viewpoint, since most of my material was mailed by the pastors involved. I felt this to be the more objective way to proceed, and perhaps the more practical, since I knew half of the pastors and had their numbers and addresses at my fingertips. I add this comment because I realize that pastors are not the only instruments the Lord uses in starting a mission. A mission needs people: a mission IS people, a priesthood of believers working together to the glory of God. Had there been no concerned Christians in the Fairmont area, there would not have been Shepherd of the Lakes. If I omitted any names, and I know I did, it was not to de-emphasize anyone's part in establishing this mission. May God be thanked for both pastors and parishoners who thought it necessary to establish Shepherd of the Lakes.

My personal thanks to:

Pastors:

John Miller
Robert Kant
Robert Wilke
Eugene Roecker

Relatives:

Mr. and Mrs. Paul Nolte
Mrs. Roger (Aunt Char) Miedtke
Prof. Howard Wessel, my father

Addendum: All material was supplied by letter or phone. The special material on St. Paul's Lutheran Church was supplied by Mrs. Roger Miedtke. It was taken from St. Paul's Centennial Book, 1883-1983.