

WELS in the Inner-City

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The Wisconsin Synod is not an urban church body. Even today, after the vast migration to the cities, WELS remains a small-town Synod. A recent study reported that 67% of WELS members live in towns of 50,000 or less. Thus our Synod was rather late in facing inner-city affairs. Because of the way our Synod grew, we had no congregations in the Detroit or Chicago metropolitan area until the 40's and 50's. The congregations developed on the fringes, far removed from the center of the city. Thus to this day there are relatively few congregations in our Synod that are directly affected by the changing neighborhoods and deteriorating housing that are generally associated with the inner city. Most Wisconsin Synod people would know nothing at all about the problems and challenges facing inner-city churches except for what they read in church and local newspapers.

The one exception to the general situation existed in the city of Milwaukee. Here is where the Synod was founded. Here was a large concentration of German-speaking people who organized Lutheran congregations by the dozens. Houses, flats, apartments, cottages built one on top of the other packed so many people into a one-block area that large congregations flourished within blocks of one another. This is where the Wisconsin Synod began to feel the realities of inner-city life.

The minority population (Black and Hispanic) of Milwaukee was traditionally very small. But in the twenty years that followed World War II that changed dramatically. In the 50's and 60's a black wave swept through the north side of Milwaukee and toppled Wisconsin Synod congregations like bowling pins.

There was no "open housing" in those days. Block busting was rather the way of life. White home owners held on to their property for dear life. To sell to a black was to earn the eternal enmity of neighbors who had been friends for years. Once the first black-owned home appeared on the block, the rest rushed to sell before their property became worthless, which action inevitably rendered their property practically worthless. White Lutherans evacuated their old neighborhoods in droves, leaving their churches behind. Under those circumstances these Lutheran congregation had two alternatives, relocate or die. There were some of each. Some built new houses of worship in outlying areas where many of their members were living. Some could find no place to relocate, and merged with existing congregations. And some stayed put until fear of the "neighborhood", distance, age and illness reduced the congregation to a site that could no longer support a church building and pastor. So they sold the property to a thriving black congregation, and went wherever they could find a church home. Of course, the true story was a little different for each congregation. I am speaking in generalities here. But the fact of the matter was that the inner-city neighborhood could no longer support a white Lutheran church. The WELS congregations that no longer function at their original Milwaukee location include: (in alphabetical order) Bethel, Bethesda, Divine Charity, Ephrata, Saron, and St. Matthew's.

The fact that these congregations could not survive was not necessarily due to any lack of dedication on the part of their members or their pastor. In the first place serious efforts were made to win prospects from the black community. But these efforts enjoyed little success if any, partly because white Lutherans knew little about doing mission work among blacks, partly because most of these developments took place under the social climate that prevailed before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. In those days segregation was the way of life, not only in

housing but also in every other aspect of social life, including congregational life. For the most part blacks and whites chose to keep to themselves. Thus it was not considered “normal” for whites and blacks to attend church together. If a black Christian sought to attend a white church, he was politely (I hope) told to go down the street where he would find “his own kind of people worshipping.

This was not necessarily done in a spirit of maliciousness. Many whites sincerely felt that blacks would not be content in a white congregation. On the other hand, white church members held the same fears as white neighbors. If blacks started coming to their church, many of their “less enlightened” fellow members would take themselves and their money elsewhere. Thus blacks were instructed not to come to white churches. And most were probably content with that. However, the blacks had no choice in the matter. It was a case of well-meaning whites deciding for blacks what was best for blacks. If the blacks agreed, that was OK. If they did not agree, that was too bad, for the blacks! Although the whites for the most part thought that segregation was best for both races, they did not thereby deny their Christian responsibility toward the black race. The Lord of the Church had commanded that the Gospel be preached to all nations, and that included the black race. Thus white Lutherans made a serious effort to share their Gospel with the black community.

It was almost like foreign mission work when German Lutherans from the Synodical Conference opened mission congregations in rural black communities in Alabama and Mississippi. That is not really part of the Inner-city story, so it will not be told in detail here. But the black mission work in the South led to the establishment of a seminary for black pastors, which accounts for most of the black pastors serving in the Missouri Synod today, and also Pastor Henry Grigsby, the only black pastor in the first 135 years of Wisconsin Synod history.

White Lutherans also had their eyes opened to mission opportunities in their own cities in the North. Thus a number of black missions were established in the 1950’s and perhaps earlier. There was a St. Philip’s in Toledo, a St. Tutus in Detroit, a St. Philip’s in Minneapolis and a St. Philip’s in Milwaukee. It was not that Lutherans didn’t want to share the Gospel with blacks, it was just that they didn’t want to share their churches with them. Today that seems totally reprehensible, but then it was not seen as an offense to the Gospel, at least not by the white Lutherans, since segregation was the way of life.

Later on white Lutherans did recognize what they had done, and in some cases tried to correct the error. But not too successfully. Some mission boards decided to close the black missions, since the black Lutherans could have and should have been able to worship at the neighboring white congregations. But the corrections proved worse than the error. Black Lutherans weren’t any more keen on being forced into white congregations than they were on being kept out of them by force. In one case the black mission died, and very few of those members were reclaimed by the neighboring congregations. In another case, the black congregation continued to assemble until they found another synod, the Wisconsin Synod, which would provide them with the help they needed, and thus Zoar Lutheran Church of Detroit was born.

So it was in the WELS prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s. We were an integrated Synod. Among our 350,000 baptized members were about 500 blacks. 80 to 90 percent of them in two congregations, St. Philip’s of Milwaukee and Zoar of Detroit. The situation might very well have remained the same to this day, if it had not been for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

God's Word requires obedience to the government, even a totalitarian government. Thus Wisconsin Synod people in general disapproved of the non-violent civil disobedience tactics employed by King and his followers. With conscience toward God we could not condone deliberate disobedience of the law, even if the law was unfair. And perhaps King could have accomplished his goals without creating the tensions that led to violence in the South. But the Wisconsin Synod heartily approved of the resulting Civil Rights Act which guaranteed by law equal rights to black citizens. If some did disapprove, the new law was nevertheless a law that Christians were required to obey under the Fourth Commandment.

The Civil Rights Act together with the Civil Rights Movement drastically altered the social climate to the area of black-white relations. The old prejudices did not die. But suddenly segregation was no longer the "in" thing. A social gathering was not considered complete unless there was at least a token black representation in the group.

This change in the social climate was a breath of hope for inner-city congregations who had to integrate or die. The government now made discrimination illegal, even as God had made it "illegal" long ago. The new law swept away the rationalizations by which segregation was not considered discriminatory. White Lutherans were now free to work in earnest to win black members for their congregations. And their black neighbors could begin to believe that the white congregation really wanted them.

The new social climate did not lead to mass integration of white congregations as some had feared. The blacks who sought membership in Lutheran churches were exceedingly rare. Cultural differences still presented major barriers to inner-city evangelism efforts. But the integration atmosphere resulting from the Civil Rights Movement now made it possible to think in terms of a successfully integrated inner-city congregation.

Declining inner-city congregations continued to do what they had been doing all along. They canvassed. They made prospect calls. They conducted vacation Bible schools. They employed Seminary students to assist with their neighborhood evangelism efforts. But the results were not encouraging. Inner-city congregations were still losing strength.

In the fall of 1967 Pastor Richard Seeger was called from the Synod's mission in Hong Kong to St. Marcus Lutheran Church. St. Marcus was located in one of the poorest sections of the city. It faced a very uncertain future. Pastor Seeger wasted no time in taking action. Shortly after his arrival in Milwaukee, he called for the organization of an inner-city pastors' group, and inner-city pastors responded to the invitation. Initially the group included Pastor Henry Lange of Bethel, Pastor Elmer Mahnke of Grace, Pastor Eldor Toepel, of Jerusalem. Pastor Richard Stiemke of Parkside, Pastor Gary Schroeder of St. Philip's, Pastor Arthur Lengling of Saron, Pastor Theodore Horneber of Zebaoth, Pastors Wilmer Hoffmann and Rolfe Westendorf of Siloah, and Pastor Arthur Schupmann of St. Peter's. Pastor Richard Ziesemer also participated since students from his campus ministry at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee Campus became involved in inner-city work. For several years Pastor Hoffmann served as chairman of this group.

In a large measure this group served as an outlet for pastors who were troubled over the decline of their congregations. They shared their problems and encouraged each other to persevere. But they did not limit themselves to crying on each others shoulders. As a member of the Synod's Commission on Evangelism, Pastor Seeger proposed an intensive three-year evangelism program which would recruit young people from all over the Synod and train them in evangelism, vacation Bible school teaching, and awareness of the black culture. The inner-city pastors, who called themselves the Inner-City Pastors' Council, agreed to the plan. Funding was

to come from a grant from the Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL). Since AAL only offered grants through authorized agencies of the Synod, the Commission on Evangelism submitted the grant request. For the first time the Synod was officially involved in the affairs of declining inner-city congregations.

The grant was approved and Pastor Gary Schroeder took over the responsibility for recruiting and training the evangelism volunteers. Statistically the program was a huge success. Over the three years of the project, several hundred young people were trained in evangelism and familiarized with inner-city mission work. Thousands of homes were contacted. Hundreds of children attended vacation Bible school and inner-city congregations collected hundreds of prospect cards. Most important of all, the thrilling message of sin and grace was presented over and over to inner-city residents.

One phase of the program was the development of vacation Bible school materials designed for inner-city youth. Materials from the major publishing houses consistently depicted children as white, blue-eyed and blond, playing in their spacious suburban yards. The inner-city pastors wanted something more appropriate for the realities of inner-city life and Pastor Rolfe Westendorf was commissioned to produce those materials. A new series was planned and prepared. But the pastors had not reckoned with the cost of four-color printing. Although the materials were used in mimeographed form at first, the actual completion of Series "A" had to wait for another AAL grant which funded the four-color printing.

When the Commission on Evangelism was reluctant to support this request for funding, the pastors turned to the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM). The GBHM was more sympathetic to the need for such materials and eventually requested and received AAL funding for Series "A", "B", and "C". In all the Aid Association for Lutherans provided nearly 650,000 for the production of these materials. It was just as significant that the inner-city congregations had again received a helping hand from the Synod at a time when it was sorely needed.

About the same times in the early 70's, inner-city pastors took note of the lack of black clergy in our Synod. Private discussions with President Oscar Naumann and Professor Armin Schuetze of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary led to the establishment of the Minority Ministries Committee, consisting of Pastors Westendorf and Schroeder and Pastor Robert Voss, Executive Secretary of the Commission on Higher Education. It was agreed that congregations had the authority to train and commission black men for any congregational duties that they were qualified to fill, but that black pastors should receive the same training as their white counterpart, lest there be a "second-rate" ministry in the Wisconsin Synod. If capable black men could not prepare for the ministry at Northwestern or Bethany, the Minority Ministries Committee was authorized to train men in their local community, provided that such training would equip them for the academic demands of the Seminary curriculum.

This program, while it still exists in theory, has not met with any visible success. Several candidates were considered. One began taking some courses. But at this time our hope for future black pastors lies with the existing educational institutions of our Synod. It is probably more significant that the Synod had now for the third time involved itself in inner-city affairs.

As inner-city congregations looked to the future, they saw the very real possibility that they could not be able to continue indefinitely with their own resources. Deaths and transfers were eroding the base of support faster than new members could strengthen that base of support. The trends indicated that even with energetic evangelism progress, the congregation would eventually die, unless they received help from outside sources.

The Synod was the most obvious “outside source”. But Synod policy ruled out Assistance to self-supporting congregations. At the same time the Synod, through its district mission boards, expected some supervision over congregations receiving synodical funds. Inner-city congregations had been autonomous for generations. How could they accept Synod control? On the other hand, how could the Synod invest money in inner-city congregations without maintaining some control over the way that money was to be spent?

In 1970 these questions and others were formally presented to the General Board for Home Missions in a paper by Pastor Kurt Koelpin. Pastor Koepin was a member of the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board. He was also pastor of Atonement Lutheran Church which was located on the fringe of Milwaukee’s inner-city. In his paper he presented the problems facing inner-city churches and asked the Synod to recognize the inner-city as a legitimate mission field which deserved the Synod’s support as much as any suburban field.

In response to Pastor Koelpin’s paper the General Board appointed a study committee to react to the paper and make appropriate recommendations. Pastor Rolfe Westendorf, Pastor Daniel Gieschen, Mr. John Metzger and Mr. Arthur Schaefer were appointed to the committee with Pastor Henry Paustian serving as chairman. Pastor Kurt Koepin and Pastor Norman Berg were advisory members.

The study committee reached a number of significant conclusions:

1. that the inner-city was a legitimate mission field which demanded the attention of the Synod;
2. that support should be given only to those congregations which demonstrated an ability to assimilate the people of its community;
3. that support should take the form of manpower rather than money, with the intention that the manpower should assist in evangelism outreach; and
4. that inner-city missions should be administered through the existing district mission boards.

The findings were incorporated into a policy statement that was adopted by the GBHM on August 5, 1971. The Wisconsin Synod had officially recognized the inner city as a mission responsibility.

The study committee was also concerned about publicizing the new policies. It was important that the pastors, teachers and laymen should know how the General Board felt about the newly recognized field. Accordingly four inner-city mission seminars were conducted in Milwaukee, first in 1972 at the Holiday Inn Central, then in 1973 at Siloah Lutheran Church, in 1974 at the Synod Administration Building, and in 1975 at Garden Homes Lutheran Church. People from Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska and California attended these seminars along with representatives from the Milwaukee area. Synod administrators were introduced to the realities of inner-city mission work and the workers became acquainted with the kind of help that the Synod could offer. Through these seminars the Synod gained an important awareness of the new mission opportunities developing in the inner city.

With the adoption of the inner-city policies and the completion of the seminars, the work of the study committee was finished, and the responsibility for inner-city work was turned over to the district mission boards. The Southeastern Wisconsin Board immediately undertook a detailed study of Milwaukee’s inner-city congregations, in order to learn how best to aid the mission outreach of these congregations. However, it was soon apparent that the members of the board were more familiar with their usual task of establishing suburban missions. Inner-city

requests had to be compared with requests from new and growing mission fields, and to that light Inner-city requests often appeared unprofitable.

It was then that the inner-city pastors requested their own mission board, a mission board for inner-city affairs. The District Board took this request to the General Board where it received a favorable response.

The Inner-City Mission Committee (ICMC) was organized as a sub-committee of the General Board. Because most of the congregations were located in the Southeastern Wisconsin District, it was chaired by the chairman of that district's mission Board, Pastor Reinhart Pope. The ICMC also included two representatives from the district board, Pastor Henry Paustian and Mr. Richard Waldschmidt, two pastors from inner-city congregations, Pastor Rolfe Westendorf and Pastor Richard Seeger, and a layman from an inner-city congregation, a position eventually filled by Mr. Gessler Safford of St. Philip's. Pastor Norman Berg, Executive Secretary of the General Board for Home Missions, was an ex-officio member of the committee: Mr. Duane Polack later joined the committee to represent the inner-city principals.

In the meantime the inner-city pastors were not simply standing around waiting for help. The immense success of the three-year summer evangelism program left our inner-city congregations with a frustrating problem. How do you check out 360 hot prospects before they get cold? You can't. In the first place you don't have the time to do it yourself. And you don't have the time to train others to do it for you. Thus many of the hot prospects sat on the pastor's shelf until they became dead cold, a simple stack of cards that meant he had failed to take advantage of a great opportunity for Kingdom growth. The frustration and futility of the moment prepared the way for favorable reaction to D. James Kennedy's "Evangelism Explosion." The chance recommendation of a salesman led to the viewing of "Like a Mighty Army," a file depicting the evangelism method employed by Kennedy's congregations in Florida. Although these methods were not 100% pure doctrinally, they were sweet antic in the ears of inner-city Lutheran pastors, for they showed how the message of sin and grace could be shared by laymen with the many prospects whose cards were growing cold on the shelf.

An informal evangelism conference was organized for the purpose of studying Kennedy's evangelism methods in comparison with other methods used by our Synod. Just by chance the chairman of the Michigan District's Evangelism Commission, Pastor Wilmer Valleskey, heard about the conference and traveled from Detroit to Milwaukee to participate. He was as excited about the Kennedy method as the inner-city pastors had been. But he was also experienced enough to know that Presbyterian evangelism would never sell in the Wisconsin Synod. He sought and obtained permission from his congregation in Detroit to take the necessary time to revise the Kennedy method into a form that would be doctrinally correct and therefore acceptable to Wisconsin Synod pastors. The result of his work was the first edition of "Talk About the Savior (TAS)", which was subsequently adopted by the Seminary faculty and promoted throughout the Synod.

The inner-city pastors themselves took the new methods home with them and employed them with varying degrees of success. However, it is safe to say that these evangelism methods are still being used in some form in all of our inner-city congregations.

But while evangelism remains an essential part of inner-city mission work, another kind of neighborhood outreach has proved even more effective in bringing blacks into inner-city congregations. And that is the Christian Day school.

It was too much of coincidence that the Lutheran congregations that were managing to survive in the inner-city atmosphere were the congregations that operated a Christian day school. The school provided Lutheran congregations with something that the Lutheran church lacked

otherwise, namely, a bridge to the black community. The Lutheran Church is not strong in the South. For the most part blacks were Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal by birth. So when they started looking for a church, they weren't looking for "Lutheran." It was rewarding and at the same time frustrating when black families whose faith was reawakened by Lutheran evangelists would become active in Baptist congregations.

The school gave blacks a reason for looking twice at the Lutheran Church. The troubles in the public school sent people looking for alternatives to public education. The Lutheran school offered a good alternative.. Lutheran schools accepted black children as tuition students until their parents joined the congregation. Lutheran schools made it clear to parents that they were expected to learn the doctrines being taught their children in school, and those who agreed with those doctrines were accepted into membership. Not all those members became active members, but those who did put new life into inner-city churches, not only by filling pews and envelopes, but also by giving the white members a reason for staying.

At first there were these who left the church because blacks were coming in. But those who stayed found a reason for supporting a congregation that was doing mission work and experiencing some obvious success. In 1977 the Siebert Lutheran Foundation employed the Anderson/ Roethle consulting firm to study inner-city congregations, so that the foundation could learn how best to use its money. The most significant result of this study was the overwhelming statistical support for the Christian day school as a primary mission agency of the inner-city church. The pastors had known it all along, but the research of a respected consulting firm erased all doubts from the minds of others. It was obvious that the Christian day school was an essential part of our inner-city ministry.

The same study produced another conclusion that was very interesting to Wisconsin Synod people. Statistically Wisconsin Synod congregations had fared much better than their counterparts in other synods. Statistics, of course, could not prove the reason for this greater degree of success, but it was encouraging to see that the WELS was not falling behind. While other synods had tried to reach the black community with political and social outreach programs, sometimes with large subsidies to the inner-city churches, the Wisconsin Synod congregations had concentrated on evangelism and education. It was encouraging to learn that these methods were producing relatively high degree of success, particularly in number of black members and the number of black men serving as church officers.

However, this success did not mean that all the problems had been solved. While WELS churches had gained a greater number of black members, total communicant membership was still declining. More important, capable lay leadership was weakening through transfers, age, illness and death. Most serious was the loss of trained evangelists which deprived the congregations for the skills and enthusiasm needed for an on-going evangelism program.

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In order to bolster local evangelism efforts, the Inner-City Mission Committee instituted a program that subsidized Seminary students as part-time evangelism vicars in inner-city congregations. After some intensive training in evangelism methods, these vicars spent ten to twenty hours a week helping local evangelists to contact prospects and to bring them into the fellowship of the congregation.

Beside providing these vicars, the ICMC sought and trained volunteers to help with vacation Bible school, thereby strengthening this important outreach tool of the inner-city change.

The battle for the inner-city has by no means been won. It is entirely possible that the next twenty years may see the demise of congregations that are now struggling to stay alive. But it is now fairly certain that no WELS congregation will die a lonely death. As long as a congregation has the capacity to offer the life-giving gospel to its neighborhood, the WELS and its ICMC will make every effort to keep that congregation functioning.

And we are convinced that the survival of Lutheran congregations in the inner-city is worth fighting for. There are other denominations which teach that Christ died for sinners. But only the Lutheran Church clearly declares that salvation is by grace alone. We dare not deprive inner-city residents of the opportunity to hear that message.

I once attended a funeral in a church that formerly had housed a Wisconsin Synod congregation.. Although the preacher said many fine things about the deceased, he never once mentioned the sacrifice that was paid for her sins. He never once mentioned the resurrection that had conquered her death. And the funeral was conducted on the Thursday after Easter.

Wisconsin Synod congregations are truly “wells in the Inner-city”, wells which supply the pure water of salvation by grace to sinners who have no other access to it. The WELS is determined that these wells shall not go dry. May God grant access to that determination.