

Ministry on the Frontier and a History of the Lutheran Church in Texas

by Bishop Mike Rinehart

When Henry Melchior Muhlenberg got off the boat in Pennsylvania in 1751, he recorded in his journal, "I immediately began looking for German people." This is what "mission" was in the early stages of our country's history: gathering in ethnic groups and supporting one another. In Texas things were a bit different. The story of Lutherans in Texas began 100 years after Muhlenberg stepped off the boat.

As a part of my education as bishop, I've been reading the history of Lutherans in Texas as recounted by Russel Vardell, H. C. Ziehe, and William A. Flachmeier. The reading is fascinating. To the best of our knowledge, the first two Lutheran pastors in Texas were George F. Guebner and Caspar Braun.

Pastor Guebner had been sent to Texas by the Lutheran Synod of South Carolina in 1850 to survey the mission needs of the area. Apparently he started First Lutheran in Galveston and stayed a very short time. Pastor Braun, who also arrived in 1850, organizing First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Houston in 1851, where he served for 30 years.

The next two pastors came from the St. Chrischona School in Basel, Switzerland, in 1850: Theobald G. Kleis and Christoph Adam Sager. They arrived in Galveston in the fall of the 1850. They went to Victoria where it was decided that Pastor Sager would stay. Pastor Kleis went up to Neighborsville and Hortontown on the opposite bank of the Guadalupe from New Braunfels. A letter went to St. Chrischona saying that there was ample work for many more pastors.

So, in 1851, the school sent six pastors, their entire 1891 graduating class, to Texas: John George Ebinger, Christian Oefinger, John Conrad Roehm, William T. Strobel, Henry Wendt and Philipp Frederick Zizelmann. They stressed evangelical fervor over theological sophistication. They boarded the Franziska at Bremen and set foot on Texas soil in Galveston Wednesday, November 5, 1851. But discovered that Pastor Guebner had left. Not a soul was expecting them. The congregation organized by Pastor Guebner, now seven families, provided them lodging. Pastor Wendt stayed in Galveston to serve that congregation. The other five travelled by boat to Houston to consult with Pastor Caspar Braun.

On November 10, 1851, Martin Luther's 368th birthday, the First Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Texas was born. Caspar Braun, then 29 years of age and the oldest pastor in Texas, was elected president.

Heinrich Wendt followed Pastor Guebner in Galveston. Johann Ebinger filled Candidate Braschler's preaching point at Spring Creek (Rose Hill, near Tomball). The other four pastors headed west for La Grange, San Antonio and New Braunfels.

Scandinavians

The 1850 census lists no Norwegians in Texas, but in 1846 Knud S. Knutson writes (in a letter preserved at the University of Texas) that Norwegians arriving in Texas in 1846 brought with them hymnals and house postils. A group of Norwegians waited until The Republic of Texas

became a state before moving in. In July of 1845 they arrived, but their pastor did not survive the journey. They founded Normany, later renamed Brownsboro.

In 1954 theological student Anders Emil Fridrichsen arrived. He served congregations at Brownsboro and Four Mile, but after three years moved to Minnesota. It would not be until 1868 that a permanent pastor would be secured for Bosque County. Pastor Ole. O Estrem intended to stay for a short time, but in the Spring sent for his wife. In 1869 the first Norwegian congregation was organized in Norse. Four congregations would eventually develop into what the Norwegians called The Texas Circuit.

At about the same time Swedes were organizing churches as well. The church at Palm Valley (1870) grew, and even helped support the church in Waco, which was served by (get this) both a Norwegian (the pastor at Norse) and a Swede (the pastor at Palm Valley). Swedes founded Zion Galveston (1892), Trinity Houston, First El Campo (1893), Eden Olivia and Augustana Houston.

The Danish church at Danevang (1895) was one of a very few Danish settlements, the church grew and even hosted a national convention of Danish Lutherans. With the influx of Swedes, Norwegians, Fins, and Danes, the Texas Synod was constantly plagued with pastoral shortage.

Merger

In 1853 the Texas Synod voted to affiliate with the General Synod, which represented about two thirds of all Lutherans in the U.S. This prominent body gave the Texans (nine pastors and eleven congregations) a sense of solidarity with a national movement as they struggled with disappointments and only moderate gains.

The Missouri Synod arrived in Texas in 1855 when the Wends settled Serbin. At a time when Schmucker was trying to alter the Augsburg Confession, the Missouri Synod positioned itself as a counterpoint to the American Lutheran movement and the defender of confessional Lutheranism.

During the Civil War and in the years following it, the Texas Synod did not take sides in the Civil War. They did not join the General Synod South, as did the Lutheran churches of other Confederate states. They remained neutral and loyal to all Lutherans, North and South. But in 1868 the Texas Synod left the General Synod for the more conservative General Council, formed to oppose Schmucker's "American Rescension."

In the 1890's the Iowa Synod showed Texas a lot of attention, especially with the arrival of Pastor George J. Fritschel to serve at a new Lutheran college in Brenham. In 1895 Texas left the General Council and affiliated with the Iowa Synod, not because of any conflict, but because of the hope of more pastoral prospects. This ended an era. The Texas Synod became the Texas District of the Iowa Synod. But, the Iowa Synod did not approve of pastors from Europe. A few congregations, unhappy with the new alliance, broke off and formed the Old German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Texas of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. They consisted of eight pastors, as compared to the 29 of the Texas District - Iowa Synod.

1900-1950

By 1900 there were now 10 million Lutherans in the U.S. That year, on September 8, a Category 4 hurricane landed on Galveston Island, leveling the island and killing somewhere between 6,000 and 8,000 people. The worst natural disaster to ever hit the U.S, this hurricane continued inland and devastated crops and destroyed church buildings of southeastern Texas as far inland as Brenham. Following this disaster many Lutherans went north and west to start new congregations.

In 1915 the Old German Lutheran Synod joined the General Council, and 1917 saw a merger of the General Council, the General Synod and the United Synod of the South to form the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA).

At the outset of World War I all things German were met with hostility. The Lutheran church in Texas was officially a bilingual church, English and German. At times churches and their members received harsh treatment. Congregations began to slowly introduce English. ULCA documents and minutes were all in English. Many congregations began using English in Sunday school, even while worship was still in German, Swedish, Danish, etc.

In the 1920's the population of Texas increased 24.9% while the population of the U.S. increased 16.1%. The church was growing considerably faster than the population. That growth slowed in 1925 due to hardships caused by floods and droughts and the cessation of immigration into Texas. By 1926 Lutherans comprised the fourth largest denomination in Texas. The Texas Synod had 5705 members (30 congregations), the LCMS had 22,292 members, and the soon to be merged Iowa and Ohio synods had 44,495 members. In all, about 72,000 Lutherans.

1930 brought a merger that formed the American Lutheran Church out of a union of the German Iowa Synod, the Buffalo Synod (mostly Prussian immigrants) and the Joint Synod of Ohio (which had formerly welcomed the Augsburg Synod, the Concordia Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Conference, the Indianapolis Synod and the Tennessee Synod). For an exhaustive diagram visit <http://www.elca.org/archives/churchbodykey.html>.

Texas Synod forwarded to the ULCA in 1936 a resolution advocating a more biblical title for the presiding officer of synods: bishop. The resolution stated that the term "president" was a "secular term, and has neither scriptural nor historical basis." The Texan's resolution of course failed. It would not be until 1980 that the LCA adopted the title of bishop and 1988 when the ELCA adopted it.

Texas churches tended to be small and rural. In 1936, the average Texan congregation was 225 members, while the ULC national average was 369. Americanization continued. In 1935 Danevang discontinued the exclusive use of Danish in Sunday morning worship. The 1935 constitution of the Texas Synod affirmed German and English as the official languages of the Texas Synod and provided for a recording secretary for each language. There was great concern about whether English sermons would be understood by all. Some churches provided an English service and a German service. Others alternated languages on a weekly basis. Periodicals of this era continued to be bilingual until May of 1939, coincidentally the same year Germany invaded Poland. From then on English would predominate.

Texas Lutherans wholly supported the declaration of war in December of 1941, and no mention of harassment of German Texans is mentioned. Lutherans mobilized to provide ministry to the many servicemen and women coming to Texas military bases. Many pastors felt called to serve as well. For example, Pastor Oelke, formerly at Schroeder, Kilgore and Ander, returned to Nebraska to serve as a military chaplain and provide services for German prisoners of war.

After the war, a boom of church planting began. Only in the 1940's did the majority of Texans become urban dwellers. St. Mark's in Corpus Christi and Faith in San Antonio were planted. Zion Galveston became self-sufficient. Augustana Houston became self-sufficient and assisted in developing Christ the King Lutheran Church near Rice Institute. Texas churches grew 4% a year between 1941 and 1951. Again the growth rate exceeded that of the population growth. Between 1940 and 1950 the church grew about 30% while the population of Texas grew 20%.

1950-1987

In February of 1950 the Texas Synod began its third Houston mission: St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church, started by Pastor Delmar Dolton, who just died this past Christmas. His funeral was held at St. Paul's Brenham. Pastor Lawrence Bade officiated and I said a few words. Pastor Phil Wahlberg arrived in Corpus Christi to pastor a faltering St. Mark's in 1947. The situation had been so bad that the executive committee had recommended closing the church and disposing of the property.

Between 1950 and 1960 Texas and Louisiana churches tripled their budgets. The U.S. population grew 18.4%. Texas population grew 24.3%. The Texas Synod grew 35.3%. The Texas-Louisiana Synod grew 88.2%. The ALC reported 53.4% increase. The LCMS 70.3%. And the ULCA reported 80.1% growth in Texas (1952-1961). Increasingly, Texas and Louisiana started to grow together.

In 1952, the Texas-Louisiana Synod moved to a full-time president, citing the frustrations of serving a parish full-time as well as maintaining the schedule of a part-time president. Pastor Royal E. Lescher became the first full-time president.

Phillips Petroleum announced in 1954 plans to sell 25 acres in Fayette County that was formerly an oil-pumping station, with a broad field and wooded hillside. The executive committee authorized \$10,000 for purchase. When the bids were opened, the synod's offer was too low. The highest bid was \$13,000. When officials contacted President Lescher to give him the bad news, he immediately countered (without authorization) with a bid of \$13,001. It was accepted. The synod now had a camp that would also serve as a central meeting place for synod activities. Today that camp is Luther Hill.

To continue to fuel the growth, the Texas Synod evangelism committee decided to train evangelists. During January of 1953, 535 laypersons from 19 congregations were trained to share their faith. From this team, 150 people from 16 congregations visited over 1100 persons in their homes. As a result the Synod saw a 10% increase in membership in just one year.

In 1958 Pastor Phil Wahlberg was elected the second full-time president. Wahlberg had

attended Texas Lutheran College for two years (where he was valedictorian), Lenoir-Rhyne College and Southern Seminary. In eight years St. Mark's in Corpus Christi had grown from 100 members to 650. He would serve as president, then bishop, until the formation of the ELCA in 1987, a total of 29 years. He and the executive committee chose as his assistant Pastor Martin Yonts, who would later become the first ELCA bishop of this synod.

In Houston, three new congregations organized between 1957 and 1961: Gloria Dei, Resurrection and King of Glory. Gloria Dei would eventually dissolve and join in with Resurrection. In 1957 a mission developer began work on St. Paul's in Baton Rouge.

Augustana Houston's Pastor Paul Seastrand began preaching in 1955 on Galatians 3:28, and the church as an "inclusive fellowship." While he was on vacation the board of deacons met and voted six to two in favor of his desire to reach out to all people "regardless of race or nationality." In 1955 they held the first interracial Vacation Bible School among Texas Lutherans. 37 of the 70 children enrolled were of African descent. In protest, 18 adult members severed their membership with Augustana. However, 26 adults joined in that same period, so the church grew. The following summer there were 100 at Vacation Bible School, 75 of which were of African descent.

The Service Book and Hymnal came out in 1958, further uniting Texas Lutheran congregations in a traditional liturgy and reinforcing English as the dominant language. It is also said to have increased the frequency of Holy Communion from nine to twelve times annually.

Mergers Again

The new American Lutheran Church (ALC) was formed in 1960 from a merger of the old ALC (1930), the Evangelical Lutheran Church, (Norwegian), the Lutheran Free Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (Danish).

See the diagram at <http://www.elca.org/archives/churchbodykey.html>.

One thousand delegates marched in three columns from Central Lutheran Church to the Municipal Auditorium, where three general church presidents joined hands as the 3500 participants sang "A Mighty Fortress." (As a weird twist of history, the ALC's former headquarters in Minneapolis now serves as the Hennepin County Jail.) In May, Dr. Vernon Mohr was elected president of the new Southern District of the ALC.

Unfortunately, this is where the historical account of the ALC in Texas ends. Ziehe takes us to 1951. Flachmeier takes us from 1951 to 1961. Vardell goes all the way to 1987 but his work is on the predecessor of the LCA, so he doesn't spend a lot of time on the ALC. When I spoke to Luther Oelke about this he said, "There is a big hole in the history of the Lutheran Church in Texas." Anyone need a good project for his/her Doctorate in Ministry?

In 1962 the ULCA (which had been formed from the 1918 union of the General Synod, the General Council and the United Synod of the South) merged with the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (Danish) and the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church (Swedish) to form the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). Phil Wahlberg was elected president (later renamed bishop). He would be the only

bishop the Texas-Louisiana District of the LCA would ever have, serving until 1987. Having first been elected in 1958, Bishop Wahlberg served 29 years.

Growth in the LCA was fast, but not as fast as the ULCA. It took 25 years for the LCA to grow as much as the ULCA had grown in 10 years: 75% (from 26,995 in 1962 to 47,437 in 1987).

Between 1963 and 1967 15 new congregations were organized, five of them in Louisiana. These five doubled the LCA presence in Louisiana. In 1964 Pastor Paul Youngdahl started Love in New Orleans before going on to pastor the LCA's largest congregation, Mt. Olivet in Minneapolis.

During those years, some of the congregations that were formed were House of Prayer Houston (1965), St. Timothy New Orleans, Messiah Monroe (1966), Nativity (later Holy Trinity) Shreveport. In 1967 the LCA had their convention in New Orleans. By the end of 1967, the LCA had grown to an even 100 congregations.

The sixties began a trend that was seen throughout the Protestant Church in America. At the beginning of the 70's, there was a decline in membership that caused the weakening of some congregations and the closing of others. Because of declining benevolence, "mission interpreters" (mostly lay) were trained to go to congregations and interpret the mission of the LCA. By 1973 the LCA was back below 100 congregations.

Efforts were renewed to start new congregations. In the next 14 years, the synod would add 31 new congregations, increasing the synod's membership by more than 40%. In 1980 Our Savior in Baton Rouge was organized, and in 1982 Galilean La Place. Vardell says a sense of "chaplaincy" to northern transplants existed, but slowly they began to reach out to indigenous Louisianans.

In February of 1984 Covenant Houston became the synod's 123rd congregation. And in 1986 the last three LCA congregations were planted: Joy Richmond, Shepherd of the Woods Humble, and Tree of Life Conroe.

Summary

Someone once told me that congregations are most mission-effective in their first 10 years. Think about it. A mission developer arrives, and a small worshiping community is formed. Doors are knocked on. Fliers passed out. The mission of the church is clear: Grow! And they do. Then they organize. In a few years they build a building. And then the mission seems to be to pay for the building, and the parking lot, and the budget. The congregation turns from an outward focus to an inward focus.

Could the same be true for synods?

It is time for renewed energy in mission work. Perhaps in our congregations we need classes on sharing our faith. Congregations that are outwardly focused take on a different feel. Instead of feeling like a nursing home, an outwardly-focused congregation feels like a rock concert. There is joy, laughter, energy, and a sense of shared mission: to proclaim the Good News, to welcome sinners, and to serve the world in Jesus' name.

In every period that the church grew, there was aggressive church planting going on. People are moving in and moving around all the time. If we are going to make disciples, we will have to constantly plant churches where those people are. And in this day of competing resources, we will have to figure out how to do it less expensively.

Consequently, where people are moving out, congregations will decline. We will have to help them band together, merge with other congregations, or share pastors like they did in the late 1800's. In short, we're going to need a frontier mentality.

And finally, one last thought: Given that half of New Orleans is African-American and half of Houston is Latin-American, the mission-minded church in this day will have to go beyond Henry Melchior Muhlenberg's "mission" strategy when he got stepped of the boat in Pennsylvania in 1751 of "looking for German people."

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