

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# Faithful and Missional from the Beginning: One Hundred Years of LCMS Mission<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The Saxon immigrants from Germany who first settled in Perry County, Missouri, were strongly motivated by the desire to live in a country where they could organize their lives around their commitment to the Lutheran church and its teachings. In that group of believers, however, there were pastors and people who recognized that the Lutheran Church had much to offer a world in need, and over time the church grew in its commitment to the missionary task.

In this article, one resource and two major challenges are highlighted. As a resource the Saxon immigrants and their leaders soon discovered that other Germans, pastors and people, had arrived in the United States, and some of them had a larger vision than the Saxons of the work that God had given them to do.

The first challenge was the enormous numbers of Germans entering the United States, most of them economic migrants with weak ties to the Lutheran church. How could Lutherans already here respond to this challenge? There were also people beyond the Germans whom God had called His people to serve: Native Americans from the beginning and after the Civil War mission and ministry among Black Americans.

The second challenge involved the planning and administration of mission. Is it better that local planning and participation is emphasized, or should mission be planned and driven by people at the national level who may have resources to work efficiently on large projects? Debates about how to organize for mission start early and are answered in different ways at different times.

If we were to put the original colony of the Saxon Lutheran immigrants in Perry County, Missouri, out of our minds for a minute and consider the origin of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), there is one fact that would impress us, namely, that the LCMS was, in the words of the late Dr. Roy A. Suelflow, “basically, at its inception, a mission synod.” Of the twelve charter voting members who first formed the Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, five were trained

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and sent as missionaries by Wilhelm Löhe (1808–1872), a Lutheran pastor in Germany who was convinced that Germans needed to play a role in mission in the United States. Of the twelve charter advisory members, five of these were also sent by Löhe. Of the twelve so-called “Friends of the Project,” F. C. D. Wyneken also must be noted because of his 1841 appeal to Löhe to send missionaries to serve the enormous immigration of Germans into the United States. The majority of the men who became charter voting and advisory members of the Synod in 1847 were not a part of the original Saxon immigration in Perry County. Actually, C. F. W. Walther’s congregation, Old Trinity, St. Louis, was the only Saxon congregation that joined at the time of the founding convention.

Much of the credit for arousing interest in sending these men and women as missionaries to America must rightly go to F. C. D. Wyneken (1810–1876). He is remembered as the father of Lutheran Home Missions in the nineteenth century, the pastor who worked tirelessly in the interest of mission. He called attention to the need for mission work through his publication entitled *Notruf* (Eng. *A Cry for Help*, now commonly translated as *The Distress of the German Lutherans in North America*). It was in response to this publication that Wilhelm Löhe of Neuendettelsau, Germany, prepared and sent more than 80 missionaries in support of Lutheran work in America. Löhe published his own plea for workers in 1841 and, with J. F. Wucherer (1803–81), published a newspaper in 1843 in behalf of America’s need: *Kirchliche Mitteilungen aus und über Nord-Amerika* (Church Announcements from and about North America). These two men were cofounders of home mission work, i.e., evangelistic outreach to Germans in Germany, specifically in Bavaria. They opposed the rationalism of the day and championed the importance of the Lutheran Confessions for the life of the church.

Löhe also supported a theological school for the training of emergency helpers (*Nothelferseminar*), a “practical seminary,” established in 1846 at Fort Wayne, Indiana. Wilhelm Sihler (1801–85) served as its head and professor with eleven students enrolled. At the request of the LCMS, Löhe turned the school over to the Synod in 1847.

Already in 1847, the need for mission was accented in the Synod’s constitution. One of the stated purposes of organizing the Synod was the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The new organization, small as it was, sent out missionaries immediately to survey and determine the possibility of doing mission work among the pioneers on the American frontier. In the very first proceedings of the Synod, we read of the work of these itinerant missionaries (*Reiseprediger*). In their

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individual work, too, the early fathers were intense missionaries. It was an accepted principle that each pastor was to look after the needs not only of his own immediate congregation, but to reach out as far as possible to the unchurched.

In the meantime, Walther sounded a clear Lutheran note in *Der Lutheraner* (*The Lutheran*) which he began to publish in 1844, before the organization of the Synod. Other pastors and congregations saw this banner of Lutheranism, and for many who were looking for a rallying point, this became their regimental banner. Little by little, many Lutheran pastors of diverse origins applied to the Missouri Synod and entered into its membership. In this way, more missionaries sent by Löhe and others became part of the LCMS, and this gave the Synod an exceptional growth rate in its early years.

Among those who joined were not only pastors with established congregations and home missionaries seeking newly arrived German immigrants, but also missionaries active in outreach to those who had never known Jesus. We can mention here only a few names of those who were active in Michigan Indian mission work and who joined Synod shortly after its organization: E. J. Meier (b. 1828), E. G. H. Miessler (1826–1916), and E. R. Baierlein (1819–1901). These men added not only to the ranks of the Synod's clergy, but they brought their mission projects with them, so that in a few years a sizable number of pastors did not serve established congregations but were actively involved in mission work.

Since a large number of missionaries were members of the Synod, it is not surprising that mission interest was intense and that already before 1850 a proposal was brought before the Synod to open mission work among the Native Americans in the State of Oregon. The fact that an Indian war was going on there at just that time did not deter them but was considered additional reason why work ought to be planned immediately.

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As the Synod grew, administration became more difficult, especially over the far-flung mission fields. To enable it to carry on mission work on the local level, districts of the Synod were formed in 1854. The emphasis was on decentralization, the theme of the Synod in its early years. Local guidance and direction seemed to the early Synod to be one of the chief factors that could make a vigorous mission program possible.

However, American Indian mission work received one setback after another. First, one of the champions of the work, Baierlein, was recalled by his sponsor, the Leipzig Mission Society (1819 on) in Germany, and sent to India in 1853. Baierlein had been sent to America by the Leipzig Mission to do mission work among the Indians, and his association with the Missouri Synod was purely incidental.

The Native Americans in Michigan were being settled on reservations. That government program interrupted some of the work in the older stations when the Indians were moved away from the stations. Competition from sects tore away chunks of membership. Furthermore, the language barrier was a problem. There appear to have been only a few men who learned the Indian languages. In one report, we find a plea that a young man be found who would be able to handle at least English to help a missionary working among the Indians. The Indians, understandably, had no appreciation of the missionary's German.

Finally, after the mission projects had suffered repeated setbacks, the Synod resolved to close all of its work among American Indians. This blow felled completely the Missouri Synod's first attempts at mission to non-Christians. The Synod's efforts were then narrowed to the home mission program of outreach to the German immigrants who were arriving in a steady stream.

In home missions, the Synod faced a tremendous challenge, of course; for those were days of the Midwest frontier, when the Midwest and the West were receiving tens of thousands of immigrants. The Missouri Synod faced the challenge admirably and strained its energies to gather German Lutherans into congregations and supply them with pastors. Column after column in *Der Lutheraner* reports the difficulties of the *Reiseprediger*, the circuit-riding preachers, in their journeys to gather scattered German immigrants into Lutheran congregations.

There was a downside to this work, however. As admirable and commendable as the home mission program of Synod was from the beginning, it is clear that their goal was almost without exception to work among Germans, and more specifically, among German Lutherans in need of Word and Sacrament ministry, congregational nurture, and pastoral care. That this was all good and necessary goes without saying. It is unfortunate that other mission opportunities were not even recognized, let alone acted upon, as a result of this strategy focusing on the needs of German immigrants.

In spite of this restricted view of missions, an ecumenical spirit was evident in inter-synod relations. In the 1860s "free conferences" were held with other Lutherans, which finally led to the organization of the General Council. At the end of the discussion process, the LCMS felt unable to join the General Council. But, an encouraging note was struck in 1872 when the Synodical Conference was formed by a group of conservative Lutheran Synods, including The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

This new organization soon vigorously took up the mission challenge by beginning work among Black Americans in 1877. Technically, this was not a Missouri Synod project, but the Synod was vitally interested and contributed men and money willingly and generously. This project was no doubt an important factor in helping to keep alive in the Synod the memory of the Lord's words "Go into all the world. . . ."

However, tensions were developing among Lutherans. Differences of opinion concerning the issues of the Civil War were not forgotten, even when the war was over. Later the differences became even more serious when the doctrine of election (predestination) became the main issue. Polemics then became the main occupation of many individuals on both sides of the question, and the big challenge was no longer focused outward—to go out and win new peoples for the Savior—but was bent inward—to defend the fortress of pure doctrine against attack from without and to cleanse it within.

That there were vital issues involved and that the truth had to be defended, no one would deny; but the emotional violence with which the flames of discord flared throughout the Synodical Conference during the 1880s did untold damage to the spirit of mission. For decades the ability of either side to undertake any mission work on a sizable scale was crippled.

There was, however, one staunch spirit who kept on throughout the turmoil of these times to focus on the words “Go into all the world. . . .” This man was Georg Ernst Ferdinand Sievers (1816–93), the father of the Missouri Synod’s foreign missions. When many lamps were hidden under bushels, his burned brightly on the stand; when other visions narrowed, his did not.

Sievers had been associated with the old American Indian missions. When this work was closed, the commission or board was kept intact, because there were mission properties to be disposed of. Between conventions, Sievers sold the mission properties, and at conventions he never tired of bringing before the Synod the need of bringing the Gospel to those without Christian faith. We find him year after year trying to stir up interest and arouse his brethren to the challenge. Sometimes the reply was that there was no open door. In response, Sievers pointed out that the major nations of the Orient had just been opened to foreigners.

Synodical inertia was finally overcome by pressure from the individual districts, many of which put forward urgent pleas that foreign work be started. An enlarged and reorganized foreign mission board was mandated by the Synod convention of 1893, and Sievers was elected its chairman; but he died before the Board’s first meeting, set for Oct. 4–5, 1893.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, however, the Board of Foreign Mission was instructed to make a study of foreign fields and to bring recommendations to the Synod. The Board was also instructed, however, to pay particular attention to the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), because it was reported that there were many Lutherans there. The Synod

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accepted that it needed to be involved in foreign mission work, but it was not yet confident that it knew how to cross boundaries of language and culture.

Finally, an opening presented itself when a Japanese student, Henry Shigetaro Mizuno, at the Springfield seminary, was identified in 1893 as ready to go back to Japan as the Synod's first missionary. This young man, Mizuno, pleaded unsuccessfully for a co-worker but left American shores alone. Before long, differences with Pastor Mizuno and changes in government policy in Japan led to the shelving of all plans for Japan, and Mizuno was turned loose to shift for himself.<sup>3</sup>

The Synod's attention then turned to India and to two missionaries who had been working under the auspices of the Leipzig Mission but had felt constrained to leave that body because of differences about the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. One source states that upon the suggestion of some Missouri Synod friends in Germany, these men, Theodore Naether (1866–1904) and Franz E. Mohn (1867–1925), were sent to America, where they were commissioned at Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Charles, Missouri, October 14, 1894, and sent back to south India as Missouri Synod missionaries. A beginning had finally been made in foreign missions, but seven more years were required before anyone from within the ranks of the Missouri Synod's clergy could be found and sent to India, in spite of urgent pleas throughout the Synod.

Shortly thereafter, just at the turn of the century, work was begun in South America. A German Lutheran immigrant pastor active in Brazil had requested help from the Missouri Synod for work among German Lutherans. The challenge was accepted. Christian J. Broders (1867–1932) went to Brazil to explore the field and to make contacts. His mission method was probably typical of conventional Missouri Synod mission strategies of the time. His tactic was to find German Lutherans without a pastor, organize them into a congregation, and encourage them to call a Missouri Synod pastor from the United States. Then his work of beginning Lutheran mission work in a new area was finished.

It is interesting to note that the Missouri Synod, after only a few years of work in South America, urged the newly formed Lutheran churches to form a district of the Synod as soon as possible, enabling them to become a part of the structure of the LCMS. This was not regarded as difficult, since this early mission work in Latin America had focused on finding German immigrants in those lands, just as had been done in the United States; and the churches in the United States and in Latin America were, for the most part, not divided by language and culture. When it became apparent in the twentieth century that Latin American mission work needed to become more Latin and less German, other governance models were adopted.

Meanwhile, interest was growing within the Missouri Synod to start foreign mission work, not like in India—with missionaries who were formerly attached to an outside mission society, but with the Synod's own personnel—and not like



mission in South America—focused on Germans, but rather mission work among people of a different language and culture who had no understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith.

This movement in Synod, led by Dr. Edward L. Arndt (1864–1929), culminated in the organizing of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission for China (1912), the mission society—not a part of Synod structures—which in 1913 sent him to China. Rev. Arndt began the work with his own strategy and without direction from the Missouri Synod, establishing missions and schools in Hankow in 1913. He made it a point to learn the Mandarin language, and under God’s blessing his work prospered. In response, but with considerable hesitance and reluctance, the LCMS took over this work officially in 1917. Thus began the Synod’s first effort in foreign missions, crossing barriers of language and culture with its own ordained missionaries.

After the Synod took over the China field in 1917, the workload increased, and in 1920 a full-time director of foreign missions was called, namely, Dr. Frederick Brand (1863–1949). This decision led to the beginning of greater centralization in foreign missions, on the one hand, but also to greater emphasis on Missouri’s part in God’s mission, on the other. Unfortunately, the work in China did not immediately produce a large number of converts. At the same time, controversy on how the name of God should be translated into Chinese also arose. Disagreement about whether a generic name for God or a personal name should be used led to divisions in the missionary community.

Into this period falls also the redoubled effort of the Synodical Conference in the field of African missions. In 1936 work in Nigeria was begun. This mission was, again, not strictly Missouri Synod work, since the Synodical Conference made the decisions about the work; but since the LCMS was the largest of the participating church bodies, it lent the chief support for the project.

After the appointment of Dr. Brand as full-time Director of Foreign Missions, an old dream of Sievers was again revived, namely the plan to found a School of Missions for the training of foreign missionaries. During the presidency of Dr. Louis J. Sieck (1884–1953), a missionary orientation program was begun at Concordia Seminary in 1944. Rev. E. C. Zimmermann, a missionary repatriated from China, was called to head the program.

Others contemplated a bigger dream. Dr. Roy Suelflow, a veteran missionary to China and Taiwan, strongly advocated the importance of having a Mission School in support of the Synod’s mission and beyond. In 1954, he said at Concordia Seminary: “Start immediately to build up a mission school at the Seminary. A good staff of about a dozen men here in the mission school would attract missionaries from many other churches, and our biblical and confessional standard would thus permeate many missions all over the world.”



With World War II, however, the Synod was reminded that foreign mission programs dare not be geared to the slow pace of planning by centuries, but that urgency is required in the King's business. The Synod discovered from the reports of chaplains and service pastors that there were heavily populated lands that no one had ever considered as potential mission fields. Through contacts made by service pastors, chaplains, and regular soldiers—and often as a result of their nudging and prodding—the Synod began mission work in the Philippines and Japan. Post-War expansion included work in New Guinea (now called Papua New Guinea), Guatemala, as well as in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea.

With the overriding expansion of Communism in Asia, particularly in China, the Board for Missions in Foreign Countries was forced not only to evacuate its workers but also to reevaluate its whole mission policy and strategy. After the collapse of LCMS work in China, serious questions were raised about the wisdom of centralized planning under conditions where the center of the planning is far removed from the center of the work. Indeed, this subject has been an ongoing topic for reflection and critical assessment ever since.

As we look back on more than a hundred years of Missouri Synod mission history, there are several points that cry for attention. It might well be noted in this period of centralized aggressiveness that major LCMS mission advances have never resulted from mission board initiative or centralized planning. Rather, considerable, consistent pressure from the outside has been required from the bottom up, as evidenced particularly by the beginning of foreign work in 1894–95 and in the case of China, 1913–17.

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There can be no question the LCMS mission work has been richly blessed. Different organizational structures have been utilized and different strategies pursued. Yet, the Gospel was preached and taught. God's Word, as promised, did not return without results. Many blood-bought souls for whom Christ died and rose again were brought into the Kingdom of God. All glory be to God alone!

This article is but a brief overview of the first mission efforts of the LCMS. Much more could have been said, just as another article is needed to describe and evaluate the developments and directions of LCMS mission work since 1945.

For more background on this early period, the following references may be helpful:

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revision of "Missouri Synod Approach to Mission in the Early Period," appearing in the first issue of *Missio Apostolica* in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> See A. R. Suelflow, "The Life and Work of George Ernst C. F. Sievers," in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, issues in 1947–50.

<sup>3</sup> W. J. Danker, "Henry Mizuno, Samurai without Support," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, Oct. 1992, 339ff. Also Arthur Strege's Thesis [B.D.] on Japan Mission, at Concordia Seminary, 1952.