Lutheran Mission Matters

Volume XXIX, No. 1 (Issue 58) May 2021

The Surprising Result of Being Reminded That People Are the Focus of God's Mission

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Abstract: After fifty years of on US soil, The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States grew in awareness that the Gospel needed to be shared beyond the audience of German-speaking immigrants. In some cases, this new understanding resulted from increasing exposure to the developing American culture. In other situations, the Synod was pressed into new behavior by hostile social conditions. But Missouri rose to the occasion. Two key figures in LCMS history, Rev. Dr. Friedrich Pfotenhauer and Rev. F. W. Herzberger (both born in 1859), teach us that when processes, comfort levels, traditions, and preferences—which are always clamoring for top priority in the community of God's people—are replaced by the ultimate goal of reaching people with the Gospel, wholistic and effective mission efforts grow and flourish.

Neither Processes nor Comfort Levels

It started with puppies—stuffed animal puppies to be exact. A kindly woman brought forward a basket of handmade stuffed animal puppies during a worship service in Forney, Texas, so these little creatures could be blessed and consecrated for distribution among the lonely and hurting children and older adults in the community.

After the worship service, the woman presented me with a puppy and let me know how these little furry friends made such a difference as they were presented with love and care during her outreach work to the forgotten and lonely. She mentioned that she was merely following in the footsteps of her great-grandfather who had a heart for the disenfranchised. The woman's name was Suzanne. Her great-grandfather was Rev. Frederick W. Herzberger, a pioneer of wholistic mission in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

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Rev. F. W. Herzberger was a uniquely American pastor. Unlike many LCMS pastors during his era, Herzberger was born in the United States in 1859. He spoke both German and English fluently. After graduating from the seminary in 1882, he was sent to Arkansas where he started six new congregations in four years. As his ministry service took him to Kansas and Indiana, Herzberger was exposed to unique needs in a developing America. Crop failures in the Ozarks led him to petition railroad officials to supply seeds to families so they could grow vegetables that would keep them from starving. His uncle's position as a prison official in Kansas allowed Herzberger to observe the hardships of the imprisoned and those who oversaw prisoners. During his ministry in Indiana, Herzberger encountered the often violent struggles of laborers and labor unions. He also confronted racial marginalization and scolded complacent Lutherans for their hesitance to support the Black Lutheran School in Conover, North Carolina: "Listen! You can have so many houses and properties and farms and businesses and factories—yes, you can acquire the whole world, and yet with all that, you do not yet possess what every [African American] needs above all else. That is the precious blood of Jesus Christ, poured out also for him as well as for you who have been delivered from the anxious worry of sin."[1]

As Herzberger encountered newly developing cultural and societal needs, his commitment to the people for whom Christ died moved him to seize these opportunities for the sake of the Gospel. The church also awakened to this new mission realization. Urbanization was at a high point during the industrialization of America in the late 1800s. The city of St. Louis became a bustling center of production, trade, and transportation. As new residents thronged the city, urban issues began to surface. Local pastors were swamped with busy parish work and had little opportunity to extend their ministries to serve the poor, ill, and disenfranchised. But they knew they needed to reach these precious people with the gifts of God. Professor Martin Sommer of Concordia Seminary commented on a bold response to the growing human blight in urban St. Louis:

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> It was some time before 1899 that a number of pastors of St. Louis, MO at a city conference urged the duty of the church to inaugurate the work of bringing the Word of God to the inmates of our hospitals, prisons, poor houses, and asylums. . . . After a meeting of pastors and laymen had been called, the organization of the St. Louis Mission Society was effected. This society consisted of the representatives of the different congregations in St.

> Louis. In 1899 these combined congregations called the Rev. F. W. Herzberger of Hammond, Indiana, as city missionary of their city.[2]

This action was the first time a pastor in the LCMS was called not by a local congregation, but by a Mission Society—a cluster of congregations deploying a pastor into an area of need for unique outreach. Robin Morgan notes in her brief biography of Herzberger that

> The sense of urgency to do such mission work must have been significant among the area leaders since calling a clergyman to minister without a congregation was a big step outside the norm for the Missouri Synod community. All clergy were to be accountable to a congregation and their calls were not valid unless they came from a congregation. Even seminary professors were obliged to have a least a "paper" call to a congregation.[3]

Because the eternal well-being of people was at stake, the LCMS stretched its comfort level and adjusted the process of calling pastors. The result was far-reaching and wholistic ministry.

Professor L. Fuerbringer of Concordia Seminary exhibited delight in the new development. He noted that "an entirely new missionary movement had begun in their midst. The object of this mission-work was . . . to do individual soul-saving work among the hundreds, nay, thousands of poor neglected Lazaruses lying at our very doors in our large cities."[4]

The scholarly and thoroughly German Lutheran Synod leader Fuerbringer saw and had a heart for the "Lazaruses," people who might be overlooked and left without the Good News of Jesus.

This mission was messy and risky. Herzberger's great-granddaughter recounted how he suffered the loss of sight in one eye when, as he was walking with a prisoner to the gallows, a chain broke loose and hit him in the face. But Herzberger was undeterred. Writing in the seventy-fifth anniversary book of the LCMS, Herzberger repeated the confessional refrain that Walther and many others stated boldly:

> True Biblical orthodoxy is *always* full of spiritual life, full of missionary zeal, full of unfeigned helpful, compassionate love, for it is the work of God's Holy Spirit in the hearts of His believing children. By His grace, His divine grace alone, Missouri's faith is *no dead historical faith*, but *the faith that worketh by love*. Missouri confesses in the words of Luther with the Fourth Article of the *Formula of Concord*, treating of good works: "Faith is a divine work in us, that changes us and regenerates us of God, and puts to death the old Adam, makes us entirely different men at heart, spirit, mind, and all powers, and brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, powerful thing that we have in faith, so that it is impossible for it not to do good without ceasing."[5]

Herzberger went on to describe how a new cultural setting and understanding propelled the church into new pathways of behavior for the sake of God's precious people:

> The older generation of [the Synod's] members came chiefly from Germany, where the state supported the ministry and also looked after the poor, the sick and needy in its charity institutions. Here in America these thousands of immigrants had first to learn and acquire the grace of giving for the Gospel ministry and all kinds of charities. And they did learn it under Missouri's faithful preaching of the old, old Gospel-faith that worketh by love. Indeed, we venture to say that no other Protestant Church so stresses, on the one hand, the doctrine of salvation by pure and free grace and, on the other hand, takes such pains officially to inculcate upon its ministers and lay people the principles of true Christian charity, as does Missouri.[6]

Herzberger wisely connected the new mission trajectory of the Synod to its solid theological foundation by citing two of C. F. W. Walther's seminal works:

> Although a pastor has chiefly to care for the spiritual wants of his congregational members, still the care for the bodily welfare, especially for the necessities of life among the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans, the infirm and needed and aged, also belongs to the sphere of his ministerial duties.[7]
>
> Likewise the congregation shall care for the nourishment, clothing, housing, and all necessary wants of the poor, widows, orphans, aged, invalids, who are unable to support themselves or have no relatives who are in duty bound to do so. . . . Also in calamities caused by fire, famine, dearth, robbery, etc., the congregation is to help sufferers.[8]

Helping "sufferers" superseded systems. The Synod changed the way it called pastors. It sacrificed comfort levels as it came face-to-face with people in a new culture and context. Herzberger even noted how far the Synod had stretched when he referenced the very first patient at the newly formed St. Louis Lutheran Hospital: "It started on its career in two little rooms in the house of Mr. Ed Bertram, and its first patient was **a Mormon invalid**."[9]

Neither Traditions nor Preferences

Friedrich Pfotenhauer and F. W. Herzberger were born in the same year. Pfotenhauer, however, was very much a German Lutheran pastor. He was born in Hanover, Germany, and immigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen. After attending Concordia College in Fort Wayne and Concordia Seminary in St. Louis—like Herzberger, he was ordained in 1880 and called as a traveling missionary to the new and growing territory of Minnesota, called "the great northwest" at the time.[10]

For the first seven years of his ministry, Pfotenhauer braved cold temperatures, blizzards, impassable rivers, and thick forests in order to locate German-speaking immigrants who needed the Good News of Jesus. Pfotenhauer understood the mission of God, "who so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son" (Jn 3:16).

Pfotenhauer described his predecessors in mission as "self-sacrificing men, their hearts throbbing with **the love of Christ and his people**."[11] Pfotenhauer himself was described as "one of the pioneer missionaries of the Great Northwest."[12] In addition to the elements, Pfotenhauer noted that the greatest threat during his mission experience was from "sectarian revivalists" and other denominational influences.[13]

The Rev. Friedrich Pfotenhauer was thoroughly German and Lutheran. He was a devoted adherent to the truth "that only God's Word may establish articles of faith, and no one else; and that we are justified before God and are saved apart from the deeds of the Law, alone by faith in Jesus Christ."[14] But the changing context in the United States would challenge his previous mission focus of reaching German-speaking immigrants.

After serving as the president of the Minnesota District from 1891 until 1908, Pfotenhauer was elected as the first vice-president of the Missouri Synod. Three years later, he was elected to be president, an office he held for the next twenty-four years. Just six years after his election as president of the LCMS, World War I brought shocking turbulence to the globe and to the LCMS that now numbered one million baptized members. Anti-German sentiment gripped the United States. The Missouri Synod was German to the core. Persecution erupted in communities. Legislation was passed to outlaw the teaching of German in schools. Social sentiment was overwhelmingly anti-German and, therefore, anti-German Lutheran.

For years, the debate raged in the Synod about whether or not biblical and confessional theological truth could be adequately expressed in languages other than German. For decades, English-speakers were considered church-outsiders. For its entire history, the Missouri Synod used the heart language of German for massive evangelistic outreach among German-speaking immigrants and a successful unification of people from diverse European regions and traditions who spoke the mother language. But now, the decision between a strong preference or tradition and the ability of the church to reach the people in its context with the Gospel had reached a culmination point. How did the Missouri Synod respond?

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The Synod gathered in Milwaukee for its triennial convention in 1917. The year also marked the celebration of the four hundredth anniversary of the Reformation.

President Friedrich Pfotenhauer noted in his opening address that "both the World War and the Church Jubilee affect us deeply, since we are both citizens of our land and members of the Church."[15]

Responding as citizens of the United States, the Synod was pressed into the dramatic action of changing its constitution so that the word *German* no longer appeared in the church body's name. At one time, the "German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States" was an inclusive and invitational name for people flooding the United States—people who spoke German, people who craved the Gospel, people who populated the heart of a growing nation and people who were pioneering new territories in the United States. But now, the word *German* counteracted mission outreach, confused families whose young men were being struck down by German soldiers in Europe, and created fear among people who no longer trusted German people. So the church set aside traditions and preferences—*beloved* traditions and preferences. Perhaps the primary motivations for this dramatic change were the Synod's desire for self-protection as Germans in the United States and its hope to be validated as a true American church. But President Pfotenhauer, a student of C. F. W. Walther, also embraced the Synod's resistance to exclusivity—a warning of inward thinking and behavior that C. F. W. Walther sounded loudly and clearly.[16] Friedrich Pfotenhauer was a missionary. His heart "throbbed with the love of Christ and His people." Traditions and preferences were secondary to a church that was "in full possession of the treasures of the Reformation."[17]

Pfotenhauer's opening remarks at the thirtieth convention of the Missouri Synod crystallized the importance of God's mission to reach all people with the life-giving Word:

> Our Synod meets this year under very extraordinary conditions. In the world a terrible war is raging, in which nearly all the nations of the earth are engaged, so that streams of blood are flowing daily, and thousands, yea, millions, of human beings are being cut down by the sword, or by famine and pestilence.
>
> Although we are living in such troublous times, and all happenings are pointing to the end of the world, yet **we Christians may not become slothful or discouraged, but we must lift up our heads and be active.**
>
> Lest we think that it would be useless for us at this convention to plan for the extension of Christ's kingdom, **the Lord tells us that even during war and rumors of war, during famine and pestilence, the Gospel is to have free course and is to be preached.** "This Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for witness to all nations; and then shall the end come." **The signs of the times should urge us to labor incessantly and with all our powers.**

> And in this work our members may not become lame for fear and expectation of things to come. We are Christians, and we know what is coming: The long-expected Last Day is coming. Our Savior is coming in heavenly glory to make an end of all earthly misery, and to take us into His eternal and blessed kingdom.[18]

1917 brought unrelenting pressure on the Missouri Synod. World War I caused tragic death and destruction. More than 4,000 LCMS young men lost their lives in brutal trench warfare. The Spanish Flu pandemic ended the lives of nearly 675,000 people in the US and caused the Synod to experience a 25-percent increase in funerals. Weddings declined by 30 percent. By 1919 the very first decline statistically in the LCMS was recorded since its beginning in 1847. Immigration laws changed. The birthrate dropped. Economic collapse was on the horizon.[19]

What did the Missouri Synod do? In humility and repentance, with trust in the Lord of the Church and in the living Word of God, it focused on God's mission and adapted. The change, however, did not happen swiftly. In his memoir, *This I Recall*, Rev. Dr. John Behnken, presidential successor to President Friedrich Pfotenhauer, noted that for two decades after the 1917 convention "practically everything in the line of convention transactions was bilingual. There were two opening sermons, one in each language. Resolutions and minutes were read in both languages."[20] Finally, at the 1938 convention, a delegate made a motion to dispense with the president's report in German. Behnken noted, "That ended the use of German as the Synod's 'official' language."[21]

The slow and stubborn surrender of the German language hindered the outreach of the Synod. Behnken noted that many prospective church members did not join Lutheran churches because English was not being used. Others drifted away from the church because they could not understand the language.[22] Behnken shared,

> Mr. Henry Dahlen of New Jersey, a man who had given this matter close study, once told me that according to his estimate, if all Lutherans from Germany and the Scandinavian countries and their descendants had remained with their church, Lutherans in North America would number about 25 million instead of the 9 million we have today.[23]

Friedrich Pfotenhauer was, in fact, the last German-born president of the LCMS. Some speculate that the Synod was ready for an American-born leader and, at seventy-six years of age, the older, Germanic Pfotenhauer symbolized past traditions.

But the focus on the Gospel still tugged the Synod forward. It was no social Gospel. It was the consistent action of sharing the Word of Truth. But that Word of Truth shaped the Synod's mission program to reach more and more people in the changing context of the United States. In his report to the Synod, President Pfotenhauer noted that "Home Missions continue to prosper."[24] The convention

mission report described the Synod's "Pilgerhaus" (a "pilgrim home" or hostel) that was housing people from the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, and Africa as they traveled through New York City. A number of these travelers who could not make it to their destinations were provided material help and spiritual blessings. Jobs were found for three thousand travelers.[25] Nine congregations and forty-one preaching stations across the United States served the deaf community. Fourteen missionaries in the United States worked among other ethno-linguistic groups: "Poles, Esthonians [sic], Finns, Letts, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Persians, and Italians." An Italian Catholic priest who converted to Lutheranism became a missionary in the Synod and was lauded for publishing an Italian translation of Luther's Small Catechism.[26] Missionary work to the Jewish community was proceeding with strength in New York City.[27] New initiatives were developed to reach people in seemingly unreachable places. President Pfotenhauer formed an Army and Navy Board to tend to the spiritual welfare of those serving in the military. Unlike other Protestant churches, the Synod was given permission to provide "camp pastors" for local military bases.[28]

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The mission of the LCMS, always centered around the Gospel, had become diverse and responsive to changing contextual needs in the United States. People were the priority—reaching people with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Just two years after the convention, Rev. John H. C. Fritz, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Louis, one of the re-framers of the LCMS constitution and the chairman of the Synod's Western District Mission Board, expressed the new direction of the LCMS toward more widespread American outreach:

> While for obvious reasons, our Lutheran Church in this country did its work through the medium of a foreign language, it is of late years very rapidly coming to be an English-speaking church. For thirty-five years we have had congregations which used no other language than the language of our country. There is no doubt that the future of our Lutheran Church of this country belongs to the English-speaking Lutheran Church. . . .[29]
>
> A Lutheran missionary who ferrets out only the former Lutherans, or the people of a certain nationality, as those of German extraction, is not doing his mission work in accordance with his Lord's explicit directions. **Christ, who died for all, would have us bring His Gospel of Salvation to all.** The unchurched, that is, such as are not members of a Christian church, are the missionary's mission material. These the missionary will find everywhere.[30]

Hostile social conditions pressed the Synod into sharing the Gospel in new ways. But the Synod's mission focus was never just about being German. People's need for the gifts of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ superseded processes, comfort levels, traditions, and preferences. Friedrich Pfotenhauer presided over—and reinforced the mission purpose of—a shift that would set a new course for the Missouri Synod in America.

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What about Today?

Two Fredericks whose lives began in 1859, one born in the United States and one born in Germany, helped to propel a wholistic American mission movement in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Herzberger and Pfotenhauer, two seasoned missionaries, advocated for and were pressed into conforming to the mission God was placing before them. Herzberger, the American cultural pioneer, embraced the whole human being with the Gospel. He cared deeply about people and responded with a wholistic pattern of service that set the stage for the Synod's twentieth-century development of a robust human care ministry. Pfotenhauer was used by God to usher in a different type of wholistic ministry—one that literally began to "speak the language" of its context. It was a slow and even unwilling transition, but people needed to hear the Good News of Jesus. The church needed to be concerned about the people in its location. Pfotenhauer triggered the change that was simmering for decades. Dr. A. L. Graebner described this needed change in the Synod's official publication, *Der Lutheraner*, in 1897. He noted that

> while the use of German by our church had been a great blessing, especially to the great flood of immigrants, our church must now realize that "the years of the great immigration of Germans are past." If our church hopes to continue to grow . . . we must think in terms of a type of mission work different from gathering scattered German Lutherans into congregations. . . . [Graebner] trumpeted the urgent need for congregations to introduce English services and to concentrate their efforts on America's vast numbers of unchurched people.[31]

This new direction caused the Synod to enter one of its most fruitful seasons of ministry expansion. A refreshed American evangelistic emphasis in the Synod added one million new members from 1917 to 1954, doubling in size in only half the time. Nearly 40 percent of the new members were adult converts.[32]

The lives of Herzberger and Pfotenhauer reflect their Savior. In Luke 7, Jesus addressed the criticism of church leaders who said, "Look at him! A glutton and a

drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" (Lk 7:34) As Jesus ate at Simon the Pharisee's house, "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" (v. 37) came to anoint Jesus' feet. Her tears mixed with the aromatic ointment. Simon scorned the woman silently, but Jesus spoke up. He said,

> "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." (Lk 7:44–48)

Moved by God's grace, the Missouri Synod became a friend of sinners as its context shifted. As ones who gave thanks for being "forgiven much," the Synod reflected Christ's love by "loving much." Missouri brought the Word of God to the least of these even when culture caused discomfort and when processes, comfort levels, traditions, and preferences needed to be sacrificed. The Synod followed the Spirit's lead to keep putting the Word of God to work, trusting that the Word would not return empty even when encountering new and unfamiliar conditions. Missouri even discovered that, in adverse and humbling circumstances, the Gospel proliferates. The far-reaching mission of God reaches even farther. As a result, many lives were blessed with the gifts of forgiveness and eternal hope.

F. W. Herzberger's great-granddaughter continues his legacy as she blesses the hurting and forgotten with prayers, visits, stuffed puppies, and prayer shawls.

How are we being called to respond to the risky and messy context facing the church today? How can neither processes nor comfort levels, neither traditions nor preferences hinder the mission entrusted to us?

Will we, like those who came before us, continue to hold firmly to the truth while we also make faithful sacrifices and adaptations for the sake of people who need the Gospel? May the grace of God, His love that fills our hearts, and the pace-setting actions of our predecessors move us to steward a strong and wholistic mission for the people God has placed around us today.

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Endnotes

[1] Robin Morgan, *F. W. Herzberger, Part 1*, 2–4, https://crossings.org/part-one-f-w-herzberger/.
[2] Morgan, *Herzberger*, 6.
[3] Morgan, *Herzberger*, 7–8.
[4] Morgan, *Herzberger*, 7.
[5] W. H. T. Dau, ed., *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 446–447.
[6] Dau, *Ebenezer*, 447–448.
[7] Walther's *Pastoral Theology*, quoted in Dau, *Ebenezer*, 448.
[8] Walther's *The True Character of a Local Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, Independent of the State*, quoted in Dau, *Ebenezer*, 448.
[9] Dau, *Ebenezer*, 452, emphasis added.
[10] https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/presidents/president-pfotenhauer/
[11] Dau, *Ebenezer*, 335, emphasis added.
[12] Dau, *Ebenezer*, 334.
[13] Dau, *Ebenezer*, 336.
[14] "Proceedings of the Thirtieth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States Assembled as the Fifteenth Delegate Synod at Milwaukee, Wisconsin June 20–29, 1917" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 5.
[15] Proceedings, 3.
[16] Walther held firmly to an uncompromising focus on pure doctrine, an insistent emphasis on sharing the Gospel with all people, and an ongoing quest to join with others who confessed the truth of the Gospel. He lamented his role in the Martin Stephan debacle of inward thinking and exclusivity. In an 1845 letter to Wilhelm Sihler, a missionary leader in Ohio who became the first president of the Lutheran Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Walther wrote, "We, who in unbelievable blindness formerly permitted ourselves to be led by Stephan, have special reason to seek out those of orthodox faith. . . . God knows that we ourselves under Stephan had nothing else in mind but to prove ourselves completely faithful to the true Lutheran Church. But there was nothing which caused us to fail in this very thing more than our stubborn exclusiveness." Roy A. Suelflow, trans., ed., *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 86.
[17] Proceedings, 5.
[18] Proceedings, 3–4, emphasis added.
[19] Statistics of the Missouri Synod 1847–1937. Compiled for the Saxon Immigration Centennial by Rev. E. Eckhardt, Part IV, note 22.
[20] John Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964, 2014, Kindle Edition), Chapter 4, Location 744.
[21] Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition*, Location 751.
[22] Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition*, Location 773.
[23] Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition*, Location 773.
[24] Proceedings, 7.
[25] Proceedings, 35.
[26] Proceedings, 36–37.
[27] Proceedings, 40.
[28] Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition*, Location 600.

[29] John H. C. Fritz, *The Practical Missionary: A Handbook of Practical Hints for the Lutheran Home Missionary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 9.
[30] Fritz, *The Practical Missionary*, 12, emphasis added.
[31] Behnken, *This I Recall: Revised Edition*, Location 751–759.
[32] Walter Baepler, A *Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod 1847–1947* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), 357. Baepler notes that since 1918, 189,945 adults had confessed their new faith at the altars of Missouri Synod churches. The LCMS statistics provided to the author from the Concordia Historical Institute show the Synod reaching 2 million baptized members by the end of 1954. That included a gain of 202,497 adult confirmations from 1947 through 1954, totaling 392,442 new adult confirmands from 1918 to 1954.