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Lutheran Braille Workers: Seventy-Five Years of Faithful Service to the Blind

Patti Ross

Abstract: This piece is based on the address the author gave at the Lutheran Braille Workers's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration on October 20, 2018 in Yucaipa, California. Lutheran Braille Workers is the only Lutheran organization in the US that supplies Bibles and other Lutheran literature free of charge to people around the world who are blind or visually impaired. The work began seventy-five years ago when a young Lutheran woman, Helene Loeber, became involved in transcribing Braille Bibles for use in post-war Germany. She soon discovered that the needs were huge in the US as well as Germany, but she also recognized that God had provided an enormous resource in the Lutheran women who were willing to learn to transcribe and produce Braille literature. The article deals with the challenges faced and the solutions found over the decades as LBW became known worldwide for its service to people who are blind and visually impaired.

Six dots.

Six dots that make up a Braille cell

Let's imagine an illustration of the six dots and the Braille cell in which they reside. Let's say this cell represents the Lutheran Braille Workers organization, and the six dots represent what has made up the Lutheran Braille Workers over the past seventy-five years.

Our **first** dot will represent the inspiration for all that we do in Lutheran Braille Workers (LBW). The saving grace and loving mercy that God has for the blind and visually impaired and His desire that they know of that love and His salvation motivates everything. God wants and does what is best for us. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, God says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord,



Patti Ross, the current president of the LWML and a former board member of Lutheran Braille Workers, presented this brief history of the organization and its important work among people who are blind and visually impaired at LBW's seventy-fifth anniversary celebration in Yucaipa, California, October 20, 2018. The oral style of that presentation has been retained. Patti Ross can be contacted at president@lwml.org.

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plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer29:11).

The Gospels contain many references to Christ’s mercy and love in the healing encounters He had with the blind. Answering John’s disciples in Matthew 11, He uses this healing of the blind as one of the proofs of who He is. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them” (Mt 11:4–5). Thus, He shows how He has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah heard in Isaiah, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (35:5). When teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus mentions His care for the blind when He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18).

We all know the story of the healing of the blind man when Jesus mixed His saliva with dirt, applied it to the man’s eyes, and healed him. Significant it is that He says that the man was not born blind because of any sin done by himself or his family. Blindness was not a punishment for sin (Jn 9:1ff.). On another occasion, on the way up to Jerusalem prior to Palm Sunday, Jesus came upon a blind man who called out to Him, and Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” With this question Jesus indicated His willingness to serve him, and He did just that by healing him (Mk 10:46ff.).

The first dot is the inspiration from Scripture. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, God’s people serve our Lord by reaching out as Jesus did, bringing the Words of Holy Scripture in a form that makes sense to people who are blind to guide them out of spiritual darkness with the Gospel message.

The **second** dot inside our Braille cell leads us to those people, God’s people, who act on this inspiration with vision and purpose.

For our second dot, we must go back to a college student who had been blinded in an industrial accident. Fred Graepp of Fresno, California, was studying for the ministry in 1941 when he lost his eyesight and was unable to continue toward his goal. I wonder how he felt about the Jeremiah 11 verse at that point. He learned Braille at the Fresno Salvation Army School and was teaching Braille by correspondence. Interested in the German language, he found that Bibles in German Braille had been destroyed in Germany before and during WWII, and he set about recruiting volunteers to help him transcribe the German Bible into Braille. How *his* plans had been changed!

Enter one of his student volunteers, Helene Loeber, who at the suggestion of her father, wrote to Mr. Graepp. After years of learning Braille patiently on her Braille

slate and making thousands of dots with her stylus, she also learned to read Braille. She became inspired to recruit others to help her, first turning to friends in the Ladies Aid Society of Trinity Lutheran Church in Whittier, California, who joined her in her work. Later, acting on another inspiration, she decided that it would be a good way to gain support for the work they were doing by attending the Lutheran Laymen's League convention in Hollywood in November 1946. Taking samples of their work, she was introduced to some people of vision, to Dr. Oswald Hoffmann of the Lutheran Hour and to Dr. Walter A. Maier, the Lutheran Hour Speaker. She came away with requests to transcribe the Lutheran Hour Bible correspondence course into Braille. This grew into a huge worldwide outreach. She realized that by adding English Braille transcription to their already heavy German transcription responsibilities, it would be impossible for the current volunteers to manage the additional task. She began looking ahead for ways to mass-produce the lessons. The birth of LBW Work Centers would soon follow.

The dedication to producing Christian Braille continued, and production and volunteer numbers grew. With that came the desire to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. Guiding the way forward through those formative years was the first President, Carl Loeber, Helene's father. He worked to solve development problems and interacted with Synod's boards and committees. Rev. G. H. Smukal, president of the Southern California District LCMS, also provided pastoral advice and guidance in those early years. A motto and a logo were chosen. "Bringing Christ to Those in Darkness" was chosen as the motto and the logo—the light shining down on the globe of the world—was done by Bob Loewe.

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LBW's production of Large Print came about through Mrs. Verona Normington in San Francisco as a result of her mother's wanting Lutheran Hour sermons in Large Print. In 1959, LBW merged with this sight-saving, Large Print group. In 1960, the Normingtons' home garage became the first Large Print Work Center. Uppermost in their minds was to furnish the Word of God to that group of people between the seeing and the blind, the "no man's land" of the partially sighted.

LBW has looked ahead through the leadership of many dedicated leaders. Following Helene's resignation as executive director, the Lord provided leadership in the persons of Mr. LeRoy Delafosse, Mr. Lloyd Coppenger, Mrs. Jan Fisher, Rev. Dr. Phil Pledger, and Rev. Dennis Stueve.

Many other people were inspired by God's Word and led by His love to serve in all areas of LBW's work. Many had no idea this would be in their plans, but, as Jeremiah stated, God had plans to prosper them and give them a future. Answering

God's call, they advanced the ministry of LBW and touched more lives for Christ through Braille and sight-saving print.

For the **third** dot we look at the technological advances that have come about over the years. Starting with a slate and stylus used by the first workers, LBW has embraced new technology whenever possible, sometimes even inventing the technology themselves. From stylus we advanced to the Braille writer that resembled a typewriter with six keys.

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Then came one of the first innovations—shellacking the back of the paper pages to make them last longer when used multiple times. Apparently, the Van Nuys Walther Leaguers painted these pages in the church basement! We can imagine what that smelled like!

Embossing metal plates came next, and this enabled a single plate to print multiple copies. In the beginning, this had to be done at the Braille Institute in Los Angeles on its roller press. It involved a lot of travel and heavy loads back and forth. Enter Norman Loeber. He kept tinkering around in his garage, and with a set of wringers from an old Maytag washing machine, he was able to convert them into a Braille roller press. Norman kept working on improvements, consulting with engineers at IBM. When a stereotype machine was added in 1955, Norman was able to engineer changes and equip it with an automatic line spacer and power-driven carriage return.

Next came the Braille encoding keyboard which was an electric keyboard. Again, Norman worked with and got help from his employer, IBM. Large Print was started on an old hand-operated letter press that the Normingtons had found and started using. In 1960, a typewriter with a sight-saving font was purchased. Advances in Braille production continued. Norman designed a system in which punched cards encoded to Braille could be prepared on keypunch machines. Ken Loeber started building roller presses.

IBM, under the direction of Norman Loeber, experimented on and later donated an embossing magnetic card machine. And if you want to know how that works, I think Norman is in the audience tonight. I stopped understanding all of this after the wringer washing machine. One idea I found fascinating was taking the cover of a Braille book and vertically embossing the title so that the blind user can insert a finger between volumes on a shelf and read the name of the book without removing it from the shelf.

So many innovations, large and small, often by “coincidence” (and we know there are no coincidences with God), often in surprisingly timely fashion, have shown the plans God has had to prosper LBW and the people it serves.

At each step in this tech advancement, the Lord provided someone with an idea and further provided people generous enough to give of their time and resources to effect technological advancement. And He still does today.

Fourth dot. The Braille workers. After years in LWML, I can say that people in our church love having a “hands-on” part in ministry. They don’t want to watch someone else do something; they want to do it. LBW is truly a hands-on ministry. The Work Centers, or as they will be called, Ministry Centers, number around 110 across the United States, starting in California and extending to New York and Pennsylvania. There are more than three thousand people working in Braille and Large Print centers. Still more are serving as board members, devoted staff members in Yucaipa, and financial supporters. This organization, along with LWML, is currently the largest grass roots volunteer-run organization in our LCMS! In 2015, the estimated aggregate financial value for the LBW volunteer force, at California minimum wage rate, equaled \$5,760,000. Speaking as current head of another largely volunteer-run organization, I say, “Way to go, LBW!” Giving opportunities to your volunteers helps them grow in faith and service! God has faithfully provided a work force for seventy-five years for LBW.

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Fifth dot. LBW’s clients. Ninety-five percent of the people who are visually impaired are un-churched. Reaching out to that 95% has led us to have Braille, Large Print, audio in DTB (digital talking book format), as well as an audio Bible study and the ESV version of the Bible put into Braille. Over the seventy-five-year history, LBW, starting with German and English Braille, went on to supply materials to India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Korea. In Central and South America, sight-saving print was welcomed. While the Iron Curtain was pulled across Europe and Asia, LBW was able to get Braille Gospels into Romania and Russia. In spite of Bible reading restrictions, Muslims requested copies of Braille materials; Jewish people loved the Psalms; Protestants and Catholics were happy to see both the Braille and sight-saving materials for their blind members. The need for books and education materials for the blind was an open door to bringing the Gospel into countries where missionaries were not allowed to work. God has worked through the

blind to take the message of salvation where even the printed or spoken Word was not allowed! Jesus said in John 9:3, speaking of the blind man, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

The **sixth** dot in our LBW Braille cell is what I would call partnerships. Over the past seventy-five years, this ministry and love and concern for the blind has benefited from the many partnerships LBW has entered. Early work was helped along by association with the Braille Institute of Los Angeles. In 1946 at an LLL convention in California, Helene met with Lutheran Hour (LHM) officials, and a partnership was formed that led to the first LHM Bible correspondence course produced in Braille. Other partnership can be summarized: Norman Loeber’s collaboration with IBM; partnering with Concordia Seminary to produce written materials for theological study; with Orphan Grain Train to deliver Braille texts to Soviet-occupied countries; with the United Bible Societies to distribute materials worldwide; agreements with Concordia Publishing House for the right to produce Braille editions of anything published by CPH; working with the Synod’s Board of Missions and gaining RSO (Recognized Service Organization) status. Willingness to partner with other entities over the years to strengthen ministry to blind and visually impaired people has characterized LBW.

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For financial support, LBW partnered with the Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL) and Lutheran Layman’s League for many years. And, as you may have figured out, this also leads me to mention LWML—Lutheran Women’s Missionary League’s work with LBW. If you count the Ladies Aid Society of Trinity Lutheran, Whittier, California, as LWML, then we have the first group of LWML women working at Braille from the very beginning of LBW. If you were to do a survey of the Braille Work Centers (or ministries), I would venture to say that half to two-thirds of the women working there are also active in LWML. My own work center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has about a 75% rate of LWML participants.

LWML has involved LBW in producing Braille and Large Print materials at our national convention servant events for several of the last conventions, a great way to introduce the work of LBW to the women of our church body. We will again have that opportunity at our national convention in Mobile, Alabama, next June 20, and I invite all of you to come and enjoy. LBW produces many of our LWML resources in Large Print or Braille, such as our *Mustard Seed* devotions and our official publication, the *Lutheran Woman’s Quarterly*. They also produce our convention manuals in Large Print.

Many of LBW board members and directors have included LWML women. That would include the current Board Chairman, Carol Zemke!

LWML has historically provided many grants to LBW for the work of helping people touch the words of Jesus. This year all forty LWML districts met in convention. As I look over the grants chosen by those districts, I see many for LBW. At our 2017 national convention, we adopted a grant of \$100,000 for the transcription of the ESV version of the Bible into Braille.

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Our Braille cell is complete. For seventy-five years God has provided our inspiration from Scripture and from Jesus' life. He has given us leaders with inspiration and energy. He has provided technology and people who understand it. He has provided willing workers. He has given us people to serve and ways to serve them. And He has given us people to partner with to achieve the mission of LBW, which is "to provide the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to individuals who are blind or visually impaired throughout the world." He has done wonders with just six dots.

What God says is eternally true for LBW and for the visually impaired that we serve, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Happy anniversary, LBW. To God be the glory!

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