

F.W. Herzberger Part Three – Herzberger's Theological Legacy

*Ministries such as City Mission are never done in a vacuum. From the beginning, Herzberger had a variety of people who supported the work he was doing and as he moved out into the community, more and more people were drawn to the needs he was addressing and the way in which he was working. This kind of ministry had its struggles at the turn of the century much as it has today and those who felt called to it banded together in support of one another. It would be the men of the Associated Lutheran Charities, Herzberger's younger colleagues in this work, who will take up the theological conversation that Herzberger started by his actions. Over the next decades they would carry it beyond the confines of City Mission into the wider Missouri Synod community.*The Beginnings of the Associated Lutheran Charities

The last two decades of the nineteenth century saw a burgeoning movement within the Missouri Synod of ministries that included both care and redemption work among the marginalized. Hospitals were started in areas well-populated by Lutherans: Brooklyn, New York in 1881, Cleveland, Ohio in 1896, Mankato, Minnesota and Springfield, Illinois in 1897, Sioux City, Iowa in 1902 and Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1903. Orphanages were also built. John Frederick Buenger, one of the original Saxon immigrants, started the first orphanage in Des Peres, Missouri in 1868. This was followed in 1871 by one in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. "The Addison, Illinois orphanage began in 1873. New Orleans followed in 1881; Indianapolis, Indiana and Marwood, Pennsylvania in 1883; Fort Wadsworth, New York in

1886.”[1] Homes for the aged and, after the turn of the century, home-finding societies for children emerged in much the same way.

All of these efforts were established through grassroots channels with considerable lay support:

One of the Chicago pastoral patriarchs, August Reinke, preached a sermon to his Bethlehem congregation on the duty of Christians to care for the aged in the late 1880’s. Two days later an anonymous donor left twenty-six cents at the church, marked ‘for the Altenheim building fund.’ Reinke simply kept the twenty-six cents on the parish financial books with the notation that the donor intended it to go toward a home for the aged. Thus, for several years the idea stayed alive in the conscience and conversation of the parish fathers. In 1892 twenty-six congregations of the Northern Illinois region – a parish for each penny of the initial donation! – combined to form the Altenheim Gesellschaft and the ministry was underway ‘to establish a home for aged persons in needy and destitute circumstances belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chicago and vicinity.’ Thus Pastor Reinke and his co-workers defined their vision of the task.[2]

In 1899 at the Missouri Synod annual meeting, a request was made that the Synod become the over-arching administrative body for these new ministries. They needed connection and support through a national organization that would acknowledge the realities of such work and its differences from traditional congregational work. The delegates tabled the matter, “offering as a reason the considerable difficulties involved in administering such a burgeoning program.”[3]

Since officially appointed Synod leadership was not going to

happen, Herzberger took matters into his own hands. He gathered those who were directly involved in the ministries and began working with them. In 1901 he joined August Schlechte, city missionary in Chicago, and Frederick Ruhland, institutional missionary in Buffalo, New York for an informal conversation about the work which each of them did. Though initially they were not thinking of starting an oversight organization, this trio was the soil from which Associated Lutheran Charities grew.

This first meeting blossomed into annual conversations that gradually included more and more people. "In November of 1904, seventeen men responded to an invitation to come to Ft. Wayne and formally organize. Seven were active in children's home and placement ministries...two were orphanage directors...two were Lutheran hospital representatives...and five city missionaries were on hand." [4] Officers were elected, a name was chosen, *Lutherische Wohltätigkeits Konferenz* – Associated Lutheran Charities [ALC] – and the organization which would coordinate such ministries in the Missouri Synod for the next half century was born.

The agenda for the meetings addressed issues critical to these ministries. Should illegitimate children be taken from their mothers? Should adoptive families be subject to supervision by the adoptive agency? If yes, who should do the supervision, an adoption agency or the parish pastor? What was the relationship between home-finding organizations and orphanages? Should illegitimate children be accepted by home-finding organizations and orphanages?

One particularly thorny issue discussed in 1905 was the validity of calling a pastor to a home-finding organization. The Missouri Synod's aversion to allowing pastors to be called by any entity other than a traditional congregation made this

issue of paramount importance:

The whole concept of a specialized welfare ministry was still in the tender stages of its earliest beginnings at the time. Therefore, it must have struck the rest of the Synodical constituency, and especially the other clergy of the Synod as something of a bold step for the convening pastors to conclude that the call to service in a welfare ministry of a home-finding society is divinely authorized. The basis of the declaration was found in Christ's command to teach all nations recorded in St. Matthew 28:19. Any pastor who is thus called to a ministry to children and families has the right to baptize, remit and retain sins, and administer the Lord's Supper to those under the care of the institution or agency.[5]

These concerns about the place of welfare ministries within the pastoral ministerium continued to be part of the agenda of the ALC meetings for many years.

The 1911 annual gathering was of particular significance for the men of the ALC. Synodical president Frederick Pfotenhauer participated as well as St. Louis seminary professors, Theodore Graebner, Paul E. Kretzmann and W.H.T. Dau. This show of support for the organization was an important boost for the validity of their work. Dau spoke to the gathered assembly and urged them to watch their public communications so that they couldn't be accused of unchurch-like work. "One persistent misrepresentation of the spirit of the welfare ministry was that it catered to the physical needs of people and the church was on earth not to care for bodies but for souls."[6]

Another concern was about any ministry which might take away from the primacy of the congregation. At this time, Sunday schools, laymen's groups, and even youth ministries could be

considered suspect if they diverted time and attention away from the Word and Sacrament core of the Missouri Synod world. The ALC had a long, slow climb to complete synodical acceptance and this show of support from important guests was a significant step up.

These annual meetings were also an entry point for connections between the Missouri Synod world and the wider world of the culture. "Civil authorities" were invited to participate and speak as early as 1912. "The 1919 convention of the ALC in Fort Wayne featured as plenary session speakers Dr. Amos Butler of the Indiana Board of State Charities and a county probation officer, Mr. Fred Klein." [7] Both the church and the state have responsibilities to care of the population of the nation and it was natural that this part of the church was more open to conversation with the wider world. It was through this venue that Herzberger initiated his efforts to bring the deaconess movement into the Missouri Synod and through it, into the wider community.

This connection was important just before and during World War I when negative sentiment about German-Americans was running high. As people outside the Missouri Synod saw the good work being done by the ALC ministries on behalf of the community, their respect for the Synod rose and partially ameliorated the previous perception of the Synod as a religious enigma.

The ALC provided a place for conversation about the work of these ministries and made room for reflection on their work. Care and redemption ministry to the marginalized is so time-consuming and all encompassing that without an external framework of support, serious reflection on the work tends to fall by the wayside. Keeping up with the crises and day-to-day realities of people living in need and struggling to survive can absorb every waking moment of the leaders of such

ministries. The men who carried the ALC ministries with Herzberger and the men who came after he was gone had the opportunity, through the ALC, to reflect together theologically on their work for each other and distant colleagues who needed such writings.

[1] Lueking, 19.

[2] Ibid, 20.

[3] Synodical Proceedings, 1899.

[4] Lueking, 23.

[5] Ibid. 26.

[6] Ibid. 27.

[7] Ibid. 28.