

F.W. Herzberger Part Two

[F.W. Herzberger was the first Lutheran city missionary in St. Louis. His City Mission was the founding organization of Lutheran Ministries Association, now Humanitri. His example of passion for the Gospel and for the people he served as well as his perseverance against opposition and rousing indifference intrigued me and led me to dig further. Here, is part two of my work about him.] Herzberger's first work in St. Louis after coming to the city on June 4, 1899 was at the Temporary City Hospital at 17th and Pine where Dr. H.L. Nietert was superintendent. Herzberger stated that "I found plenty to do among the spiritually neglected patients and preached my first sermon on the text Matthew 11:28 (come unto me, etc.) on the Sunday following in a vile smelling little cellar room before perhaps twenty hearers." [1]

Herzberger's second stop was the Female Hospital, originally the Social Evil Hospital, on Arsenal Street where female TB patients, women with other chronic illnesses, and poor working women without family support were cared for. Though Herzberger's call was individual soul-saving, his compassionate instincts flowed beyond the preaching of the Gospel to include helping people with their other needs as well. Herzberger's experiences with the women institutionalized at the Female Hospital led him, within a year, to start Martha's Home, a boardinghouse, for young women coming to the city to find work.

Herzberger's propensity for stretching his ministry beyond his official call, which had been begun with his first congregations, was part of his City Mission work from the beginning as this example with the poor working women illustrates. He began his work by sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, redemption work, but in reaching out to people in need,

he instinctively incorporated aspects of care ministry as well. Herzberger, in his efforts on behalf of the myriad of people he worked with during a given week, exemplified both law and gospel ministries.

During that first week of his life as city missionary Herzberger also visited the Poor House where he met an old man, a former Lutheran. "He told me that he had been sitting in his invalid chair for seventeen years and never had a minister of our Church call upon him. As he did not wish to die and be buried like a dog, he had turned a Catholic." [2]

Herzberger commented that other German men in the Poor House told him that they didn't care which Protestant service they participated in because they were all the same. He responded to this statement in true Lutheran style: "This sad state of affairs caused the writer to hold sermons on Luther's Small Catechism on Friday afternoons for the German inmates, and so wonderfully did the Lord bless His Word on the hearts of these hearers that they resolved to form among themselves a Lutheran congregation of the pure Word and Sacrament and to call the writer as their pastor." [3]

On Arsenal Street near the Female Hospital stood the Sanitarium or Insane Asylum which was also part of Herzberger's ministry territory. Initially, the superintendent of the facility, Dr. Runge, would not give permission for the Lutheran city missionary to preach to the inmates because of his previous experiences with "sensational" preachers who "unduly excited the patients and did more harm than good." But once Runge was told what denomination Herzberger represented, "he gave his permission, stating that he knew the Missouri Synod and its sober way of preaching." [4]

Herzberger also had to convince Captain Huebler, head of the

jail called Four Courts, to allow him to talk with the inmates – not because of the possibility of undue excitement among the men, but because “those boys are beyond redemption.” Nonetheless, Herzberger persevered and began holding services in the jail twice a month. One of his comments about the inmates in the jail was that only two or three miscreants had attended Lutheran schools and “not a single Lutheran girl had darkened our Jail.”[5]

Education has always been a significant part of Lutheran ministry. Luther’s focus on education, whether at home or in the public arena, has informed Lutheran ministry, particularly Missouri Synod ministry, throughout the world ever since. St. Louis Germans, even those who didn’t agree with the Missouri Synod religious stance, sent their children to Missouri Synod schools. Very early on, St. Louisans realized the high quality of Lutheran schools. City mission was no exception to this rule. Herzberger, through the efforts of W. Runge, a Lutheran teacher and two seminary students, began the city mission’s first school in 1900, the second year of the mission’s operation. At the corner of Second and Plum on the day after Labor Day fifty children of various backgrounds came together to learn.

Though by this time St. Louis had a public school system that served part of the youthful population of the city, the immigrant children who would have come to City Mission’s school would probably not have had access to the public education available to more well-to-do and established residents of the city. The anticipation and yet also the risks of starting such a new venture are evident in Runge’s words in The City Missionary newsletter about the opening of the school:

Monday being Labor Day, school opened on the day following. With what secret fear we went to the school that first day,

accompanied by our faithful helpers, Students Maschoff and Buenger! What if all our prayers and work would prove in vain? What if no children would be present? But who can describe our joy when at the school door we were hailed by over fifty happy, noisy children; children clean and children dirty; German, English, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Armenian children. We kept school with a happy heart that day and are doing so still every afternoon.

As with most ministries of this type, the City Mission School continued operating and providing education for children in difficult circumstances until 1941 when the money ran out.

The first annual report of the St. Louis Lutheran City Mission summarizes the work Herzberger started and continued to build until his death in 1930:

Under the visible guidance and blessing of the Risen Head of His Church our Lutheran City Mission has completed its first year's work and presents with much gratitude to its friends and patrons the following report: Mission-stations, 11: City Hospital, Poor House, Insane Asylum, Four Courts, Female Hospital, Memorial Home, Bethesda Incurable Home, Bethesda Maternity Home, Workhouse, Mission Home for Men, Martha Home. Attendance at divine services, 7,366; sick-communions, 20; baptisms, 5 (2 adults); burials, 2; marriage, 1; pupils who have attended hospital mission school, 37; lodgers in Mission Home on Second Street, 437; servant girls at Martha Home, 6; destitute persons provided with clothing and shoes, 30; assisted with tickets to reach home, 6; old spectacles distributed, 200.[7]

Herzberger's passion for the good news of Jesus Christ and his compassion for the marginalized of his day are apparent in this

list of his activities during the first year of City Mission's work. Besides the work of this official call, he had also started new organizations to help those in need that were falling through the holes in the existing safety nets in place in the city. When he saw a need Herzberger moved to address that need as best he could with the resources at his disposal, but he didn't do it alone.

One of Herzberger's first supporters was H. Achenbach who owned Achenbach Apothecary on Market Street. Herzberger set up an office there and all donations and business matters were directed to Achenbach at that address. As with many Lutheran ministry endeavors, it was laypeople like Achenbach who sustained work that the church body itself would not directly support. The Lutheran Mission Aid Society was formed to do just this early in the life of City Mission and gave Herzberger steady support throughout his ministry. Mrs. A. Rohlfing was the founder of the Ladies Aid Society, which was begun in the fall of 1900. Mrs. Rohlfing gathered other Lutheran women who were sympathetic to the causes of City Mission and they formed a society "whose object should be to alleviate all suffering found among our poor City Mission charges and, above all, to raise funds for the purchase of a suitable school and chapel in the newly opened mission district on Second Street." [8] By 1920 they were instrumental in establishing the Lutheran Convalescent Home as well. [9]

Of course all of this work took a great deal of money. The Ladies Mission Aid Society was one of the main sources of support for Herzberger and the work of City Mission, but, as with all ministries like this, asking for additional funds from sympathetic sources was an ongoing effort. Much of Herzberger's writing, particularly in "The Missionary News," the official newsletter of the organization, was dedicated to highlighting the numbers of people helped in all the various ways that City

Mission reached out. It was imperative that it be clear that money sent to City Mission ministries was money well spent. He was effusive in his praise of dedicated Lutherans who continued to support the work, but he was also willing to pull heart strings:

For the last years our Christians in St. Louis have supported the work most loyally by putting it on their congregational budget and also by private gifts of love...At a recent Board of Directors' meeting our treasury showed a deficit of \$239. Certainly none of us who love the Lord's work done in our flourishing City Mission wants it to decrease, nor does any one surely want our treasury to sink deeper into debt or have our missionaries not promptly paid. If every one of us will add but a little bit more to his or her contribution during the coming "lean" months of summer and fall until our congregations increase their budget for the blessed work in the coming year, we shall have sufficient funds to carry on our work.[10]

Members of the board got involved when the financial struggles became too great:

Shall the blessed work of our St. Louis City Mission be discontinued? Is it possible that our Christians here have lost interest in this work? The rich man in the Gospel at least permitted Lazarus at his door to have the crumbs from his table and shall we neglect to give the Gospel crumbs to the poor, the destitute, the sick and the forsaken whom we have been ministering to in our City Mission?

Look at these questions again before you read on. Do you say: Is it as bad as all that? Yes, it is. Our City Mission treasury now has a deficit of \$1,800.00. We cannot continue borrowing

money month after month as we have been doing for the last six months. Our churches must either supply the funds or the City Mission Board will have to reduce still more the number of our workers. The board has been keeping down expenses as far as possible. In school we now have only one teacher in place of the two formerly, the enrollment of children being only 45. And yet we have a deficit every month.[11]

After World War 1 the hospital administrator of City Hospital, Miss Allison, asked the Lutheran City Mission if they would be able to provide a female social worker to help with the female patients. Mrs. A. Vellner who had been working with various City Mission endeavors for many years was suggested and began work at the hospital. The 1923 report on her work explains its nature: "Conferences on different cases 138, errands for patients, 1,462; telephone messages, 2,040; letters written for patients, 149. She made 173 home visits, secured temporary homes for 18; crutches for 16; crutch-tips for 17; stationery for 23; reading-matter for 28; supplied 95 garments; found employment for 10; secured glasses for 8; surgical appliances for 4; burial for 1; baptism for 2; legal aid and quite a number of other things." [12]

[1] F.W. Herzberger. Does Our City Mission Pay? Unpublished manuscript, Concordia Historical Instituted archives.

[2] Ibid.

[3] F.W. Herzberger. Twenty-Five Rich Harvest Years. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1924, 8.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The City Missionary date?

[7] Herzberger. Twenty Five Rich Harvest Years.

[8] "Twenty-Five Rich Harvest Years," 19.

[9] Lueking, 14.

[10] "The Missionary News" vol.8, no.5, May 1923, 2.

[11] Louis J. Sieck, personal correspondence, Concordia Historical archives, November 6, 1918.

[12] Twenty-Five Rich Harvest Years, 16.

Rev. Robin Morgan