

Part One – F.W. Herzberger

The next four weeks (while I'm in charge and before Ed and Marie get back from Europe and over jet-lag) are going to be devoted to some research I did to discover how Lutherans in earlier generations did city ministry. I was working in the city of St. Louis at the time and was concerned about the struggles I had doing care and redemption ministries in that context. [For a clear explanation of care and redemption ministries look at <https://crossings.org/archive/ed/God.pdf>] I decided to look for Lutherans in previous generations who had done what I was trying to do and see if I could learn from them. So I began to hunt around a bit and discovered F.W. Herzberger in the Concordia Historical archives. 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, for the next four weeks, is part of the fruit of my labor.

Robin Morgan

F.W. Herzberger was an inspired choice to be the first city missionary in the Missouri Synod in St. Louis. A pastor was needed who spoke and could preach in English (English didn't become the language of choice in the Missouri Synod until World War 1). They also needed someone who could go into the institutions of the city and reach "lost Lutherans" as well as touch the lives of others struggling to survive outside the normal channels of life in the city. Herzberger's personal history, professional background and, most importantly, faith

in Jesus Christ were woven together in such a way that he would passionately spend the rest of his life building the ministries of the City Mission that endure to this day.

Fredrick William Herzberger was born in 1859. His father was a Lutheran pastor in the Ohio Synod and served as a chaplain in the Union army until his death in 1861. Shortly before he passed away, his father wrote on a slip of paper, "Fritz shall be a pastor." Herzberger's mother followed his father's wishes and enrolled Herzberger in the Missouri Synod's ministerial preparatory school in Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1875. He finished his studies for the ministry at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1882.[1]

His first parish experience was in the northwest region of Arkansas. He and his wife, Martha Schroeter, served in the area of Johnson County where a colony of Germans had been moved from Wisconsin by the St. Louis and Iron Mountain Railroad Company to develop the land. During his four years in this area Herzberger started six congregations. Here in Arkansas he had his first experience as a leader in care ministry on behalf of his community in addition to his Word and Sacrament duties. During his tenure in the Ozarks, three years of crop failure left the people on the verge of starvation. On his own initiative, Herzberger went to the railroad company and petitioned the officials to help the people through this time by supplying them with seeds so that they could grow enough vegetables to keep from starving to death.[2]

Even in this early, short-term pastoral experience, Herzberger was confronting care and redemption realities, which he juggled throughout his ministry. As the shepherd of his flock, he did what needed to be done to help his people survive during difficult times. The pastoral office, which in the Lutheran church is defined by Word and Sacrament ministry alone, was

stretched as Herzberger sought the help of the railroad company. The reality of his parishioners' lives pulled him beyond the traditional role of his calling.

Herzberger's next call took him to Carson, Kansas. He was in Carson for a very short time before an injury to his right hand forced him to leave the congregation and spend several months recuperating with an uncle who was an official at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas. "During these quiet days of recovery, he had a first hand opportunity to see the plight of prisoners and grasp some of the problems with which prison officials must cope."[3]

*Because the injury to his hand was so severe in those days before antibiotics, Herzberger had to extend his recovery time beyond his stay in Leavenworth. He and his family moved to Chicago where he did some temporary pastoral work while they lived with friends. It was during this period that he wrote a book of poetry, *Pilgrim Songs*. These poems illuminated Herzberger's passion for the Gospel and his struggles with what he was sure would be his death at an early age. Thankfully, God spared him and he lived for many years after this accident.*

Herzberger's next long-term assignment was ten years at a congregation in Hammond, Indiana. During his time in Hammond he continued his habit of speaking up on worldly issues that affected his flock. One of his parishioners was killed in the 1894 Pullman strike and Herzberger responded by speaking directly from the pulpit about the situation. He called for both the "rich capitalists" and the "greedy laborers" to repent. That same year he spoke about what he considered to be "spiritual foot-dragging" after a visit to the Lutheran school for Negroes in Concord, North Carolina:

It cannot be denied, love for the Negro mission task has

become cold among many of us. Why? Does it not come about because so many among us think: 'Why bother about the Negro? We can use our money better than to waste it on such people.' 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 Negro 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 for the Son of God...[4]

Such words wouldn't have been the norm for pastors at that time. In fact, many clergymen probably agreed with the thought that "we can use our money better than to waste it on such people." Yet, Herzberger spoke out, even though he was not directly involved with these ministries. It seems that his passion for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ overruled socially prescribed boundaries that most people, including most Lutherans, were not willing to venture beyond. Herzberger possessed an urgency about sharing the Good News, which would not be thwarted by the conventions of the day.

He reiterated his sentiments about ministry with African-Americans many years later in a poem that opened a pamphlet entitled "Unsere Negermission in Wort und Bild." The pamphlet highlights the work of the Missouri Synod among African Americans in many different parts of the country. Herzberger's poem, "The Negro Child's Plea," calls for the people of the synod to respond to the cry from the child (above the poem on the page is a picture of a young black boy kneeling in prayer). One stanza has the child asking for help that he might have Jesus' word in church and school, that he might hear Jesus' grace preached until he goes to his grave.[5]

Though certainly a man of his time and cultural circumstances, Herzberger's passion for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ called him across social boundaries that were clearly delineated. In crossing those boundaries he also witnessed suffering that drew him into care ministry as well. "In the seventeen years following his seminary graduation, F. W. Herzberger had a range of experiences with the suffering and the outcast that exceeded most of his pastoral colleagues of that day." [6] All of this care and redemption experience would soon be put to use in his new call as city missionary in St. Louis.

Herzberger's Call to St. Louis

Though St. Louis was still near the apex of its importance on the national scene [7], the city had problems with housing, immigrant relations and the ongoing struggle of industrialization like all other American cities of the time. By 1900, St. Louis' growth was beginning to slow down, especially in relation to its Midwestern rival, Chicago. The economic depression of 1893-97 hampered industrial growth and "this crisis exacerbated the long-standing malaise of the cotton and wheat growers of the South and West, both of key importance to St. Louis." [8] The river corridor between St. Louis and Philadelphia had been superseded by the railroad corridor between New York and Chicago and St. Louis' life as the premier city of the Midwest was over, even if St. Louis didn't yet acknowledge it.

Lutheran pastors in St. Louis began to see that ministry needed to be offered to the masses of Germans who were being neglected in the upheaval of such rapid change. The ongoing influx of immigrants from Europe continued to flood the congregations of these pastors. With their burgeoning parish work, often trying to minister to congregations ranging in size from several

hundred to several thousand, these city pastors saw no way to do the work themselves that was needed to reach the sick, the delinquent and the aged.[9]

St. Louis Lutheran clergymen realized that many Germans, including Lutherans, were in the public institutions of the city and beyond the ken of their daily pastoral routines.[10] By the 1890s, the time was ripe for the Lutherans to begin doing their part to care for the poor of the community. The Missouri synod community was now well established in the city and they were in position to add their efforts to those long since begun by other denominations and civic organizations. Martin Sommer, a professor at Concordia Seminary reported on their decision to begin City Mission:

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. Prominent among those who favored this project were the Rev. Dr. C.C.Schmidt and the Rev. Otto Hanser. 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 Lutheran congregations of St. Louis. In 1899 these combined congregations called the Rev. F.W. Herzberger of Hammond, Indiana, as city missionary of their city.[11]

Though there was no money through the structures of the church body to pay for this venture, two of the laymen present at that meeting, A.G. Brauer and J.F. Schuricht, quietly committed to funding the first two years of the city missionary's salary. Brauer owned the Brauer Supply Company on Fourth Street in the heart of an area of deep poverty within the city. He had seen

the struggles of the poor first hand and had helped as many as he could with food, clothing and shoes. The time was right to call Herzberger.[12]

Der Lutheraner, the official news organ of the Missouri Synod at the time, reported Herzberger's work this way on June 27, 1899: "A number of our local congregations have called a pastor and preacher who is not bound to any individual congregation, but who is to devote his whole time and strength to mission-work, especially in our public charity institutions. For instance, he will daily visit our large City Hospital and look after the spiritual needs of those among the hundreds of patients who have no church connections, especially the lost and wayward sons and daughters of our Lutheran Church. He will comfort the sick, prepare the dying for a blessed end, call the attention of such as are recovering to our churches, and direct them to our pastors."

In the same article the author, Rev. Prof. L. Fuerbringer, D.D., made clear to the Missouri Synod population that "an entirely new missionary movement had begun in their midst. Hitherto our Missouri Synod churches had been busy establishing congregations in the West and Northwest, doing mission-work among the Negroes in the South, jointly with the Synodical Conference, and had also entered the foreign mission field in India. But here was something new. The object of this mission-work was not to found congregations, but to do individual soul-saving work among the hundreds, nay, thousands of poor neglected Lazaruses lying at our very doors in our large cities."[13]

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 at least a "paper" call to a congregation. This was the synod's way of keeping the clergy from wielding more power than their office allowed. The legacy of Stephan continued to shape the way ministry could be done among the Saxon Lutherans.

[1] F. Dean Lueking. A Century of Caring: 1868-1968, St. Louis: Board of Social Ministry, LC-MS. 1968, 10.

[2] Ibid., 11.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid, 12.

[5] Unsere Negermission in Wort und Bild. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1914, 7.

[6] Lueking, 12.

[7] James Neal Primm. Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri. Boulder, CO: Pruett Publishing, 1981, 289. After the Civil War, many editors of newspapers in the middle of the country set up a campaign to get the capitol of the U.S. moved to the Midwest. Because of St. Louis' prominence at the time, it was one of the front runners in this campaign. DeBow's Review of New Orleans argued that "St. Louis with its healthful climate, beautiful highlands, and metropolitan character, with its central situation in the midst of our greatest industries, and equally accessible to all parts of the country...should be made the Capitol of the United States."

[8] Ibid. 346.

[9] Lueking. 9.

[10] Ibid. 357.

[11] Martin S. Sommer. The Birth of Lutheran City Mission in St. Louis. Unpublished manuscript, LMA archives.

[12] Ronald J. Schlegel. Lutheran Mission Association: An Interpretative History. Unpublished manuscript, LMA archives, 3-4.

[13] F.W. Herzberger, Twenty-Five Rich Harvest Years, St. Louis:

Concordia Publishing, 1924, 6.