

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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Photo courtesy Jayne Shearer

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The Pilgrim



Kramer Chapel circa 1958

Seminary

By the Rev. Robert E. Smith

In the 1800s, the American dream lured millions of Germans to the frontier of a growing nation. The promise of a better life drew them to leave behind all they knew. And with civilization they left behind the church. Scattered in the wilderness, they longed for the preaching of God's Word and the gifts of His Sacraments. Few pastors came to America and still fewer American pastors could speak their language. When a missionary finally visited them, God's people would implore him to stay. "How necessary it is to send a true shepherd to us," pleaded Adam Wesel, elder at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne. "The harvest is great, but, alas, there are no workers! But if it isn't possible to send us a preacher, then send us a circuit rider in spite of this. We are hungry and thirsty for God's Word!"

Christ heard this plea and sent Pastor Friedrich Wyneken and others to serve His scattered German flock. This strong, steel-willed, and energetic missionary was perfect for the frontier. Yet he quickly discovered the need was far too great for him alone. He wrote many letters to Germany crying out:

Thousands of families, your fellow believers, perhaps even your brothers and sisters in the flesh, are hungry for the Gospel's powerful food. They implore you, crying out in distress: "Oh, help us! Give us preachers who will strengthen us with the Bread of Life. . . . I beg you, God willing, take up the work and quickly walk together! Stop conferring about it! Hurry! Hurry! All that matters is that there are eternal souls to redeem!"

Some pastors came but not nearly enough to meet the need. In June of 1841 Wyneken went to Germany to seek attention for a throat ailment and to plead for pastors in person. He lectured wherever possible and met with Dr. Wilhelm Löhe in 1842. Dr. Löhe helped the missionary compile and publish his Macedonian call as: *The Need of German Lutherans in North America: As Friedrich Wyneken Laid It upon the Heart of Their Fellow Believers in the Homeland*. He also suggested to the Bavarian pastor that it might be advisable to build a seminary in America where men could quickly prepare to serve Christ on the American frontier.

In September of 1846, Dr. Löhe and his friends founded a small seminary in the parsonage of Dr. Wilhelm Sihler, pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church of Fort Wayne. At its second convention, Concordia Theological Seminary became the first seminary owned and operated by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Soon, second career men arrived from Germany to prepare for the ministry. Through much hard work and

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the donations of German and American friends, the seminary took root along the Maumee River. The program grew to include high school education, a pre-seminary program, and a college for English-speaking students.

The Fort Wayne seminary became known as the "practical seminary" because the focus of its instruction was to prepare pastors as quickly as possible. They soon encountered the need that Christ sent them to fill. While in the last few months of supervision by Dr. Sihler, Pastor Georg Streckfuss traveled to three settlements as far as 50 miles from Fort Wayne. He fell ill twice with the fever, once for 11 days in Columbia City, Indiana, and once in Avilla, Indiana. In the first town 22 others were also ill and four women died. He traveled through the forest, waded through the swamps, preached, taught, comforted, taught parents how they should instruct their children, and distributed news from home and other writings. On this one trip he baptized 32 children, some of whom died of fever not long after entering God's kingdom. Afterwards he wrote to Pastor Löhe: "There is for me no way too far or too hard and no work too much. I want to go wherever my Lord sends."

Nine years later, Dr. Sihler thanked God: "Praise God who has so richly blessed this endeavor ... God pours this spiritual, heavenly, and everlasting blessing into His Gospel, through Christ, for whose public proclamation He has created the holy office of preacher ... [by His mercy], God has sent them shepherds and teachers after His own heart."

When the Civil War tore one American from another, the Synod moved the "practical seminary" to St. Louis where it shared quarters with "the theoretical seminary." The high school and college students in St. Louis were moved to Fort Wayne to become Concordia College. In spite of the hardships of Civil War Missouri, the two seminaries were blessed by sharing professors. Students from two very different schools grew close to the men who would later minister alongside of them.

For 14 years the two seminaries prospered. Soon the sons of the Missouri Synod's first members began to arrive in St. Louis. The Synod accepted the offer of Lutherans in Springfield, Illinois, to give Concordia Theological Seminary a new home.

In Springfield the seminary served Christ by meeting the church's emerging needs. The German model of pastoral education began when students were confirmed. Springfield's Concordia accepted students who began their training later in life. Many small, confessional Lutheran synods could not afford to found their own seminaries. The seminary trained them as well. When the Missouri Synod began the transition from German language worship and instruction, Concordia began to teach seminary students in English. As the pulpits of her church body filled, the practical seminary increased its educational standards. As a seminary dedicated to Christ's mission, Concordia prepared missionaries as well. Its graduates reached out to African Americans, the deaf, and others. After World War II, Concordia prepared its students to serve their Lord in far away mission fields.

In 1976, the pilgrim seminary returned to its Fort Wayne roots. To save operating expenses, Concordia Senior College merged with Concordia College of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Concordia Theological Seminary moved to the Senior College's beautiful Eero Saarinen campus on Fort Wayne's north side.

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One hundred and fifty years ago Pastor Sihler praised God for the blessings of laborers sent into the harvest field of souls. Christ, the Good Shepherd, has found His lost sheep. He has sent thousands of shepherds from Fort Wayne, St. Louis, Springfield, and Fort Wayne again. They preach His Word, share His means of grace, and faithfully guide generations into His eternal pastures. Today He seeks the lost and still sends shepherds to care for souls. Join us in thanking Christ for His endless grace and love.

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