

The Story of the Beginnings
of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League
of the Northern Illinois District
of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
1936-1951

By the Rev. Henry C. Fricke

The story of the women's missionary movement within the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod cannot be told fully or accurately unless the historian emphasizes the pioneer contribution to that cause of how a missionary society in St. Peter Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights, Illinois planted a tiny mustard seed as an act of faith, how it sprouted and grew and spread out branches into the congregations of that district, the Lutheran women of the Northern Illinois District. It is a fascinating story that needs to be told:

That tiny seed was planted by mission minded women of St. Peter's, because of their concern for a doctor and a member of their church. Thereby hangs a tale of a doctor turned missionary, who needed support to make him an effective missionary. It is a tale, how God's grace turns evil events such as a world depression to the good of His church.

The name of the doctor who would be a missionary in India, is Norbert Leckband. He was a most unusual doctor for he was both a trained theologian and a competent doctor, and thus qualified to heal bodies and souls. After a busy career he is now retired, living with his wife Mefa in Naperville, Illinois. Leckband was graduated from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri in 1924. All his fellow graduates were assigned to positions in the church as pastors, missionaries, chaplains, teachers, etc., but he alone was chosen to take up the study of medicine. The Foreign Mission Board wanted a seminary graduate, who was qualified also as a doctor, to head up the medical mission in Bethesda Hospital in Ambur, India. By linking together theology and medicine in one person, they believed such a person would be an ideal leader in establishing the new medical mission undertaking.

Acquiring the knowledge and skills of a doctor of medicine demanded arduous and long study. When he had completed years of schooling and internship, he was eager to leave for India and begin his activities as head of medical missions. Then came the big jolt to his hopes and plans in the announcement from the board, that due to diminished funds, they were unable to send him to India. The great economic depression had fallen like a wet blanket over the nation and likewise over the activities of the church. That economic monster had robbed the church of a talented missionary doctor and of thousands of dollars spent on his education. So it seemed then, but that wasn't the last word in the debacle. Our Lord, guiding His church, kept His hand on His special servant and eventually led him to India, a better prepared servant with better backing.

Released by Synod, he faced the decision, which career to follow, that of a pastor or of a medical doctor. He chose the latter, because he felt the need of more medical experience, and also because calls into the parish ministry were in short supply. After 3 years of practice in Eveleth, Minnesota, Dr. Leckband with his family moved to Arlington Heights, Illinois, taking over the practice of a retired doctor. The Leckbands joined our St. Peter congregation and were most active members.

People were drawn to Dr. Leckband for his gentle manner and his dedication to his patients. Here was a doctor who made house calls, midnite calls when necessary. He never pressed anyone for payment and sometimes, when there was need he simply cancelled the bill. Facing a critical case he prayed with and for his patients.

Around the middle 1930's indications appeared that the shattering depression was tapering off. Improvements in the economy were also reflected in greater contributions to Synod's treasuries. The Board of Foreign Missions concluded that funds were now adequate to support Dr. Leckband's healing mission in India. They addressed a call to him urging him to accept it. Facing a hard decision that would drastically affect the life of his family and his career, he came to discuss it with his pastor. How well I remember that warm June night in 1936 when we wrestled in prayer to learn God's will in this matter, so important to the kingdom. He frankly admitted that he hesitated to accept Synod's call. His hesitation, he assured me, was not because of unwillingness to accept the sacrifices involved for him and his family.

There was a stronger reason that prompted him to decline the call. His correspondence with Dr. Brandt revealed the inadequacy of the facilities in the hospital. It lacked such essential things as electric power, X-ray, and other tools considered indispensable by the American medical profession. Under such primitive conditions, he insisted, he could not serve effectively. I agreed with him that this lack of proper equipment was sufficient reason to return the call, but I reminded him that whatever he needed could be bought with money. I said, 'Money is easier to find than a missionary with your exceptional qualifications.' Then and there, in my youthful enthusiasm, I committed myself to raise the funds for the equipping of the hospital. I proposed to organize a women's medical missionary society in the congregation to supply the funds by regular contributions. I submit that was a big order of faith on the part of the doctor and myself. We assured ourselves it was God's work and He would not let us fail. Sustained by such faith in God's backing and ours, the doctor could only offer himself to this service and say, "Here I am, Lord, send me!" The very next day he sent his letter of acceptance.

In an impressive service in our ancient church August 30, 1936, attended by a large congregation, many pastors and notables of the Synod, Dr. Norbert Leckband was formally installed as supervising doctor of Bethesda - Hospital in Ambur, India, assigned by the Lord to dispense the Bread of Life and good medicine.

Under the pressure of my commitment, I undertook the task of forming the mission society for the support of the doctor's hospital. In a meeting attended by members of our three ladies' aids, I presented this matter for their consideration. Selling this project to our women proved to be easier than one might expect. It was received with general approval. They concluded the least they could do for the Leckbands who were giving so much was to support his missionary efforts. And so the tiny mustard seed was planted, the humble beginnings of a local society, that would soon branch out to cover a whole district.

Our monthly meetings were well attended, and enjoyed. Their interest was sustained by regular letters from the Leckbands in Ambur which often enclosed pictures and slides. Occasionally we heard returning missionaries tell their stories or heard church workers, such as Mrs. Verna Schulz speak about her Chinatown mission in Chicago. Frequently visitors from nearby congregations attended. Always they brought their mite boxes, which sometimes held crisp dollar bills. There was an outpouring of love and concern that was evident at every meeting.

Elated by the success of their missionary venture within their congregation they concluded that women in the district would likewise be glad to share in our exciting cause and program. They boldly resolved to invite all the **women** societies to join with them in a district wide missionary society. I read from the minutes dated October 15, 1936, Arlington Heights, Illinois:

"A meeting of the medical mission society was called October 15, 1936 in St. Peter Lutheran School, Rev. Fricke in the chair. Rev. Fricke explained that this meeting was called to discuss some form of permanent support for our medical mission in India, headed by Dr. Leckband. The Northern Illinois District has no women's organization of any kind. We believe the time has come to unite our women, to harness their spiritual power, in the real work of the Lord, promoting missions at home or abroad. Our district president, Rev. Ernest Lams, will surely give us his backing."

Then follows a brief presentation on -1) how to interest the ladies of the district; -2) how to organize them; and -3) how to support the approved projects.

In a series of meetings we planned a program which would in particular appeal to our Lutheran women. Our two-fold goal, we said, was missionary education and missionary giving. We put the emphasis on education, believing that an informed, enlightened Christian is a generous giver.

The chief medium for informing our members would be a quarterly magazine for general distribution, to be called the Harvest Call. It would provide inspirational and educational features, The list would include a topic study; missionary stories; articles on specific missions; letters from missionaries in the field; a speakers bureau; audio visual material, pictures galore, original poetry, plays, etc.; an official pledge to **be** spoken in all meetings of the societies, reconsecrating ourselves anew to our Lord's world-wide tasks.

In our discussion how best to tap the zeal for the cause we discarded the idea of contribution envelopes and we decided to adopt the mite box, suggesting a small coin every day, preferably when the family is assembled for home devotions or for prayer at meals.

We must confess that we were somewhat nervous about being able to deliver such an ambitious program, but the very first issue of the Harvest Call, September 1938, with our Lord's help, contained most of the promised material.

No doubt of it the fires of missionary zeal were glowing brightly in the hearts of our women and they looked forward eagerly to their first convention. Now the only task before us was the formality of approval by the district officers. To me at least it seemed like a formality for we couldn't conceive of any church authority opposing such a venture that could only be a blessing to our women and the work of the church. Accompanied by two leading women we presented our cause to the president of our district, Dr. Ernest Lams. I knew him as an eager promoter of missions in his large congregation in Oak Park. Under his inspiring leadership his people more than doubled their mission pledge year after year. He listened to our plans and programs with sincere interest and then said simply, "I don't see how anybody could find fault with such a worthy cause. You have my hearty approval."

Having overcome the hurdle of official sanction, we believed that the way was now cleared to launch the district mission endeavor. We proceeded in arranging the first convention. The ladies of St. John's Lutheran Church on the northwest side of Chicago and their congenial pastor, Henry Blanke, invited us to use their facilities.

We set about to work out the details. We selected as temporary officers Mrs. E. T. Eggersmarm, Roselle, president-chair person; Mrs. Henry Schroeder, Arlington Heights, secretary; Mrs. Wm. Samels, Berwyn, treasurer. The various convention committees were appointed and instructed. All the women societies were invited to attend the convention and join our ranks. So eager were twelve ladies aids to become charter members that they mailed in their application weeks before the convention date. This is the honor roll of charter member societies, pioneers in a district mission group for women and by women:

St. Peter, Arlington Heights (H. C. Fricke)

St. Paul, Melrose Park (P. L. Kluender)

Bethlehem, Dundee (E. Sylvester)

Zion, Ottawa (H. Oldsen)

Trinity, Oak Glen (A. Guebert)

St. John, Lansing (H. Harthun)

St. Andrew, Park Ridge (A. H. Senmann)

Tabor, Chicago (A. D. Wangerin)

St. John, Chicago (H. Blanke)

Trinity, Pontiac (O.C. Simonsen)

St. Stephen, Chicago (O. Fedder)

Our Savior, Chicago (E. J. Scheibert)

All things were now ready, so we thought, but unfortunately this meeting scheduled at St. John Church was never held. A week or two before the date set, Dr. Lams phoned me and in an agitated voice regretfully requested me to cancel the meeting. The district board, he said, had expressed the judgment that he (Dr. Lams) had exceeded his authority in granting approval of a district wide women's society. He had to ask us, he said, to postpone all activity toward such a movement and wait until June 1937 to submit it to the district convention. It was my unpleasant responsibility to convey this depressing news to the officers in a special meeting and to the ladies aid societies by letter. The reaction was as I expected, resentment, even anger, at such "high handed action." We were swamped by protesting phone calls, some insisting that we disregard the direction of district officials and hold the meeting as scheduled. After a long discussion, calmer heads prevailed upon my suggestion to accept this as only a temporary postponement of our cause, which would become stronger by this tribulation. It proved to be in actuality good publicity, gained support of the pastors pressed by their women, and fired women throughout the district to make their voice heard.

We made good use of the interim to the district convention in June 1937 promoting the mission endeavor. The women talked it up in their congregations and I spoke for it in meetings of the circuits and the pastors. My best opportunity to win over the pastors was given me in the general pastors' conference in the fall of 1936. The topic of my paper was "Our Unused Women Power" in which I chided the church for its failure to use fully the spiritual powers of our Lutheran womanhood. The time had come, I insisted, to accept them as partners in the Lord's worldwide programs of bringing Christ to the Nations. My plea was "let's harness the unused power of our women and thus strengthen and extend our outreach." The reaction of the pastors generally was favorable, but some had their doubts, such as expressed by one brother, "It would be difficult for our district officers to control so many organized women." Or another negative comment, "Their support of special projects will decrease their contributions to Synod." One elderly pastor in all sincerity warned against the danger of feminism in the church.

Then in June 1937 at the convention of the Northern Illinois District came the real test whether our mission child would live or die. A large number of women appeared at the convention on the day the destiny of their Lutheran women's missionary endeavor was to be decided. Then convention committee presented its approving recommendation on the endeavor. When the voice vote was called for, the sound of approval came loud and clear. Our good ladies, their eyes bright with tension, sighed audibly with relief and then impulsively burst into resounding applause - and the chairman did not gavel for order. It was a great victory not merely for Lutheran womanhood, but for the church at large, bringing life, and hope and healing to bodies and souls, that would not have been blessed by healing Christian hands if there were no LWML.

With happy hearts we now could devote our time and energies building up our LWML, rather than spend it on overcoming doubters. To help the women officers in forming an effective organization the district synod selected an advisory committee of pastors and laymen as follows:

Rev. Harry C. Fricke, Counselor and Editor
Rev. J. E. A. Mueller, Projects
Rev. Oscar Fedder, Membership
Rev. Martin Ruppert, Mission Education
A. Schumann, Secretary
J. J. Ohlis and Chris Manke, Business

It must be acknowledged that much of the early growth and progress was due to the talented leadership of these men. That policy of providing men as counselors for every department was a temporary arrangement until competent women could take over, at least such was the thinking in the 1930's. Today, our women have demonstrated that they, without question, are fully competent to guide their local societies and their international organization.

The big event we all anticipated eagerly was our first convention. It was held at Concordia College, River Forest, May 5, 1938 with 570 in attendance representing sixty-two congregations and ladies aids. When I was called upon to address the assembly, I found it difficult to control my emotions. I looked at the smiling female faces before me, faces that shone with the joy of achievement. We had good cause for rejoicing for we were celebrating a victory that God had given in answer to our faith and prayers.

Most important business was the election of the first officers, the very first women officers of a district mission society in the Missouri Synod. I inscribe their names in this record:

Mrs. Hugh Bresemann, President
Mrs. Henry Kehe, Mrs. Edward Kasch, Mrs. M. Streufert, Regional Vice Presidents;
Mrs. Otto Koch, Correspondence Secretary
Mrs. Luther Kom, Recording Secretary
Mrs. Walter Samuels, Treasurer
Mrs. Victor Richter and Mrs. Victor Bittner, Members of the Board

The spark, which was ignited in St. Peter Church at Arlington Heights, had produced an ever growing flame of missionary zeal. During the four years before the Endeavor became a part of the national group, much indeed had been accomplished. The twelve charter societies had swelled to 70, comprising some 11,000 women. They had gathered a total of \$21,000 for district and synodical purposes.

Our little band of pioneers, which had pledged their support to Dr. Leckband, saw their pledge redeemed beyond anything they had hoped and prayed for. As their first foreign missionary project they approved the funds to enlarge and equip the Ambur hospital. We were all glad with the good doctor when the new building was dedicated in a joyful ceremony

January 19, 1943. Later in 1951 the national mission league underwrote the cost of \$70,000 for the erection of two additions. Today Bethesda Hospital is one of the finest mission hospitals in all of India and a monument to the zeal of Lutheran women.

Nor were these dedicated women of the Northern Illinois District content to hide their mission light under a bushel. They were eager to have it shine into the other synodical districts, near and far. They encouraged me as editor of The Harvest Call to send it to district officials and women leaders of all districts of Synod. We offered to help them get started in organizing a district society of their own following our guidelines in the pamphlet we had prepared, Plans and Objectives of a District Mission Society.

The response from women in other districts was most gratifying. They too caught the vision of a greater role for Lutheran women in the church and as a result mission societies were born, modelled after ours - I think the record will show that the LWML Endeavor of Northern Illinois was the first district society, concentrating on missionary promotion, guided by their own elected women officers.

While the Central District of Synod made significant contributions in promoting mission consciousness among their women, all the leadership was provided by the clergy. There were no women officers until they joined the LWML in 1948. Ruth Fritz Meier, author of Women in Mission expresses the same judgment: "Actually the Central District Mission Endeavor was no organization at all in the usual sense, but was a project which was administered by the clergy to carry out a program which they had planned, through the Home Mission Board of the District." (page 67)

With so many district groups working diligently and successfully, the stage was set for a national federation. This was finally effected July 7 and 8, 1942 in St. Stephens Church, Chicago by twenty eight representatives of fifteen district mission societies. The organization of The Lutheran Women Missionary League marked the culmination of many years of waiting, working, and praying by mission minded women all over the country. It was a long struggle against misunderstanding and prejudice, but the idea trickled through, that here in our womanhood we had a mighty spiritual power which would greatly increase the mission outreach of the church.

And reach out they did to every state of the union, and far beyond our shores to South America, Africa, India, the Philippines, Europe, devastated by war, whenever the call came to them "come over and help us!" All over the globe stand the monuments erected by their faith and love: churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, missionary retreats and furlough homes, deaconess

chapter homes, a girls dormitory in India, a leper sanitorium, libraries, service centers, etc., etc.. This represents an investment in human welfare of \$1,863,262. In their home districts they provided even more support for mission churches, the blind, the deaf, schools, university chapels and many other projects too numerous to mention costing as of 1951 some \$4,700,000.

With such a record of achievement in Kingdom work before us I hear no voices today questioning the usefulness of this woman power in promoting the mission of the church. The dire results which some negative people predicted have not come to pass. The ingathering of mite box offerings has not reduced Synod's income. On the contrary, general giving for Synod's programs has actually increased since mission societies began to support special, non budgeted projects at home and abroad. Nor have the women taken over the control of Synod and their local churches as a few people feared they would in a strong national organization. Instead of dominating the church our women are now active partners with the men in extending the Kingdom of God.

The Lutheran Women's Missionary League has proven to be a great blessing to the church we love and to countless people they helped in body and soul. God keep the LM as a power for good to the end of time, when our Lord will pronounce His will done upon them and usher them into eternal glory!

THE LEAGUE PLEDGE

In fervent gratitude for the Savior's dying love and His blood - bought gift of redemption we dedicate ourselves to Him with all that we are and have; and in obedience to His call for workers in the harvest fields, we pledge Him our willing service wherever and whenever He hath need of us. We consecrate to our Savior our hands to work for Him, our feet to go on His errands, our voice to sing His praises, our lips to proclaim His redeeming love, our silver and our gold to extend His Kingdom, our will to do His will, and every power of our life to the great task of bringing the lost and the erring into eternal fellowship with Him. Amen.

**Rev. Harry C. Fricke,
Author**

Note: Since the original manuscript was type written, this document has been typed into a digital format. The original manuscript had the League Pledge in its original form of a cross, but could not be duplicated into this document.

Kris Blackwell, LWML NID Archivist/Historian June 2022