

German Presbyterianism in the Northwest

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Barry Waugh, editor, 2018

The tide of emigration has brought to this section of country a vast number of Germans, eager to settle down upon cheap, rich land. Their well-known industry and economy are amassing for them wealth that will gain them future influence. It is their custom, as many points in the East will testify, to settle in communities of their own and not to scatter themselves so much among the general class as some other peoples. There they thrive and grow, building up, as it were, little German states for themselves as in the old country. Any one familiar with the religious condition of the emigrating class in Germany will not need to be told that they bring little evangelical religion with them, and that what religion most of them have, is for the most part, a barren formalism—a mere profession, without any pretension to a spiritual life. This opens up a large field for missionary labor, which many good men believe, if properly cultivated, would in time yield a rich harvest. This could be called the foreign missionary work that has come to our doors from abroad. Why is it not quite as important to preach the gospel to the Germans in America, as to the Chinese in China? And why should we be discouraged any sooner in the former work than in the latter?

As to the number of Germans in the northwest, I wish information was at hand to afford material for an accurate estimate. I can only speak of a few points with any degree of precision. In the city of Milwaukee there are about fifteen or twenty thousand; in Chicago, perhaps an equal number. Nearly one third of the population of Wisconsin is said to be German. In the northern third of Iowa there are at least twenty-five thousand. There are, besides, large settlements of them farther down in the state, especially along the Des Moines River. In Dubuque we have five thousand; in Davenport between three and four thousand. The town of Guttenberg on the Mississippi forty miles above Dubuque has a population of about five thousand, almost wholly German, where little other speech than their language is used.

There are scattered among these communities a number of Roman Catholic Churches, and a smaller proportion of Lutheran. Very many of the people are free thinkers, but a large number of these are so only because they know no better. The Catholics among them are less superstitious than most, and the free thinkers are generally willing to hear and discuss the truth; though of course, there is much opposition to the gospel to be found every where in their midst. Now, among these people, especially in Wisconsin and northern Iowa extending also partially to northern Illinois, southern Iowa, and a part of Minnesota, a decisive effort has been made to spread the gospel through the aid of our Board of Domestic Missions and so far with a satisfactory result, and, as we believe, with an efficiency and success equal to the average of our missionary work among our own population. The Congregationalists have also done something, and the Methodists still more towards the same end, as also the German Reformed.

We have now in connection with us, in the limits above named, twenty-two churches, with a membership of over one thousand, to which may be added nearly four hundred more, scattered in preaching stations where churches are not yet organized. The number of hearers gathered into congregations is thus hardly less than three thousand. Ministering to these churches. We have thirteen ordained ministers and one licentiate—a scanty supply. They have

seventeen houses of worship, eight of which have cost about eighteen thousand dollars, and although the cost of the remainder is not ascertained, it will certainly be fair to estimate the whole expense incurred in building at no less than twenty-five thousand dollars. Nearly all of this has been the fruit of their own labor and sacrifice. Of this amount about ten thousand dollars has been expended upon one of these churches in the city of Dubuque, which is the largest among them, and numbers, at the present, one hundred and thirty members. And I may mention in this place, that beside the work of this church, the First Presbyterian Church has in this city, entirely independent of the other church, a mission school among the Germans, under the care of one of its ruling elders, numbering over one-hundred scholars, which is conducted in English, and has been sustained for over six years. The pastor of the German church is the Rev. A. Van Vliet, the father of these churches and the principal agent in their establishment. He has been for eleven years pastor here, is a native of Holland, and over fifty years of age. Since his connection with this church he has received upwards of two hundred and fifty members. It may be well for the purpose I have in hand, to make a farther statement concerning this good brother because it will involve a sketch of the rise of the work among this people.

For some years a soldier in his native country, Mr. Van Vliet afterwards learned a trade, and came to America that he might support himself by it. He had been instructed thoroughly in the sound Calvinism of the Dutch Church, and was, as he believed, converted to God through the power of the Holy Spirit. In 1849 he was led, in the providence of God, to Platteville, Wisconsin, where was a settlement of Germans. There were then no German Presbyterians in the whole region. Desirous of doing what he could for religion, he went about in his spare hours distributing tracts, and talking with the people upon their duty to serve God. After a year the people became anxious to have preaching among them, and a young man, a candidate for the ministry, came into their midst. He was a promising and sincere laborer, but much tainted with Arminianism. Mr. Van Vliet conversed much with him, and as he seemed desirous of learning the truth, the latter agreed to instruct him in the doctrines by a study of the Scripture together. The scholar came and sat by the teacher as he toiled at his daily work, and was much with him in the evenings, and upon the Sabbath, until he was thoroughly instructed in sound doctrine. After some time, a church was organized in Platteville, under the care of the Congregationalists. In the meantime, Mr. Van Vliet had been studying the German language, and speaking it amongst the people so that he became very familiar with it, and he was persuaded to commence preaching, as he had read and studied theology, and especially the Scriptures. In 1852 he was called to the German Church in Dubuque, which was then Congregational, and after much struggling in his mind, he accepted the call. He found but little vital religion among the forty members of the church and set himself at once to teach them the necessity of regeneration and a spiritual life with Christ. He has labored acceptably with them until the present, and his instrumentality has been greatly blessed. His church is now as sound in doctrine, and as spiritual, as is the majority of our churches, but maybe even more so. More than one hundred have gone forth from his church to form the nucleus of other churches in all this region. In 1854 the church in Dubuque, and that in Platteville, being dissatisfied with the doctrines and form of church government in the Congregationalist body, came over to the Presbyterians, and have since been faithful in their adherence to our standards, to which they profess much attachment. Since that time, the other churches of

which we have spoken above, have been organized, and the work has been urged forward as fast as good men could be procured to labor among the people.

Mr. Van Vliet saw at once that the great want for this work was a sound and evangelical ministry, so as soon as he was settled in Dubuque, he began to look around for pious and capable young men among the Germans, whom he might instruct for the ministry. Of course, material was scarce in so limited a membership, but he succeeded, from year to year, in finding a few who had love for Christ sufficient to lead them to engage in study for this end and who gave fair promise of usefulness. He received them into his own house, boarding them at cost, for one dollar to one dollar and fifty cents per week for all expenses. He has thus spent a good deal of his own funds for this work. The Board of Education, at the recommendation of our Presbyteries, has granted to these students from one-hundred to one-hundred-twenty dollars a year for their support because most of them were poor. They have remained with Mr. Van Vliet in their course of study, variously from two to five years. As the result of this, there are now of these students eight ordained ministers and one licentiate in the field. There are also two more ministers, whom Mr. John Bantly—Mr. Van Vliet's first student in Platteville, and pastor of the church there—has instructed. These *eleven*, with *one* minister, a convert from the Lutheran Church, and *two* from the German Reformed Church, comprise the whole force of laborers in this great field.

These students have all been licensed and ordained by our Presbyteries, and I may say here that, owing to the peculiarity of their training, our Presbytery, and I am assured the others also, have been particularly careful and minute in their examinations, especially upon doctrinal points. And these trials have been most satisfactory, showing thorough acquaintance with reformed doctrines, and capability in their defense. The diligence and good example of these ministers in the field is such as to inspire universal confidence, and their success has been most encouraging. To show how they are esteemed, let me quote an extract from a late report of the meeting of the Synod of Wisconsin, which appeared in your issue of November 7th. Your correspondent, R. G. T. says:

There were present also a goodly number of German ministers, representing the very large German population of the State, who greatly need the refining and elevating influences of a sound Christianity. These German brethren are zealous and excellent ministers, sound in the faith, and thorough Presbyterians. A wide field of usefulness among their countrymen is open before them, and doubtless God will make them the instruments of turning many of them from vice, and the errors of a rationalistic philosophy, to the wisdom of the just.

Their churches are thriving and winning souls, and the self-sacrifice of their members is most exemplary. As instances occurring under my own eye, I may mention that the German Church in Sherrold's Mound, a large German settlement a few miles north of Dubuque, has made arrangements to build next summer a stone church, to cost all told, about twenty-five hundred dollars. They have subscribed part in money and part in *labor*. They will blast and quarry the stone themselves this winter and haul it to the place of building where they have several acres of ground, and next summer they will unite and put it up themselves. They thought of applying to the Board of Church Extension for aid, but finally concluded that they would try to pay it all themselves. The church in McGregor, numbering thirty-three members, has just about completed a building to cost one thousand dollars. They thought of asking for

two-hundred dollars from the same board, but finally thought they would take another year and endeavor to pay it themselves. The church built in Dubuque at the expense of eight-thousand dollars is a fine edifice with a parsonage in the basement, also a lecture room, and is out of debt except for a small amount assumed by one of their own members. By a flaw in the title to their lot, which was undiscovered until two years since, the land having been settled by another person previous to the one from whom they bought it, they were compelled to pay for it *again* the sum of two thousand dollars. Although this was in the hard times, two winters since, they set manfully to work and raised the half of it at once among themselves. And you may rest assured that they will pay the remainder. They are almost entirely persons of very limited means, and in some cases, they have actually paid one quarter of their whole annual income to save their church, which signifies considerable attachment to it while setting a noble example to other churches in debt. To show how anxious the Germans are to have the gospel, I may state a single instance. There is a large settlement in Bremer County, Iowa, one hundred miles from Dubuque. Some of Mr. Van Vliet's members, who had removed there, had been engaged in instructing the people, and were very anxious to have a sound minister. They sent word for Mr. Van Vliet to come and see them; sent a wagon twenty-five miles to the railroad depot to bring him to them; stopped their work for a whole day in the midst of harvest and turned out in a large crowd to hear him preach; and sent him back the next day having paid his expenses. He thinks a church of about thirty truly converted members might be established there. They are very anxious to have a minister, but he does not have one to send. Ministers enough could be had from abroad, but the experiences of the churches are that such ministers are, in most cases, not only unevangelical but also unexemplary and unfit.

Now, it is to be noticed that this work has been sustained by the Board of Education by assisting in the preparation of students; by the Board of Domestic Missions by assisting in sustaining them as ministers, but they have drawn very lightly upon it; by the Board of Church Extension, in completing their houses of worship; and by the Board of Publication by giving them tracts, and books, and hymns, and above all, the *Confession of Faith* in their own language. So here is found a practical proof, both of the need and of the efficiency of our church machinery.

In several of the Presbyteries in other parts of the country, with which I have been familiar, there has been great discouragement felt in regard to the German work. But I think that, when they reflect upon the matter, they will find that the difficulty has been almost wholly confined to the ministers who have labored in these churches. These ministers have, in a majority of cases, been those who brought from Germany their ministerial credentials or have come from the German Reformed Church of this country. A very large proportion of these men have not fulfilled the expectations they excited, and as a class, to which there are honorable exceptions, they have failed to be useful to us. Whether it has been a want of personal piety, or a want of appreciation of our system, or a failure in training, or whatever, it is not for me to say. Under such circumstances our chief hope, or at least our most promising method, seems to be, to educate young men of tested piety in our doctrine and system of government, and send them forth to the work. The experiment tried here for ten years has proved most successful. There has been little difficulty in the churches, none among the ministers, and all has moved on harmoniously. We could put twenty more men into the field, who could readily be secured from abroad, were it not for the conviction that we are better off

without any who are not thoroughly educated in our doctrine, and who do not love our system. But we prefer to wait until we can get those whom we believe will be useful.

I know that I will be met here by the objection that we ought to send English ministers among them, and preach to them in English, which they will have to learn at last. But if we do, we will have to postpone the work to another generation for those who emigrate do not themselves, as a class, ever learn our language so as to be able to understand it in sermons. Thus, all who emigrate, as long as emigration lasts, though it be for a century, will be deprived of our missionary labor. Besides, many of the second generation will not learn English with any degree of thoroughness, especially where there are large settlements of their countrymen. I am informed by a German, in whom I have confidence, that there are nearly whole counties in Pennsylvania, where little else than German is spoken, even among the rising generation. Even if this should be an exaggerated statement, yet there are many such large communities we know of. To these we must send the gospel in their own tongue, or not at all. When our foreign missionaries enter upon their fields, their first work is to learn the language of the country, and we know how native evangelists are sought in such lands. Why shall we not send the gospel in like manner to the Germans, when the door is opened to us?

As regards Mr. Van Vliet's scholars, he has anxiously desired that they might have a more thorough education than he has been able to give them in his lectures. But he has done the best he could under the circumstances, and with his means. Now, however, the way seems to be opening to this end, and the increase in churches has afforded more suitable material from which to select young men for this work, and there are more offerings. He desires to enlarge the "Log College" of the West. To make an effort in this direction he has been encouraged by prominent ministers, to whom the character of his students has become known by contact with them in our Presbyteries. The Presbytery has taken preliminary action in support of this effort and in the spring, it is expected that others will do the same. Encouraged by this support, Mr. Van Vliet has borrowed from a friend of the movement one thousand dollars, with which he has bought a house and lot adjoining his church, which, together with rooms in the basement of the church, will accommodate twelve or fourteen students. He has employed a licentiate, who has been his student for seven years and has been educated mostly at his expense to assist in instructing as a tutor for the coming year. This young man will have to be paid a small salary, about three hundred dollars. He has now in his class five students. Mr. Van Vliet proposes to instruct them in Latin and Greek besides the usual studies of a theological course, as far as possible. They will be boarded at what it will cost, a dollar and a half a week, including rooms. As their vacation is only six weeks in the year, they have not time to accumulate anything by colportage,¹ and their support will devolve chiefly upon the church.

Mr. Van Vliet has never received and does not now receive a dollar for teaching. It is purely a labor of love for him. To secure the building he has bought under certain conditions will require the contribution of one thousand dollars, but also three hundred dollars more will be needed during the coming year. The German churches are generally poor and heavily burdened already. We appeal, therefore, to any individuals who may feel an interest in this valuable work, to lend their assistance in raising this fund, either by large or small donations. Funds sent to the editors of *The Presbyterian*, to the Rev. A. Van Vliet, Dubuque, Iowa, or to your correspondent, will be publicly acknowledged. It is hoped that the different Presbyteries

¹ [The transport and distribution of books and literary materials by representatives within the denomination.]

that are most interested will make an effort to endow a permanent institution here and vastly enlarge its means of usefulness. It is one of the most attractive and promising of all our missionary efforts and has thus far proved one of the most successful.

In closing this long article, I would state that the statistical and personal information contained herein has been obtained mostly from Mr. Van Vliet himself, whose modesty would forbid the appearance of his name at all, did not your correspondent deem it necessary as authority for these statements. As regards other matters herein contained, I shall be glad to be corrected, if wrong, by some one on the field who has had equal opportunities of observation and information and a better judgment in the matter. I leave this cause with God and his Church, praying that this good work may be steadfastly and earnestly advanced, and that friends may be raised up for its assistance.

HAWKEYE²

² [Beginning with the earliest newspapers and into the nineteenth century the authors of newspaper article often used pseudonyms. The reason for this may have been Victorian modesty; reluctance to sign their names due to, as Hawkeye mentioned, concern over the accuracy of the article; fear of retribution for what they said; or they just did not want anyone to know who they were.]