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Martin Ruccius and the Synod of Manitoba and Northwest Territories

The Rev. Michael Diegel¹

Throughout the history of Lutheranism in Western Canada, various people have contributed to the development of the church. Among the predominantly German Lutherans of the General Conference, Martin Ruccius had a profound and lasting impression. In many ways, he was literally the father of what became firstly the Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories and then the Synod of Manitoba and other Provinces. In time, this synod came to be what we now know as the Synods of Alberta and the Territories, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada (ELCIC) and Eastern and Western North Dakota of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

Due to the timing of Ruccius' ministry, various political and church names will be used in this paper. When he came to west, the province of Manitoba was very small but the Manitoba Synod would cover Manitoba and the Northwest Territories, stretching between Winnipeg and Edmonton and encompassing about 2,600,000 sq. km. What we now know as Alberta and Saskatchewan, and most of Manitoba, were part of the Northwest Territories and would not become provinces until 1905. Manitoba would not become the size it is today until 1912. As a result, the name of the Synod of Manitoba and Other Provinces started as the Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories. Similarly, the General Council would merge with the General Synod in 1917 to become the United Lutheran Church in America. These changes in name can be confusing, but for historical accuracy, they will be used when appropriate.

The modern Lutheran presence in what are now the prairie provinces of Canada began with the waves of immigration of the late 19th century. The Canadian government wanted to settle these "new" territories and so encouraged European immigration, which would help to maintain the loyalty of these areas to the crown. There was still a fear that because of immigration from the United States, these "new" territories might fall to the United States and memories of the rebellions/resistance of 1870 and 1885 were still fresh in the mind of political leaders, as were memories of the Fenian raids.

The completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway helped to facilitate settlement by making an all-Canadian route for immigration possible. Prior to this, and before the completion of the Canadian Northern Railway, some of the potential immigrants were lost to the United States as they had to traverse the United States until they could come north to Winnipeg and then fan out across the prairies to homesteads. Some of these homesteads were in ethnic colonies while others were isolated.

These immigrants, as they established communities, wished to have worship in their own language and traditions. For some Lutherans this meant appealing to the Canada

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Synod and thus the General Council for pastors who could speak German. For other German speaking Lutherans, this need for pastors was met by the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and for yet others the Ohio Synod provided such pastors. Each Lutheran church body saw this new territory for expansion as their own mission field with the immigrants as potential new members, and so they were eager to establish churches and send missionaries to their own.

The Canada Synod soon realized that western Canada was just too far away from the main part of the synod to do effective missionary work. Communications and transportation realities made supervision and growth of this work almost impossible for a synod which, for all intents and purposes, was based almost exclusively in south western Ontario, with a another concentration of congregations in the Ottawa Valley of Ontario and Quebec. The Canada Synod realized by 1881 that they needed to call someone to minister to the growing number of Germans in the west, but it would take time to find such a person and secure funding from the General Council. As noted in the General Council minutes of 1888,

the Rev. J. Mueller, Secretary of the Canada Synod informed the committee that they, this Synod, had undertaken missionary work among the German Lutherans in Manitoba, and that they desired to call a man to take charge of the field. Towards the support of this missionary your committee has granted \$600 per annum. This mission is under the supervision of the Canada Synod and our payments have been made to the Treasurer of that Synod, and not the missionary directly.¹

This action would have made the missionary responsible to the Canada Synod, and the Canada Synod responsible to the General Council for how they spent the money. From this rather modest start of one pastor, a church in western Canada would grow.

Martin Ruccius was not the first pastor and so to understand the situation into which he came we need to back up a little to the time of Heinrich Schmieder. Schmieder was the first pastor called by the Canada Synod to serve as a missionary to this vast territory of western Canada. As can be the case, church politics – or rather money – was an issue with his ministry from the very beginning. The General Council, based in the United States, felt that they should have control over the missionary; after all, they were the ones paying the salary. The Canada Synod, on the other hand, felt it was their territory and therefore they should have control. Despite the bickering between Council and Synod over who paid the bills, Heinrich Schmieder laboured in the west to build churches in communities and to reach out to the scattered German settlements.

While Martin Ruccius is generally overshadowed by the more well-known Heinrich Schmieder, his contributions outweighed, in many ways, those of Schmieder because of the length of his tenure. Schmieder was the first General Council pastor in western Canada and as such laid the foundation for churches of that body. He is known for founding churches in Langenburg, the oldest Lutheran church in Saskatchewan, and in Edenwald. Yet Schmieder did not remain long, moving to California and then to Pennsylvania. His short tenure meant that it was up to others, such as Ruccius, to build on the foundation. They would do so under the direction of the Canada Synod for the first few years.

In 1891, however, it was decided to shift the responsibility for Manitoba and the Territories to the mission committee of General Council. At their convention that year, the Canada Synod:

.... resolved unanimously: 1: 'That the entire management of the North-West mission, including the calling and appointment of the missionaries, be committed to the German mission committee of the General Council. 2. That those missionaries and their churches shall connect themselves with the Synod of Canada and be under its discipline.' This offer was accepted ... and since then the work has prospered and expanded wonderfully. There are now stationed in this district four missionaries, serving eight churches and twenty-five preaching stations with a membership of 1,900 adults and children."²

The General Council thus became responsible for this area of mission work, and to accomplish the task, they were in need of missionaries to serve the far-flung German churches of what is now western Canada. In the 1891 minutes of the General Council, it was reported that there were seven missionaries in the field supported by the General Council and they were labouring in a very large area.³ These missionaries did not serve just one church, but a number of churches and preaching stations. These large parishes were the norm rather than the exception for pioneering pastors.

So who was Martin Ruccius? As was the case with many pastors in the time of settlement, he was not born in Canada. He was born in Pessin, Prussia, and grew up in Stettin, Prussia (which is now Szczecin Poland). After his time in the Prussian army, he studied theology at the universities of Berlin and Greifswald. Unlike many of the pastors who came to Canada from Germany during this period, Martin had not studied at Ebenezer Seminary in Kropp or Breklum, as had Schmieder. Yet, like those pastors, Martin had a desire to go to the mission field – but for him this was supposed to be in German East Africa, where his brother Gerhard was already a missionary.

Records report that "Shortly before he reached the completion of his education as a theologian, information came to him concerning the need for ministers to serve among German pioneer settlers in the prairie provinces of Canada. He volunteered on a temporary basis – as he thought – expecting later to return to complete his preparation for mission work in Africa."⁴ He came in 1892, but instead of staying for a short time, he became a citizen in 1896, and stayed until his death in 1943. He would marry Wilhelmine Wagner and have a family. From this family two sons as well as a grandson would become pastors. In addition, five daughters married pastors. Thus Ruccius literally became the father of the synod.

Ruccius was originally called to serve as a missionary out of the Langenburg parish, but instead he stayed in Winnipeg. At first glance, one might think that he had taken the easy way out by staying in Winnipeg. However, he used Winnipeg as a stable base from which to serve the German Lutherans in the Northwest Territories and North Dakota. Being in Winnipeg would also provide convenient – if one may use that word in this context – access to travel on the train network, enabling him to travel to the various mission points on a regular basis.

Living in Winnipeg also meant that he would be able to meet new immigrants as they arrived in this "gateway to western Canada." This latter activity will come up later as

we shall see. By meeting immigrants, he had a wonderful opportunity to persuade them to have their new churches in their new communities join the General Council. Thus, staying in Winnipeg may actually have given him more work as a missionary than if he had settled in Langenburg.

The call to ministry would eventually take Ruccius to serve Neudorf, NWT and Strathcona, NWT. It was while serving Neudorf that his vision became impaired by snow. This affected his work to such an extent that he tried to settle in urban church and would not have to travel as much as he had in the past. However, when he could not get an urban parish, he became the editor of *Der Nordwester* from 1901-1904. Eventually he went back to Trinity Lutheran in Winnipeg to serve as their pastor. No matter where he served, however, he went out to preach to various German settlements and helped to establish many churches some of which continue to this day.

Those familiar with the geographic distribution of Lutheran churches today can attest to the vast distances pastors cover using cars. In the summer months this can be trying, but in the winter much more so. It was also dangerous, especially if a vehicle broke down. For those early pioneer pastors, including Ruccius, this travel, if they were lucky, was by train. Most pastors, along with their parishioners, lived in isolation because of distance, language, and the restrictions of transportation by horse – before the advent of cars and better roads. Despite this, they were clearly aware of the mission that God had given them.

In addition to his pastoral duties, Martin Ruccius also became the superintendent of missions and president of the synod for a number of years. In that role he would go to conventions of the General Council, reminding that body of the presence of Lutherans in western Canada and, no doubt, the need for ordained pastors. “Only after the Synod finally requested the General Council in 1904 to send representatives on a regular basis did the Council have a presence in the matters of the synod.”⁵ But this presence was easier said than done at this period of time. To get to conventions was a major expedition, not to mention the cost in terms of dollars and time. The General Council was still paying part of the bill and would have wanted accounting for the how the money was used. For example, in the 1895 General Council minutes we read that:

The church in Winnipeg still has for its pastor the Rev. Martin Ruccius. About 150 persons belonging to it have moved to the Northwest and settled at Tupper and Gladstone. Fully 550 persons remain in the church in Winnipeg. Mr. Ruccius regularly visits the settlers at Tupper and Gladstone. We are happy to say that since a true Lutheran practice has been unequivocally established in the church at Winnipeg the distraction has ceased. The people are earnestly endeavouring to pay off the church debt.⁶

The state of the church was progressing well and the synod was expanding as new immigrants arrived and their churches joined the Synod of Manitoba. True Lutheran practice was established, but what that meant was not stated, and it no doubt was debated among the various Lutheran denominations. One of the reasons for the growth of the church was that between 1891 and 1894 German immigration had tripled. The result was that the number of people being served by General Council pastors had doubled. Many of these congregations were small and at great distances from each other. Consequently, they

could not support a pastor of their own and so relied on visiting pastors who, when they came, would baptise and perform marriages. This lifestyle called for dedication, but also meant loneliness and separation from families and colleagues.

The distance which separated these missionary pastors from the Canada Synod no doubt contributed to a sense of isolation and wanting to come together. This strongly influenced their desire to form an ecclesial organization. First, they formed a conference of the Canada Synod, and then in 1897, they formed the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories.

The motion passed at the 1897 convention reads as follows:

We the congregations and pastors of the northwest Canada in knowledge that it is for the salutary progress of the work of our church it is a matter of blessing in agreement with the wishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Canada and the German inner missions committee of the General Council for us to declare herewith we do hereby organize ourselves as a synod on the foundation of the Word of God and the respective confessions of the same under the name: The German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories.⁷

In the minutes of the 26th convention of the General Council held at St. John's church in Erie Pennsylvania from October 14-20, 1897, President E.F. Moldehnke said in his report the following:

This summer in the month of July, a new Synod, which embraces the missionaries in the northwestern provinces of Canada was organized. This new Synod has resolved to apply for admission into the General Council"⁸ "The Canada Synod, at its last meeting, resolved to recommend to our missionaries and churches in Canada the organization of a separate Synod. The Board had thought favourably of this recommendation, and advised the missionaries to organize a Synod as soon as practicable.⁹

On page 19 of those printed minutes we find a brief paragraph stating: "Admission of the Manitoba Synod and the Northwest Territories was introduced to the General Council and made formal application for the admission of this Synod, certifying that it had adopted the constitution and Fundamental articles of Faith and Church Polity, whereupon it was by unanimous vote of the Council, accepted as a member of this body."¹⁰

Norman Threinen writes: "While the formation of a new synod in Western Canada reduced the pressure of administration and supervising the field from a distance the problem of funding the mission remained. The synod was limited in the amount of funds it could generate from its own midst; it had to rely almost completely on the General Council for funding."¹¹

At the first convention of what became the Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories, the six pastors and two laymen elected Martin Ruccius as the first president. Some would call such a small church organization foolish rather than wise. Yet to Ruccius and others it was not. They saw God calling them and leading them to new ventures, ventures that were engaged in the furtherance of the Kingdom, as they would say. For this to come about they would have to plan carefully and set up institutions to serve the church

and help it to grow from five pastors and 5,000 members spread out from Winnipeg to Edmonton, as Threinen notes.¹²

Part of Ruccius' duties was to try to come to a peaceful solution with the LC-MS about what was seen as "poaching" – the attempt to lure congregations away from their parent denominational bodies. It seems that inter Lutheran relations were not that good, with churches often going with whatever Lutheran body that could supply them most quickly with a pastor. Perhaps this was one of the reasons that at the next convention Ruccius asked to be released from duties of president. The convention refused to accept his resignation and so he would continue as president overseeing the growth of this new synod.

Martin began his first presidential report with Isaiah 60:22 "The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly" (NRSV).¹³ When one sees that there were only six pastors and two laymen at this convention, the text seemed most appropriate. In his report, he proclaimed his faith that God was with them and would make their mission flourish.

What exactly the mission of the church was to be and to whom, was a matter of concern. The one certainty was that it was German. Many of the Lutherans who came to Canada were from various German traditions. Some had come from "purely" Lutheran churches, while others came out of the Prussian Union, a merger of Lutheran and Reformed churches. But all of these German Lutherans saw themselves as only *Evangelische* – evangelical Lutherans. These differences, however, most often came up in discussions around Holy Communion and the placement of the altar and pulpit in the sanctuary.

Perhaps as a result of these differences among the German Lutherans, a resolution proposed in 1898 by Pastor Heinrich Beer was adopted at the convention. It was reported that: "The Pastors should follow the following maxim: 'The Pastors go to the heathen and godless whether called or not; such as claim to be Christian, or Christian congregations, especially Lutheran should only be served when called according to our agreement. Immigrants of course do not fall into that category.' A lively debate followed especially complaints about the Missouri Synod interfering in our congregations. The resolution was accepted."¹⁴

During the time of settlement congregations would sometimes go with whatever church body could provide them a pastor who spoke their language. Sometimes this meant that churches would switch allegiance when one denomination or the other was able to provide a pastor during a vacancy. The LCMS too would complain about losing congregations to the General Council or to the Ohio Synod. To such a small synod as the Synod of Manitoba, the loss of even one congregation, however, was significant because money was always an issue.

At the convention held July 12-15 1900 in Edenwald, N.W.T. Ruccius is listed only as the acting president. He wrote in his presidential report:

Our Synod is still in the stage of beginning. One can compare it with the development of a child and we as loving parents have to watch for signs that could be of significance. When good things happen, [we are to] be glad and happy. But at the same time when bad influences arrive we must with mild rebuke curb them. Or, if it must be, act with severity. We will have to be careful in the development of our

Synod if we want it to thrive and prosper. Always having in mind Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build labour in vain."¹⁵

To have this new synod grow and thrive, Ruccius and others knew that they would need their own seminary. Pastors, up until the establishment of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and Lutheran College and Seminary, were educated either in the United States or in Europe. As a result, many of the American-trained pastors would return home after a short stay, including Heinrich Schmieder. While there was a strong sense of being missionaries to their own, there were never enough pastors to reach all the Lutheran settlers let alone to reach out to others in the English language.

Without a seminary in Canada and with few pastors willing to go to the newly opened western territories it is perhaps natural that they turned to the seminaries of Europe. There were two seminaries, Breklum and Kropp, where many missionary pastors were educated. These pastors have had a lasting influence on the church of Canada, particularly those who trace their lineage to the General Council and then the United Lutheran Church in America or the ULCA which was formed in 1917, the Lutheran Church of America (LCA) of 1962, and now the ELCIC (1986).

Many of the pastors who came out from Germany found it hard to adjust to life on the prairies, and they would return to the more settled areas of eastern North America. In order to remedy this situation Ruccius, along with the pastors of the Manitoba Synod, felt that they needed a seminary of their own. To do this the co-operation of the General Council would be needed.

A special commission, convened by the president of the General Council, Dr. Schmauk, voted favourably on the question, whether it would be advisable for the Church to establish a training school on the field of the Manitoba Synod, and at its meeting at Reading, PA., in 1910 the Home Mission Board of the General Council promised Pastor Ruccius, who was attending the conference to appeal for assistance in the establishment of a pro-seminary or college, financial support. It was probably with these encouraging promises in mind that at the convention of Synod at Winnipeg, Man., in 1911, President M. Ruccius in his report to Synod made this pointed statement: "I consider the time of discussion to be past, the time for action at hand; or I fear, this project will be forever dropped."¹⁶

Perhaps somewhat optimistically it was thought that this seminary would cost \$620 per year.

In the 1920 minutes of the ULCA, one of the reasons for wanting a seminary in western Canada was to have more pastors who were able to speak English. Even in these early years it was realised that there would come a time when pastors would have to speak English as well as German. A seminary of their own would allow this, but it was also realised that this small synod could not do it on their own and would need the assistance of the ULCA. Without Kropp supplying pastors, even with the seminary in its midst, it was felt that the synod would not have grown and thrived as it had.

What became to be known as Lutheran Theological Seminary was established in Edmonton but would soon move to Saskatoon as it was the centre of the area covered by the synod and also an important transportation hub. What was first established as a seminary expanded to include a high school, which met the needs of a rural population

where education beyond grade eight was often lacking. In 1926 the seminary became affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan as Lutheran College and Seminary. This seminary would merge with the Luther Theological Seminary in 1965 to form Lutheran Theological Seminary -Saskatoon.

In the 1920 minutes of the United Lutheran Church in America we also read:

Many of its missionaries have been in service for years and are not only men of great experience but of great zeal and self denial. They are the pioneers, who in the discharge of their duty unflinchingly endure the hardships of pioneer work such as extreme inclemency of climate, days and nights of travel under most trying conditions through trackless forests, over swift flowing rivers, and in lonely prairies, braving tempest and hailstorms, prairie fires and blizzards, heat and cold, hunger and thirst, in order to uphold the banner of the Lutheran Church in those distant and isolated out posts, to bring the cheering message of the Master to the scattered immigrants, to assure them that their brethren in the faith have not forgotten them, to baptize the newborn, to teach and confirm the young, to gather the adults into congregations, to invite them to the Lord's table, to visit them in days of sickness, and to comfort them when they stand with bleeding hearts and tear-stained eyes at the lonely grave of one of their loved ones."¹⁷

With a report such as this, is it any wonder that fewer European pastors, as while as those trained in the seminaries of the Eastern United States were willing to come? As the economic conditions in Germany worsened in the 1920s though more and more immigrants were coming to Canada. As a result, more pastors were needed, but this happened just as the older pastors were beginning to retire.

Ruccius, due to health reasons, retired from active ministry in 1927. Retire is, however, a relative term. In retirement, he served the synod as treasurer and editor of the synod newspaper *Die Synodalbott*. He was also awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Hartwick Seminary of Oneonta, New York, in recognition of his contributions to the growth of the church in Western Canada.

By 1931 the Synod had grown to such an extent that it was divided into three conferences: Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Mission work, particularly among new immigrants, even with the depression, was seen as a priority. The depression impacted the synod, as it did the church across Canada, and funds were always a concern. In the 1931 minutes of the synod we find in the report on Inner Missions the following motion "...resolved that the board learns with pleasure of the initiation of city mission work in Winnipeg but that with deep regret we must inform you that the finances of the Board will not permit an appropriation for this work."¹⁸ Times had certainly changed in the synod. While concerned for work among Germans, this motion was presented in the minutes first in English and then translated into German.

Martin Ruccius served long enough to begin to see the church develop. A church, which in the beginning was German speaking, gradually – and perhaps grudgingly – became English speaking. More than one German Lutheran congregation in Canada had linguistic "wars" over the use of English in the worship service, and they refused to change until well after World War Two, feeling that they had to keep using German to be Lutheran. Martin Ruccius' wife, Wilhelmine, observed in the *Ruccius Record*: "

There was also a Saturday school which my husband taught and which dealt with religion and the German language. This schooling was a common custom in all our churches, the purpose being to keep the family united at home and at church. Transition to the English language for all purposes took place a generation or two later, earlier in the towns, later in the country.¹⁹

That transition to English, especially after World War Two, is perhaps something that Ruccius had foreseen, but not to the extent that it came. No longer would churches start within his original mission agenda of reaching out to a German speaking population. There would be new churches which fit into the parameters of such a mission agenda, but more and more churches would be solely English speaking, and they would be served by those who graduated from LTS. Generations of people would attend the churches that Ruccius and others founded. Generations of pastors would be educated at LTS and influence the church in western Canada and beyond.

Martin Ruccius should be known as the father of the church in Western Canada with his name more familiar than is currently the case. His mission, as was the case with other early pastors, was to his own linguistic group. Many churches were established along these lines, often with the result that there were multiple churches in small communities. The legacy that he leaves however, is a church that spans three provinces and two countries. None of this he did alone though. He had the support of other pastors/missionaries and his wife who no doubt had to cope with extended absences. Martin Ruccius came to Canada temporarily, but stayed. He knew that mission involved hard work and that for the church grow it also required faith. Faith that God had led him to Canada and faith that God would allow the church to grow. It was also this faith that allowed him to proclaim in his first presidential report: "The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly" (Isaiah 60:22 NRSV).

Endnotes

¹ "Minutes of the 1888 General Council," as quoted in the Manuscript – file, "Lutheran mission work in western Canada among Germans," LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

² "1891 General Council Minutes, 23rd Convention," 21. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

³ "1891 General Council Minutes," 21.

⁴ Walter Martin Ruccius, ed., *The Ruccius Record*, 1970, 3. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

⁵ Norman J. Threinen, *A Religious - Cultural Mosaic: A History of Lutherans in Canada*. Lutheran Historical Institute Monograph Series, Number 1 (Vulcan, AB: Today's Reformation Press, 2006), 91.

⁶ 1895 General Council Minutes, 38. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

⁷ "Lutheran mission work in western Canada among Germans." LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

⁸ "Lutheran Mission work in western Canada among Germans." No author indicated. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

⁹ "1897 General Council Minutes of the 25th Convention," 39-40.

¹⁰ "Lutheran mission work in western Canada among Germans," 19.

¹¹ Threinen, *A Religious - Cultural Mosaic*, 90-91.

¹² Threinen, *A Religious - Cultural Mosaic*, 90.

¹³ Originally in German.

¹⁴ "Minutes of the 1898 Synod of Manitoba and Northwest Territories." Translated Frieda Oswald.

¹⁵ "Minutes of the Synod of Manitoba and Northwest Territories July 12-15, 1900. Edenwald NWT." Translated Frieda Oswald. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

¹⁶ Ernest George Goos, *Pioneering for Christ in Western Canada: The Story of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Manitoba and other Provinces* (np: Synod's Golden Jubilee 1897-1947), 1947[?]), 19.

¹⁷ "ULCA minutes 1920," 200-201. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

¹⁸ "Minutes of the Synod of Manitoba and Other Provinces 1931," 26. LTS Archives, Saskatoon.

¹⁹ *Ruccius Record*, 8-9.