La Iglesia Luterana Santo Tomás

(St. Thomas Lutheran Church)

Ryan Heiman
Church History 2002
Professor Brenner
¡Dame dos tacos por favor! ¿Dónde está mi carro? ¡Hace calor! Hijo, espérate por favor, tenemos que buscar comida. These are some words one might hear in the local grocery store or parking lot in the Phoenix area. It is a city that is bilingual and bicultural, where the American West meets the Mexican North. For the last 25 years Phoenix has been more than ready for mission work in Spanish. Currently, about 34% of the population is Hispanic. In a city of about 5 million people that means there are about 1.7 million Latinos living in the Phoenix area. The weather is beautiful and the land is spectacular, if is similar in climate to Mexico and being close in proximity attracts many Mexicans. If someone were to do outreach to Hispanics, this would be the city to do it in, it is a perfect mission field.

Where does one start? How does a WELS congregation go about reaching out to this community? St. Thomas Lutheran church saw their neighborhood slowly browning while their church was graying. What should they to do? They had been established as a mission themselves on September 12, 1965. In 1981 its membership reached 450. Shortly after this time, during the mid-80’s, the neighborhood began to change, many Latinos began moving in and started buying houses while many Caucasians moved out of the area, in what many call the “white exodus”. As the pastor and members of St. Thomas went knocking on doors, they found out that they could not communicate with more than half the community. Their immediate neighborhood is home to about eight thousand people with at least four thousand being Hispanic, and more Hispanics are joining the neighborhood daily. It was becoming more apparent with each passing month that the trend toward Hispanic was increasing. It was also evident in the businesses in

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1 Trans. Give me two tacos please! Where is my car? It is hot out! Son, just wait, we have to look for some meat.
their area. Safeway, Abco, Basha’s and Smitty’s had all vacated large grocery store buildings within a four-mile radius of the church within a three year period. All four have since re-opened as Southwest Supermarkets, a chain of stores owned by a group of businessmen in Mexico City. This major grocery chain catered almost exclusively to Hispanics. More and more neighborhood billboards were in Spanish as well. Therefore, how does a self-supporting church for over 30 years start in on cutting edge mission work? (Not that Latino mission work is cutting edge, but never had an English congregation called a full time Spanish missionary in a home mission setting. It had only been done in a world mission setting.) It really wasn’t so hard, so they thought. The congregation didn’t really have anyone to convince that they needed to start this work since the entire church knew that their neighborhood was not the same and the language they heard all around them was not the same one that they spoke. They knew that they had to try. They decided to make a proposal to the home mission board for funding. They couldn’t do it on their own. The congregation gathered all the demographic studies they gathered some paperwork and made a proposal in the spring of 1994. St. Thomas sent in their papers and hoped to hear good news after the Board for Home Missions meetings took place, unfortunately the Arizona District had not made this project high on their list of things to do. Actually the Arizona District thought very little of the plan. Without the district’s support the Home Mission Board decided to send the congregation back to the drawing board. St. Thomas had some more hoops to jump through before they would be granted the proposal. The congregation would have to complete more studies. The mission board had many questions and many concerns about this idea. Here is list of the questions that the Board for Home Missions wanted answered.

3 Feb. 1996 Arizona District Mission Board Proposal from St. Thomas
1. Does this reflect the overwhelming attitude of the congregation?

2. Are there vocal opponents? Or a silent group of non-supporters?

3. What is the present make up of the congregation?

4. What other ethnic groups are represented in the congregation and in what percentage?

5. How are people from other ethnic groups assimilated into the congregation?

6. What preparation has the congregation done or is it doing for the changes it proposes?

7. What study of Hispanic culture is being done, if any?

8. What is the potential economic base of the congregation? ⁴


They then were given a diagnostic package that would help them in this process of answering these questions and many others. The congregation resolved that they would look for a mentor. At this time there was a program called “The Mentoring Program of the Board for Home Missions of the WELS.” They studied the book, “Mission and Ministry Across Cultures in Urban North America,” in their Bible studies, men’s group, women’s group and youth group meetings in order to be prepared to start the outreach to Latinos in the near future.

They were desperately looking for help, and the Lord sent them just who they needed. Pastor Meier was on the BWM at this time and he was in need of a vicar since he had regular meetings out of town. He had been receiving a vicar for the past 13 years.

⁴ Board for Home Missions Memo Aug 29, 1994
They received the routine vicar assignment like every other congregation. Little did they know how God had blessed their congregation. Nathan Strutz was the perfect man for the vicar call. He was rather proficient at Spanish already, and had a deep love for the Hispanic culture. This was right up his alley. When he arrived in August 1995 the congregation started making plans to use his gifts. In January of 1996 he was put to work on the Latino project. One member of the congregation, a few ALA students and a few members of local congregations went with him out into the neighborhood to learn about the Latino population. They used the Ethnographic survey developed by Pastor Sorum of Garden Homes in Milwaukee. 5 Vicar Strutz made visits, went door-to-door, invited people, talked with people, and did everything he could to find out about the church’s neighborhood. Being only a vicar he was not able to do much more than that. He helped the few Latinos that attended VBS, but not much more than that. Vicar Strutz was never able to start Bible study or Worship, but this was not his call or his purpose. His main task was to make it clear that a full time man was needed for Hispanic outreach.

Once again a proposal was sent to the Board for Home Missions in April 1996 this time with backing from the Arizona District. Much to the congregation’s joy, the proposal was granted, and money was set aside for them to do Latino outreach.6 Finally, everything was in place to do great mission work. Only manpower was needed.

Right away in April the congregation extended a call, but much to the disappointment of the congregation this man returned the call. This process would go on for about half a year. Four calls were extended and four calls were returned.7 The congregation had almost lost hope. They doubted their mission ideas. They were

5 Used the Spanish version of the English copy found in Appendix 1
6 BHM Meeting Minutes Appendix 2
7 Pastors Carlos Leyer, Timothy Satorius, Curt Backus, and Daniel Voigt
wondering if they should just scrap the plan. There was only one hope left, maybe there would be a graduate that would fit the needs of the congregation. They knew that their previous vicar was in the class, maybe he could return and continue what he had started. They saw that the graduating class had a number of candidates that would fit their need. So they requested in December 1996 that, if available, the Home Mission Board assign a Seminary Graduate to their congregation to do Latino outreach. It was sad, but the mission work had sat idle for about one year while they waited for a pastor.

Their request was granted. On call day of May 1997 President Valleskey read “Timothy Otto, St. Thomas, Phoenix, AZ (Hispanic Outreach).” Wow, the congregation finally received an answer to all their prayers! The Lord had called a young man to serve as their full time Latino outreach pastor. Was he ready for this task? His history with the Spanish language and culture was not as extensive as the men from the field that St. Thomas had called, but his love for the culture and language was. He had spent his vicar year in Mexico learning Spanish, and then serving a congregation in Guayama, Puerto Rico. This 15-month experience taught him many, many things about the language and about the culture. He also had been able to spend his senior year at the Seminary working with Lutheran Southside Ministries. This ministry specifically focuses on Latino outreach on the south side of Milwaukee. These were all tools God used to prepare him for his ministry at St. Thomas. Now there was so much to get done, planning, moving, getting things wrapped up a home, packing, finding an apartment, and getting married. Timothy had more than enough things on his plate. On June 15th 1997, Timothy Otto and Jenny Kaiser were joined in marriage. One month, $1700, and 3000 miles later they were moving into a rented house that the church had found for them just
a mile from church. They were overjoyed to be starting this new mission work that really had not been done before in our synod. Pastor Timothy Otto was ordained on July 13th at St. Thomas.

What was he going to do next? Pastor Timoteo was installed, ordained and ready to go. He needed to come up with some sort of plan. He first went to the congregation to see if anyone was still left from the work that Vicar Strutz had done, or if any of their members had any leads. July, August, and September were spent hosting a bilingual VBS, following up on those families, and knocking on doors—all of which had the purpose of starting in-home BICs. They were able to find a prospect in September 1997 who was not baptized. Pastor Timoteo baptized Crystal Ortiz, a 3-year-old girl in the hospital with kidney problems. She was his first baptism. Later, October 18, 1997 there was a special service in which 3 children from the same extended family were baptized and Crystal had her reaffirmation.

Some of the families who were studying, began to ask for a church service, so they handed out thousands of fliers and held the first “misa” on November 2, 1997 at 10:30 AM. This was amazing, in only 3 months they had gathered 14 people, but the two families that had asked for a service did not attend. Neither family became very involved, and both left soon after, but there were visitors from the fliers. This was great—14 people in a church service hearing God’s Word preached from a pulpit, listening the gospel being read from a lectern and singing hymns played on the piano. Wasn’t this great? It

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8 They call their worship “misa” (mass). They struggled to get people to visit the church because of the strong Catholic background. Many Latinos assume that all Non-Catholic churches (referred to by Mexicans as the “Christian churches”) are of the jump-around Evangelical type. So Santo Tomás stayed away from the words “culto” (worship) and “servicio de adoracion” (service of praise) used by such churches and used the word “misa” in order to take away any possible barriers. Once a prospect had visited, if they were a former Catholic, they almost always felt very comfortable.
truly was, but this mission had some help that many missions do not have. The Latino group was able to move into a very nice 300 person capacity church with a 10,000 square ft. building that contained 4 classrooms for teaching, which was already paid off.\(^9\)

St. Thomas was really in good shape to do Hispanic outreach. St. Thomas was able to offer the facilities and support in many ways, but needed to fund the $58,000 price tag on the Latino outreach. This would have to come through the synod.\(^{10}\) This seems like a large sum of money, but compared with the hundreds of thousands many other missions need to start, since there are often no facilities for the congregation to use, this was a steal.

The Lord continued to bless the efforts of Pastor Timoteo and the efforts of the congregation. They used many different forms of outreach. They advertised in a free Spanish magazine, *Segunda Mano*. This magazine was handed out at grocery stores, barber shops, etc. They advertised free baptisms, quinceañeras, (Celebration of a young girl turning 15) weddings, ESL, Saturday school, counseling, BIC, and service times. At certain times of the year they advertised special events (VBS, etc) or special services (Christmas, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Easter). The majority of the evangelism is what we would call friendship evangelism. They received most of their contacts through friends and family already involved in the church. Once they tried a block party with food, games, and entertainment, but they didn’t really get as many contacts from this as they had hoped. Another time they did a huge mailing announcing the church, the pastor, VBS, ESL, Saturday school, baptisms, quinceañeras, and BICs. They rode the responses from that for months. There were so many contacts, and contacts from those contacts,

\(^9\) BHM memo page 4
\(^{10}\) Outreach Exploratory Budget Appendix 3
and so on. (For a non-member to have a quinceañera or baptism at church, Pastor Timoteo asked them to attend church once to see what it’s like before they committed to doing the service, and also to attend one or two Bible classes/pláticas (discussion).

Only seven months after arriving in Phoenix, Jenny Otto was able to open a pre-school. This pre-school was completely bilingual. There was a mixture of about half and half, Spanish and English. This became a great blessing to the congregation. Jenny was able to teach the children the same Bible Stories that they were hearing in church. It also served as a great outreach tool since many families were unchurched when they sent their children to pre-school, and churched when they were too old for pre-school. This was in existence for almost three years. Jenny Otto was the primary teacher of the pre-school and members and volunteers assisted her. This served both groups in the congregation, English and Spanish.

One year after beginning a Spanish group, Pastor Otto had his first confirmation. This was a day of great rejoicing by all people. He had eight adults confirmed in September 1998. Vanessa Garcia, Ana María Peralta, Matilda Yglesias, Carlos Valenzuela, Kirsten Valenzuela, Beny Pereda, Alejandro Pereda, and Consuelo Castañeda. They finished their BIC and now were ready to be communicant members of Santo Tomás congregation. This was the beginning of many more confirmations to come. Pastor Otto was regularly meeting in prospect’s homes, night after night teaching them the truths of God’s word.

His next breakthrough came in 1999, actually several big breaks would come in this year. The first came in May. He had his first quinceañera service for Vanessa
Garcia. This is a Latino custom. When a young lady reaches her fifteenth birthday, the family throws a huge party that shows they recognize that she is now a woman. (It is similar to the North American sweet sixteen) This is one of the most important moments in a young girl’s life. It also has been associated with the Church for many, many years. The Catholic traditional quinceañera has a mass preformed at the church followed by a huge party. The young girls wear wedding-like dresses and the young men wear tuxedos. It is a small-scale wedding; actually some families spend more on a quinceañera than they do on a wedding. This gave Pastor Timoteo a chance to preach the Gospel message to many visitors. It also had another impact. It showed that the Latinos in his area and congregation were accepting him as part of their culture and did not think of him as an outsider. This went a long way in building relationships with the community.

The second happening of great importance was in June of 1999. Pastor Timoteo was able to start a church council with 3 men. This was also a wonderful blessing for the congregation, because for the first time, this group now made their own decisions and was responsible for many of their own choices. Before this time, they had to rely on either Pastor Otto or the church council of the English congregation. This moved the congregation away from complete reliance on the pastor, and put many of the important decisions in their hands. They were now accountable to and for their own congregation. The interesting thing about this new council is that the Spanish and English members considered themselves one church. They try to reinforce this with fellowship opportunities, communication, mutual help, and occasional bilingual services. However,

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\[ \frac{\text{She was a member who has since been released for living in sin with her boyfriend. Her mother and sisters are still members and we still pray that she will repent.}} \]
when it comes to worship, Bible study, and other meetings, due to the language barrier, they are two separate groups within one congregation.

The third big event in 1999 happened as three small little events. First in August of 1999 they sent out a huge mailing. They sent it to every house within a 3-mile radius of the church. This was very successful. They received many contacts and names from this mailing. Then, in September they started an ESL class for members and non-members. This worked out extremely well also. They found many people interested in this class and found many more good prospects. Another blessing of this class was that they were able to share God’s Word with the people that came to this class. Contrary to what some in our Synod would say about teaching ESL, Santo Tomás used it as an outreach tool and taught the students a Bible Story with the English class. This also brought many members and visitors to the church. In October of 1999 they broke the fifty-person mark in church on Sunday with fifty-three in attendance. What a joy that must have been for Pastor Timoteo and his congregation, to have gone from ten to fifty people in just two years time. The Lord had truly blessed their work in Phoenix.

The Lord has blessed the work since the day that Pastor Timoteo arrived in Phoenix. He was blessed in January of 2000 with his first youth confirmation. He confirmed two young ladies in front of sixty-three people. Throughout 2000 things continued to make headway. Pastor Timoteo was busy teaching BIC and other Bible Studies almost every night of the week. The attendance on Sunday continued to grow and grow. WELS Kingdom Workers sent down a volunteer, Rachel Myers to help out with the many programs and ESL program that was going on. Everyone was busy and the church entered into a new millennium.

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12 Map appendix 4
In the year 2001 Santo Tomás reached another milestone. They had an attendance of over one-hundred for three consecutive Sundays in February. At this time the congregation is beginning to take more and more ownership responsibilities. Male members took turns reading the first lesson on Sunday mornings. They make the worship of the church, their worship. Also in July of 2001 they had another large confirmation class of adults. Eight were confirmed on that Sunday adding to Santo Tomás’ number and ever increasing their communicant membership. Another message of good news that the congregation received in 2001 was that they were given mission status. They were no longer an exploratory, but now a mission. These are different terms that the Mission boards use that are associated with the size of the congregation.

Finally, we reach the present day. In February of this year, 2002, Pastor Timoteo started two members (now one) in pre-seminary courses. This is amazing that God has worked in this man’s heart a desire to serve his Lord and his congregation in this way. It is often difficult since the WELS does not operate a Seminary in Spanish. This student would have to fall under a sort of mentor-like program. This is great for the congregation to have another man that will one day, God willing, become a pastor that could serve his congregation in Phoenix or any other WELS Spanish speaking congregation. The congregation also added to its numbers in April 2002, seven youths by confirmation. This brings the congregation number up to seventy-six communicants and an average of about ninety-five in church on Sunday.

God has truly blessed this congregation in Phoenix, and now in the future they will have more opportunities to share the Gospel with more and more people. St. Thomas has been granted money and has purchased land fifteen miles to the west of their current
location. There they are finding both English and Spanish prospects to start another
Santo Tomás in this area of town. They also are looking into the possibility of a school
on this new property that would be available to all members, both English and Spanish.
The Lord will continue to bless their work as they reach out in the years to come to their
Hispanic neighbors.

As with all mission work there are some very sad stories that we always wonder
what that person’s future will be and here is one that Pastor Timoteo shared. Consuelo
Carnero. It’s really sad because her name means, “comfort” and she didn’t know where
to go to find it. She studied with Pastor Timoteo and became a member along with her
husband, Antonio. Soon after, her church attendance suffered terribly. Pastor Timoteo
and his wife Jenny made many, many visits with her encouraging her to repent and return
to God and his Word. A concerned friend, also a member, talked to her with no success.
Finally, God called her. Her granddaughter was diagnosed with Lupus. She didn’t hear
the call. Her son almost lost his job. She didn’t hear God’s call. More pastoral visits.
Nothing. Her husband suffered a brain aneurysm and massive stroke. He was paralyzed
and unable to talk for 10 months before he died. Countless pastoral visits. She couldn’t
hear God’s call. While her husband was sick, her 21-year-old grandson was shot and
killed. She didn’t listen then either. She blames God for her suffering and refuses to hear
His Word. As far as anyone has heard, God has stopped calling her.

On the other hand there are some wonderful stories that just stick out in mind of
the missionary. This is Pastor Timoteo’s favorite story about Fabián Juárez. He says,
“When we met him canvassing the very first summer he was an alcoholic who cheated on
his wife and had anger management problems. He blew us off, as did his wife and
daughter. All of a sudden months later (I think it was even after being thrown in jail for something to do with drinking) they showed up at church. They took the BIC and became members. He became our treasurer. He stopped drinking, according to him “with God’s help.” He says that he had been to AA millions of times, but without God he never could have done it. He now serves as the leader of our Lutheran Alcoholics group at church. This group meets as needed to help those involved or new people as the occasion arises. He and his wife have reconciled, had marriage counseling, and are working on a happy marriage. He has become a gentle, even patient man. He witnesses to his friends, family, neighbors, and fellow workers. He has brought several families to our church for the first time and many of them are now members. His daughter attends our Lutheran High School. He sometimes goes to Mexicali for the weekend and misses church. He always has to call and get my blessing because otherwise he says he doesn’t feel right. He picks up a copy of the sermon he will miss, before, if possible, and has his wife read it to him while he drives. She says that sometimes she has to stop because he is crying and can’t see the road. His wife told me about two Thanksgivings ago when they celebrated, it’s in Mexico. With the house packed and spilling out into the yard with friends and neighbors he said a thanksgiving prayer. She says it was the first time she ever heard him pray out loud.

May the Lord continue to bless the efforts of Santo Tomás and Pastor Timoteo Otto as they continue to share the message of Salvation with their entire Spanish-speaking neighborhood.
Appendix 1
AN INTERVIEW WITH A NEIGHBOR

Introduction:

1. I have lived in this neighborhood since ...

2. Before I moved here, I lived in ...

3. Most of my family and friends live ...

We like to buy our groceries at ...

One of our favorite restaurants is ...

For social gatherings and celebrations, we like to go to ...

4. The main reason(s) I decided to settle in this community is ...

5. The member of my family who decided that we should settle in this community was ...

The decision to move here was made in this way:

6. The younger and the older members of my family agree/do not agree that we should stay here because ...

7. The men in my family (or in my friends’ families) feel that their chances of getting good jobs here are ...

8. Women and mothers in my family (or my friends’ families) feel the future for our children is ...

9. When someone in my family is ill, they receive medical help at ...

I feel that the medical help available to us is ...

10. I do/do not know someone who has been the victim of crime recently.

The crime situation in our neighborhood is ...
The police protection in our neighborhood is ...

11. The relationship between people in our neighborhood who are from different cultures is ...
   This is the case because ...

12. The most urgent need or challenge that confronts me at this time in our community is ...

13. I feel that my life since I moved here has turned out ...
   In the future, I think my life here will be ...

14. Since I moved here, the biggest changes in my life have been ...
   What I really miss since we moved here is ...

15. The church or religious organization that seems to be most popular with my family and friends seems to be ...
   This is so because ...

16. I know that (give the name of your church) is located near ...
   I (or members of my family) have/have not attended services there.
   We know/do not know what programs are offered.

17. If your church really wants to serve people in this neighborhood, you will have to ...
Appendix 2
2. **FACILITY PLANNING AUTHORITY**
   a. **GRANT:**
      1) Phillips, WI

3. **SPECIAL REQUESTS**
   a. **RECOMMEND:**
      1) Shepherd of Peace, Columbus, OH
      The congregation’s application for a loan to the Joint CEF Committee upon the sale of the congregation’s WEF with the understanding that CEF funding is only for 5,000 sq. ft. and that the DMB commit to regular review of the congregation’s Ministry Plan.

**OTHER MATTERS**

1. **NOTE RE 1996-97 CEF Allocations**
   We concur with the CEF Board of Directors figure of 6.9 million dollar allocation for new CEF projects for Fiscal Year 1996-1997.

2. **RE: The SC DMB Memo Concerning an Interest Rate Cap**
   Officers from the CEF Board of Directors met with our committee and explained that there were "built-in" caps in the current loan formula. The SC-DMB will explain these protections to those who are concerned in their district.

Respectfully submitted,
Land and Facilities Committee

Wayne Hilgendorf, Chairman, Arthur Franke, Gary Klimke, James Rupp, Don Seifert

**MISSION EXPANSION COMMITTEE REPORT (H)** Adopted as follows:

1. **MANPOWER**

   **Grant**
   St Thomas, Phoenix, AZ (Spanish speaking pastor)
   Vacaville, CA
   Lafayette/Louisville, CO
   Willoughby, OH (Restart)
   Plymouth, MN (Staff Minister)
   Roanoke, VA
   NW Portland, OR
   West Palm Beach, FL (Restart)
   Radcliff, KY

   **Defer**
   Pomona, CA (Hispanic)
   Kelowna, B.C.
   Elkhart & Michigan City, IN
   Oakdale, MN (Modified Daughter)
   Emanuel, St Paul, MN (Hispanic)
   East Boise, ID
Appendix 3
## OUTREACH EXPLORATORY BUDGET

### BACKGROUND DATA

- **Synod Identification Number (if one has been assigned by BHM Office):** NONE (1174 - St. Thomas)
- **Location of Exploratory:** Phoenix, AZ
- **Name of Exploratory (if applicable):** N/A
- **Pastor Serving Exploratory:** N/A
- **District Mission Board:** Arizona District Mission Board
- **Number of Communicants:** N/A

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- Communicating Christ Videos
- VCRS and TVS to use with course
- Amount included under evangelism materials
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<th>BUDGET DETAIL</th>
<th>BUDGET TOTAL</th>
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**BUDGET SUMMARY**

**TOTAL BUDGET:** 59,534

**LESS LOCAL FUNDING:**

(1) ITEMS PAID LOCALLY: 1,535

(2) SALARY SUPPORT TO BHM: 0

**NET BUDGET REQUEST:** 57,999

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Exploratory Representative: Peter W. Ameier
DMB representative: Alan Eckert
Date: 3-23-96
Appendix 4