

LUTHERAN MEMOIR

BETHANY INDIAN MISSION

Wittenberg, Wisconsin

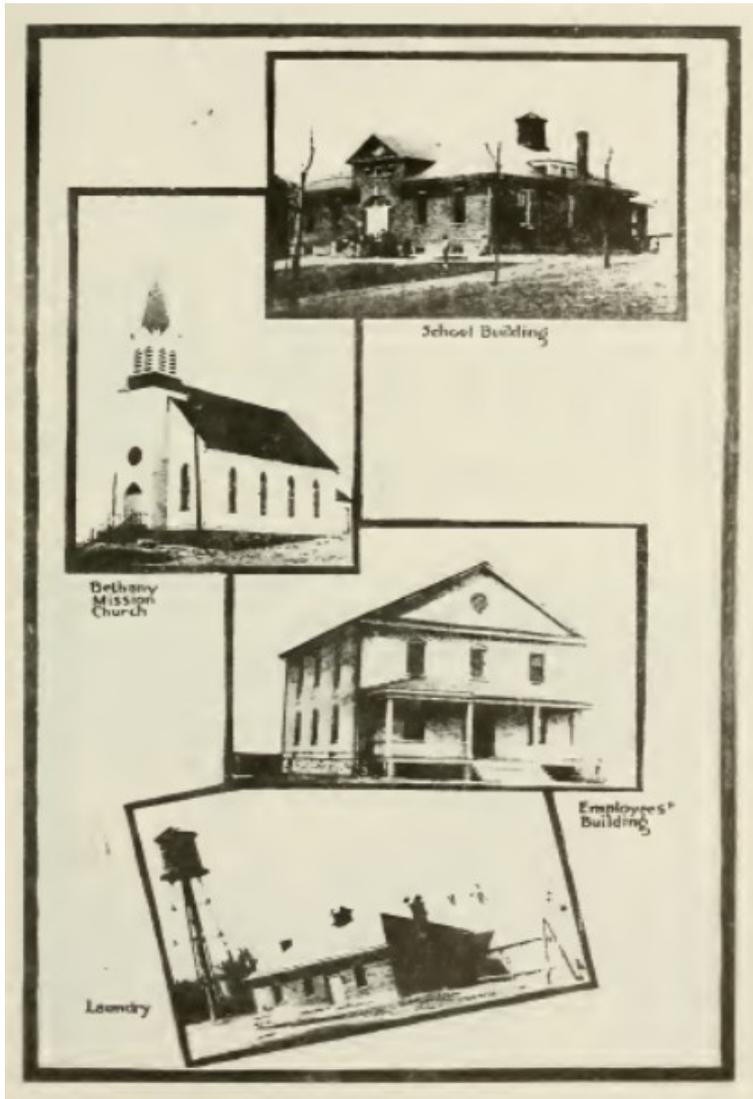


Image source “Souvenir of the Bethany Indian Mission,” compiled by Rev. T. M. Rykken. 1921. Retrieved from Smithsonian Libraries.

SPECIFICS

The mission was established by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in 1884. In 1886, the Wittenberg Indian School was organized by the Norwegian Evangelical Church of America (a predecessor to the ELCA) after the purchase of land in what was traditional Winnebago territory.

Bethany was a residential school for Native American children whom the government removed from their families as part of an effort to assimilate Native Americans into white American culture.

The school grew to include around one hundred and fifty students coming from the Winnebago, Oneida, Stockbridge, Brothertown, Menominee, Mohawk and Chippewa.

Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, provided teachers, pastors and administrators to the Mission and School.

Luther College and Waldorf College (now Waldorf University) enrolled students from Bethany Indian Mission and School.

Operations ended in 1955.

NorthEastern Iowa SYNOD



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NEIA Synod Racial Justice Network

Racial Justice Web page

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QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

1. The stated goal of the church and government's removal of Native children from their homes then placement in Mission Schools was to "assimilate" them into white American culture and religion. In the context of the time, what is the distinction between "helping" the Native people and "controlling" them? What might these efforts tell us about our Lutheran ancestors' beliefs?
2. Officials of the time used the phrase "the Indian Problem." What is revealed about the perspectives of the officials? Read Luke 6:31, Ephesians 4:29 and Romans 12:10, is a conflict or connection seen with these verses and Indian Mission schools.
3. The Puritans fled Europe to America to escape the tyranny of religious oppression. Was the same freedom of expression afforded the spiritual practices of indigenous people?

ACTION STEP:

Are you surprised to know of the Lutheran Church's involvement in forced assimilation of Native Americans? How does this history of the Church inform the efforts for racial justice today? How might you or your church take action within this context?

REFERENCES:

- "Bethany Indian Mission, Wittenberg, Wisconsin (Winnebago, Ho-Chunk Native Americans) webpage = <http://wigenweb.org/shawano/BethanyIndianMission.html>
- Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison Wisconsin. Website = <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Image/IM45742>
- "A Desire to Learn": Native-American Experiences in Lutheran Colleges, 1945–1955, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, American Indian quarterly, 2023, Vol.47 (1), p.26-69
- The Historical Marker Database, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=29131>
- Souvenir of the Bethany Indian Mission. Rykken, T. M, 1921

RELEVANT RESOURCES:

<https://elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Ethnic-Specific-and-Multicultural-Ministries/Indigenous-Ministries-and-Tribal-Relations/Indian-Boarding-Schools/Truth-Initiative>

ASSIMILATE

To absorb into the culture of a population or group; to make similar; to alter by assimilation.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bethany Mission Pamphlet



Bethany Mission Tribute website



ELCA Truth & Healing Movement



A BETHANY STUDENT'S TESTIMONIAL

What the Bethany Indian Mission Has Done for Me

MY name is Stella Hill. I am an Oneida Indian girl, 14 years old. I have attended school here at the Bethany Mission for some time. I like it very well at this school. We are made to feel right at home here, and that makes it so pleasant. There are not so many children here as at some government schools, where they often have over 300 boys and girls. That helps us to get better acquainted, and we feel like brothers and sisters. Here we go to school all day. At the government schools it was always half days at school. I like it better this way, for we learn so much more.

The teachers and the matrons mean a great deal to me, because they are Christians, who teach me the love of God. They tell me to do that which is good, not because we shall thereby escape punishment, but because we are God's children. If we really love Him, we like to do that which is His will.

The government schools were good in that they taught us how to read, write, work problems in arithmetic and such common studies. But we are taught that here too, and besides that we have an hour of religious instruction every morning. Here we have confirmation class too, and a class in Bible study. We have devotion every morning and evening. We learn to sing hymns out of the Lutheran Hymnary, hymns which really mean something.

We also have services in our little church on the Mission Hill every Sunday. We have a choir that sings every Sunday. These things we could not have at the government schools.

Since we know that the kind people of our Lutheran Church pray for us, it makes it easier for us to do that which is good.

All these things make me feel very grateful to the mission. It is my wish that I in time may do something for the mission, by doing something for my people, to show that what the mission has done for me has not been done in vain.

STELLA HILL.