

LUTHERAN MEMOIR

BETHANY INDIAN MISSION Wittenberg, Wisconsin

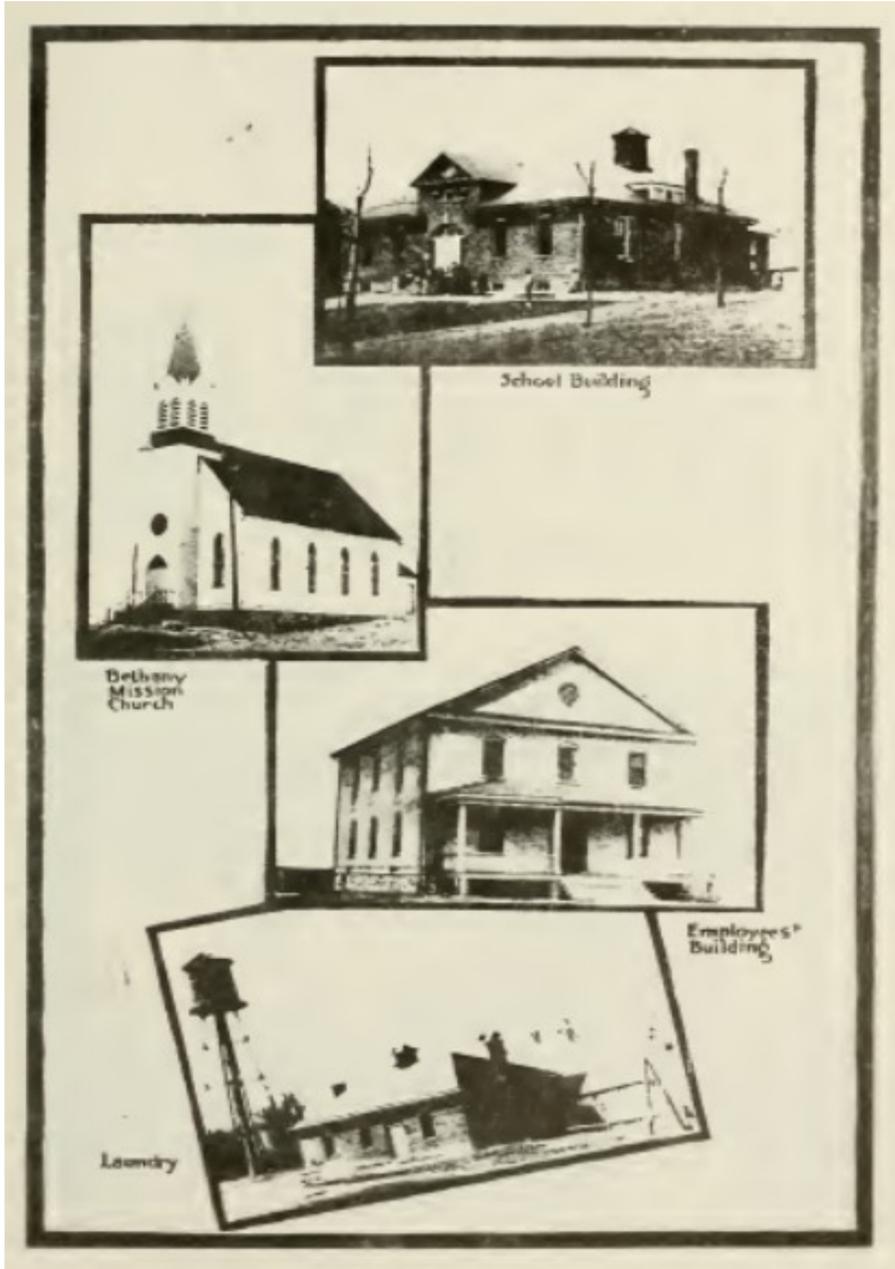


Image source "Souvenir of the Bethany Indian Mission," compiled by Rev. T. M. Rykken. 1921. Retrieved from Smithsonian Libraries.

ASSIMILATE

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

ELCA Truth & Healing Movement



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.



Bethany Mission Pamphlet

Bethany Mission Tribute website



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>

<https://www.elca.org/our-work/congregations-and-synods/ministries-of-diverse-cultures-and-communities/indigenous-ministries-and-tribal-relations>

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