

Life History of Gerald Wyneken

(as presented to Peace Lutheran Church Men's Group, 11/8/03)

Neyyoor is the name of a little town a few miles up from the southernmost tip of India. That's where I was born, July 22, 1935. The hospital was operated by the London Mission Society. The doctor's name was Somervell. A good family doctor, he was also an avid mountain climber, and had been a member of the 1923 Mallory Expedition to Mt. Everest, the first organized attempt to conquer that mountain.

The reason India is the country of my birth--even though I've been an American citizen from the very beginning--is that my parents had been living and working there since 1928 as Lutheran missionaries. In fact, they would not be leaving India for good until 1953. My two older brothers had been born in India, as would also my baby sister. My next younger brother and the youngest were the only two out of six children to be born in the United States, both while the family was on furlough.

My mother's maiden name was Paula Mieger. She was born in Nebraska in 1904, became a Californian at the age of 5, when her father accepted a call as Pastor in Olive, in what is now Orange County. When she was 12 the family moved to the Bay Area, where her father became pastor in Oakland. When she met my father for the first time, she was working as a secretary in Oakland--probably in an attorney's office, possibly even the office of Earl Warren (before he became THE Earl Warren). A graduate of Muir Business School in Oakland, my mother was living with her parents in the parsonage of Zion Lutheran Church, where my Grandpa Mieger was Pastor. The church was on 12th St. in downtown Oakland then; the parsonage was at 1115 Myrtle. Since then, the church has relocated to the Piedmont hills. 20 years old when she became engaged, my mother was reportedly quite a beauty and had many suitors. My father was only 17 at the time of their engagement, so she must have seen something very special in him that she hadn't found in any of the others. He was so young, in fact, that his mother felt constrained to come all the way up from southern California to check out this young lady and her family. Grandma Wyneken was apparently satisfied, because the engagement continued. What is not quite so clear is why my mother's parents would sanction the engagement of their daughter to a man so young. However, since my father was planning to go to the Seminary in St. Louis the following year, perhaps my clergy grandfather simply decided that his daughter could do no better than to marry another pastor. My mother became my father's faithful and loving companion in a marriage that lasted through 25 years in India and another 16 years back in California. When my father died suddenly of a heart attack in 1969, she continued living in California, nearby to one or the other of her children, until her death at 87 after a long battle with Parkinson's Disease.

My mother was the third of the nine surviving children of George and Otilie Mieger. Pr. George Mieger, my grandfather, was born in Hesse, Germany, but came to the United States when he was three. He grew up in St. Louis, where his father worked as a carpenter/cabinet

maker. After graduation from the St. Louis Seminary, Grandpa Mieger served brief pastorates in Kansas City, Kansas; Gladstone, Nebraska, where my mother was born in 1904; Pueblo, Colorado; and Olive, California. He came to Zion Church in Oakland in 1916, where he remained for 30 years until his retirement in 1946.

My Grandmother Otilie Mieger was born in St. Louis, where her father was a brewery worker. Her mother died when she was still in her early teens, and her father, being unable to care for the children by himself, farmed them out to other families. Young Otilie was sent to live with a wealthy family in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, where she was assigned the task of taking in laundry, including that of students at Concordia College. Concordia was one of several such colleges operated by the Missouri Synod throughout the country to prepare future pastors for their Seminary studies. One of those students back then was George Mieger, who had come to Ft. Wayne from St. Louis for his prep school years. Thus it was apparently over a load of laundry that my grandparents first met. They were married in 1899, presumably right after my grandfather graduated from the Seminary.

My father was born in San Diego in 1907, the first of two sons born into the family. He grew up in Los Angeles, where he finished grade school in the public school system. For his high school and junior college years, he came to Oakland to enroll in the standard pre-ministerial course of study at California Concordia College. It must have been towards the end of his years at the Oakland Concordia that he became engaged to Paula Mieger. The two were not to get married for another four years, however. In 1924 he was on his way to St. Louis to enter Concordia Seminary, where it had long been established policy--and one that continued till well into the 50's--that no student could get married while still at the Seminary. My parents' wedding came almost immediately after Seminary graduation in the summer of 1928--understandably, so did that of most of his Seminary classmates. They were married in June, and by the end of September of that year, my parents were aboard ship on their way to India, where they would serve as Lutheran missionaries for the next 25 years, minus time off for three furloughs during those years.

I remember my father as being an exceptionally competent man. There seemed to be nothing he could not do. He learned to speak Malayalam, a difficult language of South India, as fluently as any native speaker. He was gifted mechanically, able to get cars and other machinery working again after breaking down, a very useful skill since we often lived and traveled in remote rural areas. He was construction supervisor for many building projects, and was himself a handy carpenter. His common sense approach to problems was widely recognized throughout the India mission; for many years he served as Mission treasurer, almost a full-time job in itself, because he was thought to be the only man on the field competent to fill the position. Besides all that, he was an accomplished musician. In his early years he was even considered a child prodigy at the piano. Throughout our years in India, he was in constant demand for his music, not only on the piano, but also at the organ and in a variety of vocal and instrumental ensembles.

After leaving India in 1953, my father returned to the Bay Area to become the founding pastor of First Lutheran Church in South San Francisco. He remained there for the next 16 years, active in the community and an often vocal, always interested, participant in Circuit and District affairs. His unexpected death in 1969 left a void at many levels in the Church, to say nothing of the large circle of his family and friends.

My father's given names tell a great deal about his forbears--Martin Luther. This was clearly a family of Lutherans. He was the third in the family line to be given that name; a Martin Luther Wyneken IV, my oldest brother, and a Martin Luther Wyneken V, my oldest nephew, were to follow before our line moved on to more creative name-choosing procedures.

My grandfather, Martin Luther Wyneken II, was a railroad surveyor and draftsman, first for the Pacific Electric System, then for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. He designed the track layout for the Los Angeles Union Station, apparently still in use today.

My grandmother Wyneken died before I was old enough to develop any memories of her. She came from a well-to-do family in Chicago, who did not approve of their daughter's marriage to a man with as apparently few prospects as my grandfather. Some years later, however, they were more than chagrined when their other son-in-law was sentenced to prison for embezzlement, and spent 12 years at the federal penitentiary in Joliet, Illinois.

My great-grandfather, Martin Luther Wyneken I, was one of a set of twins, out of a total of eleven surviving children of his parents. After what must have been a mildly eventful childhood, he graduated from the St. Louis Seminary in 1868 to become the founding pastor of First Lutheran Church in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. After eight years he accepted a call to Cincinnati, Ohio, but had to resign his pastorate there because of poor health, suffering from the then common condition known as consumption. He moved to California, first to San Francisco, to assist his brother-in-law, Jacob Buehler, the founding pastor of both St. Marks Lutheran Church and St. Paulus Lutheran Church in the City. My great-grandfather's bad health soon forced him to move to the balmy climate of southern California. Before his death, he participated in the founding of two of the mother Lutheran churches there, Trinity Lutheran in Los Angeles and St. Johns Lutheran in Orange.

My great-great-grandfather, Friedrich Conrad Dietrich Wyneken, was the famous/notorious "Yellow Pants" Wyneken. As a newly-ordained pastor, he had immigrated to America from Germany in 1838, in response to an appeal from German Lutheran immigrants for someone to minister to their spiritual needs. His yellow leather pants were a kind of trademark in his early circuit-riding ministry in the Midwest. He wore them all the time, refusing to have them replaced. In the end, he was tricked into removing them after being told he was to be measured for a new formal suit, upon which family and friends spirited the offending trousers outside for burning. My great-great-grandfather moved on to positions of growing responsibility in the

Lutheran Church in this country, eventually becoming the second President of the Missouri Synod. In poor health in later life, he paid what was intended to be a recuperative visit to his daughter's family in the Bay Area, where he died in 1876.

My earliest memories of life as a missionary kid in India were of the colonial British-style bungalow--large rooms, high ceilings, sweeping verandahs--that was our home in a missionary compound at a place called Nilamel. Nilamel was a wide spot in the road just 30 miles, or about an hour by car, from Trivandrum, the capital city of the southern most state in India, then called Travancore, now called Kerala. My father supervised a large boarding school located on the compound, as well as a number of tiny congregations in the surrounding hill country. For me it was the somewhat spoiled life of a Western child living in colonial India, with three servants in the household, even though we children were always responsible for our separate chores around the house.

In my later childhood, my father was assigned to expanded responsibilities in Trivandrum itself. Our home there was an even bigger bungalow with even longer verandahs in an even larger compound. My memories there include bicycle adventures over dirt paths through rice fields; shopping with my father, an accomplished haggler, in downtown marketplaces; regular visits to the beach, playing in the sand and watching local fishermen tighten their outriggers and mend their nets; occasional visits to the wonders of the Trivandrum Zoo. My memories also include the day-long journeys by train and bus we took every year to get to and from our boarding school in Kodaikanal, a mountain resort town at 7000 feet. Kodai had been developed by early British and American expatriates as a place to escape from the summer heat of the Indian plains. In my day, missionary fathers took turns shepherding all the school-age children from the various mission stations around south India up to Kodai in January and down from Kodai in October.

The Lutheran Mission owned a large compound in Kodai for missionary families' use during the hot season. There were fully-equipped vacation cottages, a vine-covered stone church, a two-room elementary school for the kids, and a boarding home for those of us whose parents lived at a distance, which was almost all of us. For our high school years, we continued at the boarding home, but went across the road for school activities to a compound used by all expatriates, mostly American, and included business and government people as well as other missionaries. We children would stay in our boarding home six months and in the middle of the school year move into one of the vacation cottages for three months--six weeks with both parents during Dad's annual vacation, the remaining six weeks with Mother alone.

I must have been a fair student. By the time I reached high school, I was two years younger than my classmates. My parents had arranged for me to skip 3rd Grade, and then, because of overlapping school year schedules during 1947, when we returned to India after a Stateside furlough, I managed to complete both 7th and 8th Grades in one year. This two-year advantage worked to my disadvantage through most of my high-school and college years, however, be-

cause, while I was two years ahead of my classmates in age, I was also two years behind them in maturity. In my later professional life, this gap had little significance, although it did allow me both to enter the ministry and to retire from it two years earlier than colleagues of the same age.

Growing up in India during World War II, I was for the most part unaware there was a war going on. Among missionary parents, however, the mid-40's brought a growing concern about the possibility of a Japanese invasion into India out of Burma. A number of missionary families panicked and tried to find a way out of India, but by then there was no way out. My parents recognized the futility of it and stayed where they were. I don't remember any negative consequences of their decision to stay put, although the war did delay our scheduled furlough. Germany's surrender in May, 1945, meant that the western route back to the States was open. In July of that year we sailed from Bombay on the first ship out of India. We crowded on board along with all the other Western refugees who had been waiting to get out of the country. The voyage was otherwise uneventful, a month-long cruise that took us via the Suez Canal through the Mediterranean to New York. Our return to India was delayed until March of 1947, when we sailed from San Francisco to Madras, India, via the Philippines. I had no idea I'd be coming back to the Philippines myself one day, but I remember clearly the destruction still evident in Manila on all sides. Manila Bay itself was littered with the hulks of sunken ships, hulls resting on the bottom, superstructures and masts well out of the water.

In 1951 I graduated from high school, and it was time for me to return to the States for college. My parents were not due for a furlough, so I was sent back on my own. Together with two of my high school classmates, I sailed out of Bombay for New York via the Suez Canal, virtually retracing the route I had taken with my parents six years earlier. I remember pretending the nonchalance of a seasoned world traveler, but for a callow 16-year old, this was actually a very scary time. When we arrived in New York, my two companions went their separate ways, leaving me to find my way by train across the U.S. to Oakland, where I was to be taken under the wing of my oldest brother and his wife during my junior college years. My journey was halted half way across country by the big floods of 1951 in the Midwest. As a result, I spent a week in St. Louis waiting for flood waters to subside. While waiting, I stayed with old friends of my father from his Seminary days, Rudy and Paula Walther, who happened to be the last two surviving children of old C.F.W. Walther himself.

In Oakland, I enrolled in California Concordia College for my pre-Seminary training. The next two years I remember as being among the most miserable of my life. Still younger and more immature than my peers, a virtual stranger in my own country and culture after a lifetime in India, I went my lonely way through those two years, with very few friends, none close. Fortunately, there was family nearby to provide relief on weekends. In 1953 I was finally able to finish prep school and to move on to St. Louis for my Seminary years.

At the Seminary I was kept busy with a full load of classes and field work, plus a heavy work schedule as a nightshift orderly in the psychiatric wing of Barnes Hospital. It was at the hospital

that I met the first great love of my life, a student nurse from Emporia, Kansas. We dated for two years, but then she dumped me when I took off at the end of my third year for a year's internship in Decatur, Illinois. In Decatur I met the second great love of my life, the woman who two years later was to become my wife. Rose Marie Krekeler was also a Kansas girl, from Leavenworth. She had come to Decatur fresh out of teacher's college to teach 1st Grade in the parish school of St. Johns Lutheran Church, where I was assigned. By the end of my internship year, we were engaged. She remained in Decatur, while I returned to St. Louis for my final year at the Seminary.

1958 turned out to be a momentous year: graduation and wedding in June, missionary orientation during the summer, and in September on board the freighter, S.S. Keystone Mariner, for the two-week trip from San Francisco to Manila via Honolulu and Yokohama. I was just 23, Rose Marie turned 22 in route. So young were we in fact that, as we docked in Manila, the Lutheran mission representatives who had come to greet us had trouble picking us out from the handful of people lining the ship's railing: the only two Americans they could spot were far too young to be the new missionaries they had come to welcome to the Philippines. This, even though I had begun smoking a pipe to add a touch of maturity to my appearance.

On the other hand, precisely because we were so young, we adjusted to life in Manila without much difficulty. The noise, the traffic, the dust, the heat, all became part of life, just as did the new friends we developed, both among our fellow-missionaries and among the Filipinos whom we had come to live with. We spent our first six months learning Tagalog, the language of the people of central and southern Luzon, and the one Philippine language understood almost everywhere in the Islands. I made good progress in language study, eventually becoming quite fluent. Rose Marie had more trouble because she became pregnant almost immediately, and morning sickness and other discomforts soon took their toll on her ability to concentrate.

My first assignment was as pastor of a small congregation in suburban Quezon City. Since I was still getting comfortable with Tagalog, half of my work was in English, which was still widely used and understood in the metropolitan area. In 1961, I was reassigned to Batangas Province, about 70 miles south of Manila, to open a new mission station in the market town of Lemery. There I worked almost exclusively in Tagalog, because little English was spoken that far from the big city.

After a first term of five years, we left the Philippines for a year's furlough back in the United States. Our trip took us west for three weeks' of nostalgia in India, then on for shorter stays in Rome, Paris, and London. I found the whole experience more exciting than Rose Marie did, since she was the one who carried most of the burden of caring for the three kids we had by then, one still in diapers--and that was long before the age of disposable diapers. We divided our year in the States between the Midwest and California. I did a semester of postgraduate work at the St. Louis Seminary. Since furloughing missionaries were also expected to do extensive lecturing on our overseas missions, I gave slide lectures in many Lutheran congregations,

mostly in the upper Midwest--Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, parts of the country I had never visited before.

Returning to the Philippines, we moved into a different, larger, house in Lemery, closer to the homes of the fishermen we were in contact with. This was a big Spanish-style home, with large rooms, high ceilings, and wide windows all around. The most useful feature of the house for our work was the spacious bodega that took up the front half of the ground floor. We soon had this space converted into a small chapel, which continued to serve us until our little church was built in the center of town.

It was in mid-1965 that nearby Taal Volcano erupted after being dormant 54 years. Since Taal is only ten miles from Lemery as the crow flies, the whole town was soon covered with a thick layer of ash. That, coupled with the roar of the eruption, the continuous violent electrical storm overhead, and the buzz of rumors that the worst was yet to come, persuaded us to evacuate the family to Manila. It was good that we were back in the City, because that week my wife delivered our fourth child. After another week, I began to commute back to Lemery, while the family remained in Manila for another month or so.

In 1970, we were given a three-month furlough in the States. Upon our return to the Philippines, we moved back to the Manila area, where I was assigned to an established congregation in one of the northern suburbs. It was a timely move for the four children, since they were now able to attend Faith Academy, a school for missionary children that offered the traditional American educational curriculum.

By 1974 we had decided it was time for us to leave the mission field. The Philippine church was training more and more Filipino pastors, and I felt it was time for us veteran American missionaries to step back and let the local leaders begin to take control. Furthermore, our older children were close to, or already at, high school age. We thought it would be good for them to begin getting better acquainted with their own homeland, so they wouldn't have to experience the same culture shock I went through on my return from India.

In the Fall of that year, we moved to Stillwater, Oklahoma, where I became Pastor of Zion Lutheran Church. Stillwater is the home of Oklahoma State University. The combination of a university environment and the small-town atmosphere of a Midwestern community made Stillwater just the right place for us to move back into American life. We were to remain there for twelve years. By the end of those years, all four children had completed high school, and three of them had gone on either to graduate from or get started at the University (our daughter chose to go to a small Lutheran college in Kansas, instead). Even I managed some advanced studies, so that I was able to leave Stillwater with a Master's degree.

Twelve years in one parish may have been too long, however. Towards the end of our stay in Stillwater I began feeling symptoms of the same kind of professional fatigue that led me to take

early retirement ten or twelve years later. I went so far as to resign my parish and move to Florida to seek a secular job. After a month I realized that what I needed was not a change of profession but a change of location. I returned to Stillwater, where the good people of Zion voted to take me back as their pastor. With recharged enthusiasm, I continued serving them for another two years.

At the beginning of 1987, I accepted the call as Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Wahiawa, Hawaii. That move offered both of us a refreshing change of scenery. Wahiawa is an old plantation town located in the central highlands of Oahu, where trade winds blow almost all year and there's just the right amount of rain to keep everything green without getting sloppy. Trinity Church was within in a few minutes' drive of a number of U.S. military bases and their housing areas, so from a third to a half of our worshiping congregation every Sunday was composed of individuals and families who were in the Islands for a limited time. The leadership of the congregation stayed in the hands of a cadre of old-timers who carried into their church life many of the values and priorities of midwestern Lutheranism. Most of them were "haoles", although a few were "locals". Our stay in Hawaii was a little less than five years. We left with some regret, because we had enjoyed the Island life style, even though Church work had proved to be difficult and stressful.

We moved to Mill Valley in November of 1991, where I began my pastorate at Peace Church on the First Sunday of Advent. From the very beginning, both Rose Marie and I felt that we had "come home". We expanded very comfortably into the vastness of the parsonage. But more than that, we felt we had come into a congregation of welcoming and accepting fellow-Christians, ready to move on after the tragic death of their previous pastor. There was a depth of understanding and openness here we had not found in many places previously. We soon came to appreciate that fact, even in the midst of the tensions that rose up from time to time, as is to be expected in parish life anywhere. By 1996, the old professional fatigue had returned, and I concluded I was no longer able to give the congregation the kind of leadership it needed and deserved. It was time to announce my retirement. On July 31, 1997, I left the pastorate of Peace Church, with many regrets but many fond memories. We now live in Novato in contented retirement, happy still to be part of the parish as fellow-members with all the other people of Peace.