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ARCHIVES

BRIEF STUDIES

CENTENNIAL OF THE NEUENDETTLSAU DEACONESS INSTITUTE, 1854—1954

A European churchman whose influence touched the very core of Lutheran activity in America was directly responsible for the organization of an institution of service in Germany a century ago. The institution was the Evangelical Lutheran Deaconess Society of Neuendettelsau, and its father, the friend of the needy, the sick, and the underprivileged, Pastor Wilhelm Loehe. Born in 1808 at Fürth, Loehe early in life dedicated himself to the service of his Savior. He studied at Erlangen, where he enrolled in the fall of 1826. A contemporary of C. F. W. Walther, he grew up in the period in which serious tensions disturbed the Church. After successfully passing his ministerial examinations, Loehe accepted the position of an assistant vicar and was ordained in Ansbach on July 25, 1831. Later he became vicar elsewhere, and his influence soon was felt beyond congregational boundaries. However, his lifework began on August 1, 1837, when he became pastor of the congregation at Neuendettelsau, Mittelfranken. Here he remained for the rest of his life and was to exert a wide influence on the Lutheran Church.

An intimate relationship existed between Loehe and his congregation. His interest in ecclesiastical matters and his special interest in works of charity caused him to prepare the way for the establishment of a deaconess society. His chief interest in organizing a society of deaconesses was a growing desire to enlist a larger number of people in the service of the congregation.

Out of his rich ministerial experience he saw the great necessity for more adequate care for the sick. Besides, many young unmarried women wanted to be of service to the church. It was the concern for both that prompted Loehe to organize the Deaconess Society.

In the rented quarters in the inn *Zur Sonne* in Neuendettelsau, the society was organized on May 9, 1854. Loehe's original purpose was not primarily to train deaconesses, but rather to inspire young women to become active in the service of the Church. He had envisioned the establishment of hospitals and other charitable institutions, which in turn would draw their staffs from the local areas. He was not so much interested in organizing a central society as to place the work on the congregational level. It was in this sense that the *Lutherische Verein*

für weibliche Diakonie was organized. Actually the society came into being on March 13, 1854, when six women and eight clergymen from the area of Windsbach gathered in Neuendettelsau and constituted themselves as the mother society. Deacon Bachmann of Windsbach was elected chairman, but the leader behind the entire movement was Loehe.

Instruction began on the day following the organization of the society. Loehe himself imparted most of the instruction centering in the Catechism and the Scriptures. Dr. Schilffarth of Windsbach was engaged to teach the medical courses. Soon mentally diseased, epileptic, and similarly afflicted people were brought to the school, and Teacher Guettler was engaged to work with them. The people of Windsbach, only a short distance from Neuendettelsau, were ready to co-operate with Loehe in various ways.

A little later a mother house was constructed northwest of Neuendettelsau. The plot of ground purchased offered enough room for expansion as the society with its many services grew.

The mother house was dedicated on October 12, 1854, with a service in the village church. Originally the sick and ailing were welcomed to the institution to enable the deaconesses to receive practical instruction in the care of the diseased. However, the number who needed medical attention grew so rapidly that a resident physician in the person of Ignaz Enzler had to be called.

The care of the feeble-minded grew from very small beginnings into a large field of activity. As early as 1864 a separate building had to be constructed for this purpose.

An orphanage also was established and dedicated on December 6, 1862. Only 12 children were enrolled, since Loehe wanted to preserve a family environment for the children. A Magdalen home for unmarried mothers was dedicated on June 23, 1865. Before long the institution also boasted a farm, a large garden, a bakery, and the other departments necessary for maintaining a larger institution.

Upon Loehe's death, on January 2, 1872, 96 deaconesses and 55 probationary deaconesses were serving the Church in 48 stations.

Loehe's successor as rector of the institution was Friedrich Meyer (1872—1891), to be followed by Hermann Bezzel (1891—1909), Wilhelm Eichhorn (1909—1918), Hans Lauerer (1918—1953), Herman Dietzfelbinger (1953—). The first superior was Amalie Rehm, who served from 1854 to 1883.

A special building dedicated in 1909 was set aside for the sick, the convalescents, and the old people. Since the number of deaconesses

increased tremendously under Bezzel's rectorship, from 331 in 1891 to 709 in 1909, also many outstations were established in conjunction with the mother house. The Leipzig Mission sent two deaconesses to India in the service of a mission in 1895.

A monastery for lay brothers which had been established initially was revived by Bezzel in 1893. A school was founded for them in 1893 and a home in 1900.

During Lauerer's rectorship several buildings were added to the compound, including a home for the deaconesses returning for a furlough and rest. The sanctuary constructed in 1887 became too small and had to be enlarged. It was dedicated on November 2, 1930.

The entire enterprise suffered serious reverses during the period when the National Socialist party was in control in Germany. Almost all of the buildings and the functions of the institution were taken over by party members. During the war a number of the homes and buildings were bombed. It was not until the later 40's that all the properties, such as they were, were returned to the Deaconess Society. In 1952 there were 1,153 deaconesses, 74 probationary deaconesses, and 56 student deaconesses, 406 sisters associated with the organization; as well as 126 kindergarten teachers, serving 311 stations.

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