

Richard Waldemar Goerss; a 2-time Vicar? by Steve Mariano

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Last month Cody Norton was installed and welcomed as the congregation's Vicar. This is a significant event for a congregation that can count 146 total years in worship and has no record of a Vicar ever serving (Risen Savior – 6 years; Emmaus – 40 years; St. Martin – 100 years). In all that time, only one other seminarian ever worked in the congregation, and it's unknown exactly what his status was.¹

In the LCMS and other synods, Vicars normally serve in congregations during the third and sometimes fourth year of their education, but in the fall of 1909, Richard Waldemar Goerss, a new graduate of Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and just enrolled in the St. Louis Seminary is working with Pastor Carl Demetrio at St. Martin Lutheran Church. No record has been found explaining how or why a first year seminarian, not even complete with the first year of school, came to be working in the congregation. Unlike Pastor Demetrio, who served as a vicar in Michigan in 1906/7, Richard Goerss' seminary record does not indicate he served as a vicar during any period of his education, or ever set foot in Kansas. But his name appears three times in the records of the church over a 16-month period.

Richard Goerss was probably sent to St. Martin at the request of either Rev. Demetrio, or the Kansas District to temporarily assist him. Born just outside of Buffalo, New York, in 1889, there is no indication he had any relationship with the Pastor, the congregation, or any of its members, before or after his time at St. Martin. The congregation was still classified as a mission church by the District/Synod, and Rev. Demetrio was ministering to 3 additional mission sites: Bonner Springs, Jarbalo and Tonganoxie. His wife, Ida (Stark), had given birth the previous December to their only child, Esther, and suffered from tuberculosis. Ida never fully recovered from the birth. About the same time Goerss arrived, Rev. Demetrio's sister, Hulda, came to live with them in the parsonage to assist with the baby's care. In February 1910, Pastor Demetrio and Ida passed away a week apart due to typhoid and complications; pneumonia for him, tuberculosis for her.

We know Richard Goerss is assisting the Pastor prior to this death. On October 7, 1909, Goerss signed the voter's assembly minutes as secretary, because the "pastor has not been able to write them".

There is a second undated and unsigned record of a voter's meeting, written shortly after the Pastor's death, on the bottom of the second page of Pastor Demetrio's notes of the October 16, 1908 Voter's assembly. Pastor Demetrio took notes of all meetings, which the congregation still has, and later transcribed them. The writer of the undated minutes just choose an unwritten area of a page in the notebook the Pastor used to make this record. The record from this early 1910 meeting has an abbreviated income and expense listing for 1909; a decision to rent the parsonage for \$5 a month (now vacant after the deaths of the Pastor and his wife); and the statement "R. Goerss is thoughtful and diligent". This is the only record of any meeting occurring in the congregation between October 1909 and February 13, 1911.

On February 13, 1911, Richard Goerss' signature is found on the assembly meeting minutes as secretary pro tem. The only business being conducting is calling Rev. Gustav Hafner to serve as Pastor.

These three meeting minutes would lead anyone to believe Richard Goerss served the congregation between late 1909 and sometime in 1911. He did not. He actually served the congregation twice; once in 1909 and early 1910; returned to his studies at least for a semester; and came back to St. Martin by February 1911.

¹ Since publication a third Seminarian has been identified as serving the congregation prior to Vicar Norton's installation.

In April 1910, he is recorded on the federal census as living in the dormitory at the seminary in St. Louis. The 1909/10 Annual Kansas District Report does not mention Richard Goerss at all. The report identifies the pastor's position as "vacant" for St. Martin and the mission churches in Bonner Springs, Tonganoxie, and Jarbalo. Written in the remarks section is that the congregations are being temporarily served by Rev. A. G. (Adolph George) Dick of St. Paul's in Leavenworth.

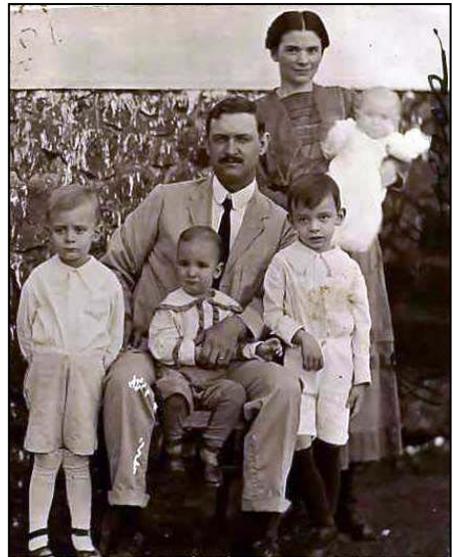
The 1911/12 Kansas District Report identifies Rev. Gustav Hafner serving as Pastor at St. Martin, the mission church in Bonner Springs, and a mission church in Boling (Pastor Hafner was installed on September 10, 1911). This time the remarks section reads; "11 Confirmed. During the pastoral vacancy, R. W. Goerss served, recieved \$41.60. In Boling preached intermittently." No other District,

11 Konfirm. Während Vak. v. Vik. R. W. Görß bed., der \$41.60 erhielt. Bei Boling mit Unterbrechung gepredigt.

Seminary or Synodical record has been discovered concerning Richard Goerss' service at St. Martin and the other mission churches.

This is the last mention of any association between Richard Goerss and the congregation in any found record. He would complete his seminary education and was ordained on August 17, 1913, in Buffalo, New York. Called to serve as a missionary in India, he left by steamship on September 23 and arrived in India six weeks later.

On May 11, 1915, Rev. Goerss and Louise Broecker, childhood sweethearts, were married in Kodaikanal, India. At the time, the wives of missionaries in India had to be nurses otherwise the Synod would not send them overseas. In 1914/15, Louise trained as a nurse at the St. Louis Seminary. On March 15, 1915, almost immediately after graduation, she and another nurse graduate left for the 12,000-mile trip to marry their missionary husbands. Rev. Goerss and Louise would have eight children.



Rev. Goerss, Louise, and children (L-R) Alfred, Paul, Herbert & Gertrude, c.1923

Except for two 18-month furlough periods, the family remained in India for the next 23 years. Rev. Goerss spent much of his early ministry travelling by motorcycle to multiple villages where he preached, taught, and baptized countless individuals. (In 1918, the Synod's Missionary Board funded a Ford automobile for his use.) Fluent in Tamil, he was one of the first instructors at the Lutheran Seminary in Nagercoil opened by the Synod in 1924. In 1928, he became its President.

In May 1938, the family returned earlier than expected to the United States for their third furlough to give Rev. Goerss time to recover from a serious illness. Within a few months it was determined his medical condition would prevent his return to India. In September 1940, he accepted a call to serve Redeemer Lutheran Church in Corning, New York, and a small mission church across the border in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. Less than a year later on August 19, 1941, Rev. Goerss passed away in Corning from heart disease. Louise followed him on December 7, 1953; they are both buried in the cemetery next to the church where they were baptized in Burgholz, New York.