THE ITALIAN MISSION WORK
OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH IN WISCONSIN
by Dwight S. Busacca

One of the little known stories of the Evangelical Church is the story of its mission to Italian-Americans in Wisconsin. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many immigrants poured into the United States from Europe. From 1880 to 1900 over 9,000,000 European immigrants came to the States, and from 1880 to 1930 a total of more than 28,000,000 settled here. About 4,500,000 of these immigrants came from Italy.

Milwaukee Italian Mission

The Evangelical Church began its mission work with Italians in 1908 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Katherine Eyerick, who had received her education in Naperville, Illinois, began this work. At first a storeroom on the east side of Milwaukee was secured, and a Sunday School and worship program were begun. Also a night school was started. It enrolled over 100 persons who sought to learn the English language in order to secure jobs. About 1910 the first congregation was organized with 11 members.

Rev. A. Giuliani, a former Roman Catholic priest, was converted to the Protestant faith and became pastor to the Evangelical Mission congregation in Milwaukee. He later married Katherine Eyerick, and together they gave leadership to this new congregation until her death in 1916.

In April, 1911, a new church building on Van Buren Street in Milwaukee was dedicated. A variety of ministries were held in this building, including worship services, catechism, vacation church school, citizenship classes, sewing classes, and English language classes. It was a ministry designed to meet the unique needs of the new Italian immigrants. Giuseppe Busacca and Angelo Germanotta were two of the young people who later became pastors of Italian Mission churches in Wisconsin.

In November, 1928, the Van Buren Street Church was sold, and a new and larger building was constructed on Astor Street, also on the east side of Milwaukee. The Woman’s Missionary Society helped with the funding of the new building. Rev. Giuliani died prior to the dedication of the new building, but his second wife, Mary Nippert Giuliani, continued the work until a new pastor, Rev. Benjiamino Re, moved from Portland, Oregon, to be the new pastor of the Milwaukee Mission. Other people who worked in the Milwaukee Italian Mission included Miss Honecker, Miss Richter, Miss Hulda Christner, Miss Mary Nippert and Miss Clara Schuerman.

Since there were also many Italians living in the west portion of Milwaukee, a satellite mission program was started in West Allis, nine miles west of downtown Milwaukee, called the Faith Italian Evangelical Church Mission.
Racine Italian Mission

One of the early converts in the Milwaukee Italian Evangelical Mission was Giuseppi Busacca, who eventually felt the call to Christian ministry. He had come from Sicily where his family owned a wholesale citrus fruit business. He had given up on religion as he knew it, but in time realized that the religion presented by the Evangelical Mission was different from what he had known. In time he made a commitment to Christ and decided to become a Christian minister in the Evangelical Church. He attended college and seminary in Naperville, Illinois. Fortunately, he had been taught the trade of repairing and making shoes, and he was able to pay his way through college and seminary by repairing shoes. During the summer he sold Bibles in Racine, Wisconsin, for the Bible Society.

For some time Giuseppi Busacca felt that there was a potential for an Evangelical Mission in Racine, a city on Lake Michigan about 25 miles south of Milwaukee. Rev. Giuliani surveyed the Italian community in Racine and agreed that there was potential for an Evangelical Church there. One day while Giuseppi Busacca was in seminary, Bishop Samuel Spreng called Giuseppi out of class and asked him to serve as a student mission pastor to the Italian people of Racine. An old store building was secured and the work began. Miss Matilda Droegkamp assisted in the mission. Homes were visited, night school classes were begun, and Sunday worship and Sunday School sessions were held weekly.

In 1914 a church building was purchased that provided more adequate facilities for worship and for English language and citizenship classes. During vacations Giuseppi Busacca worked fulltime at the Racine Mission. When Matilda Droegkamp resigned to continue her education, Miss Minnie Bach, a deaconess, was secured to work in the mission.

Following graduation from the Evangelical Theological Seminary in June, 1916, Giuseppi Busacca returned as fulltime pastor of the Racine Italian Mission. In August, 1916, he married Louise Nienas, a public school teacher he met when she volunteered her time to assist with various programs in the Racine Mission.

In 1922 Rev. Angelo Germanotta, who was also converted in the Milwaukee Italian Mission, completed his seminary education at the Evangelical Theological Seminary. He was assigned to the Racine Church as a pastor and later married Madalyne Schoeller who had been helping in the work of the mission.

Kenosha Italian Mission

During his student pastorate in Racine, Rev. Busacca noted the growth of the Italian community in Kenosha, a town about 10 miles south of Racine. By the time he graduated from seminary the Italian population in Kenosha had reached 3,000, and he soon began to divide his time between Racine and Kenosha. At first two rooms were rented in a home in Kenosha for $10 a month. The funds were provided by the Men’s Adult Sunday School Class at First Evangelical Church in Racine where Rev. George Epp served as pastor. Both as a pastor and as a bishop, Rev. Epp was a strong supporter of the Italian Mission work in Racine and Kenosha.

As in the other missions, an English language night program, sewing classes, Sunday School, and worship services were instituted. A store building was secured for the mission with rent paid by the Board of Missions. Worship services were held on Sunday afternoons. When Matilda Droegkamp finished her academic training she was hired to work full time in Kenosha, and her salary was paid by the Woman’s Missionary Society.

Each year the congregation grew in numbers and in outreach and influence. Sunday services were filled with worshippers. In addition, there was a strong Sunday School program, an active youth fellowship, mid-week prayer services, catechism classes, a vacation church school, social fellowship events, a fine choir, and other programs. It was a closely knit and meaningful fellowship.

Rev. Busacca became known for his work in helping Italian citizens who were in need. For example, a woman who had arrived in Kenosha by train was about to disembark when it lurched forward and she was thrown to the ground, and her face was deeply and extensively gashed. The railroad company did not want to pay the medical bills. Although Rev. Busacca was not an attorney he went to court to plead her case and secured payments for her medical expenses. This work was
typical of his ministry as a pastor in the Kenosha community. For a number of years Rev. Busacca served as the superintendent of all Italian mission work in Wisconsin. He traveled to Racine and Milwaukee from his home in Kenosha regularly to oversee this work. In August, 1940, Rev. Busacca suffered a serious stroke, and a series of English-speaking pastors was assigned to serve the Kenosha parish.

At least three other pastors came out of the Italian mission churches in Wisconsin to serve Evangelical, EUB, and United Methodist congregations in the state: Anthony Farina, David Farina, and Dwight Busacca (the author), son of Giuseppi, who also served for 25 years as a staff member of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

In 1941, on the eve of World War II, the Milwaukee church had a membership of 165, the Racine church 93, and the Kenosha church 115. At this time, however, the waves of immigration from Italy had ceased, and the new generation of Italian-Americans spoke English from childhood. Thus church services had to be in the English language. In 1951 the three Italian mission churches were incorporated into the Wisconsin Conference of the EUB church and ceased to be mission programs under the General Board of Missions. Eventually the Giuliani Memorial Church in Milwaukee merged with the Summerfield Methodist Church, and the Memorial Church in Kenosha merged with Wesley United Methodist Church in Kenosha. Faith Church in Racine and Faith Church in Milwaukee remain separate congregations.

Each of the missions, however, served a unique need in ministering to the Italians who migrated to Milwaukee, West Allis, Racine, and Kenosha, Wisconsin. These needs went beyond the religious needs of the newcomers to include assistance in learning the English language, in developing homemaking skills, and in assimilating into American society.

A SISTERHOOD OF PREACHERS
by Julia Dagenais

Charity Opheral is cited from time to time as "the first woman licensed to preach by a United Brethren annual conference." In A. W. Drury's History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (1924), he comments on her credentials: "The following license, if it is proper to call it such, was voted by the White River Conference [Indiana] at its session in January 1847, being the first, as far as known, to be granted to a woman by an annual conference: 'Know ye that we commend unto you Charity Opheral, our sister, as an acceptable laborer in the gospel and Church of the United Brethren in Christ'" (p. 425).

Lydia Sexton, a contemporary of Opheral and a fellow preacher, tells of a joint meeting with Sister "O'Pherl" in her autobiography. She calls Opheral a "very pious and gifted lady" and says further that "I heard one brother say she was the best natural orator he had ever heard. Few surpass her. But her health is greatly endangered from bronchitis, which is a great hindrance to her work."

Another active woman preacher of the period mentioned in Sexton's autobiography was "Sister Damaris Thornburgh, a very worthy and gifted sister, who held a license to exhort." She often went with Mrs. Sexton into the "stand." Sister Thornburgh had "a peculiar notion that she must not give out an appointment, but just speak when she felt like it and when favorable opportunity offered." "Consequently," her colleague comments wryly, "she seldom preached."

Other women preachers are mentioned by Sexton--Mrs. Thomas Craner and Lydia Nicholas. Another in their same community, Sister Elizabeth Fox, was persuaded to preach one evening and did so very successfully. Sexton commented, "Oh, how I wish she would cut loose from every incumbrance and go into the work in good earnest. I do believe the Lord would sustain her. What a pity that such talents should be buried in a napkin ... . One brother blamed me for letting Sister Fox preach though he, the minister in charge, could not have preached so able a discourse and when he did preach he used manuscript."

Doubtless each of these women, about whom we know so little, had a rich story to tell--an inviting challenge to the historian.

CENTER ON THE NET
Since our summer issue went to press the Center for the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage has established a website containing various items connected with our work. We hope it will prove useful to persons seeking our services.
Our Web address is: <www.united.edu/eubcenter>.
A NEW EDITOR
by Robert L. Frey

In the last issue of the Telescope-Messenger, I was introduced as the person who will succeed Don Gorrell as editor. I begin by thanking the founding editor, Calvin Reber, and the editor for the past six years, Donald K. Gorrell, for their outstanding efforts in preserving the witness of the people known as Evangelical United Brethren. Both Calvin and Don were faculty colleagues and close personal friends of my dad, George W. Frey. I grew up in the United Seminary family, and many of the faculty served as important role models for me—both professionally and personally. In this sense the editorship passes to another generation, although I am not much younger than Don Gorrell and Jim Nelson.

Before accepting this position I was assured by both Don and Jim that they will continue to have a significant role in the TM—in fact, most of the content of this issue was developed by Don. In the past several years we have placed a heavy emphasis on the historical foundations of the United Brethren and the Evangelical branches of the EUB church. This was done because of the significance of 1996 (50th anniversary of the creation of the EUB denomination) and 2000 (the bicentennial of founding events in both the UB and the Ev denominations).

At the same time we are aware that many people who were a vital part of the EUB years (1946-1968) are passing from the scene. In coming issues we hope to present more articles emphasizing the EUB years. Here is where we need your help. We are interested in your historical perspective of the EUB years. Personal anecdotes, stories of local churches, conferences, events, programs, reminiscences, biographies or autobiographies, in short, almost anything, will be welcome.

These articles do not need to be of finished or professional quality. Just get the information on paper via hand, typewriter, or computer, and we will do the editing. We have worked with student papers and have written and edited text for many years, thus we can provide the expertise to produce finished copy. But we cannot author all the articles necessary to continue the EUB heritage.

Many of you have stories that need to be told! Send your notes, comments, papers to:

Dr. Robert L. Frey
1356 Hidden Creek Rd.
Miamisburg, OH 45342

Together we can continue the excellent work begun by Calvin Reber and advanced by Don Gorrell.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Dwight S. Busacca was reared in the Italian Mission churches of Wisconsin. His father, Giuseppi, was the founder of the Racine and Kenosha missions. Material for this article is based on written recollections of his mother, Louise. Dwight was an EUB minister and a staff member of the Board of Global Ministries for 25 years.

Julia Dagenais is a layperson from Wichita, Kansas, who has a special interest in Christian women in ministry. This is her second article in the TM.

Robert L. Frey is the new editor of the TM. He is retired as academic dean at the University of Charleston (WV) and lives with his wife in the Dayton area. Bob is the son and grandson of Evangelical-EUB ministers. His Dad, George W. Frey, taught at UTS for 33 years.

Paul W. Milhouse, editor, author, and church officer, was elected an EUB bishop in 1960 and served the EUB and UM denominations in the Oklahoma Area until retirement. He and his wife live at the UM Home in Franklin, Indiana, and he is an active member of the Center’s Advisory Board.

James D. Nelson is Professor Emeritus of Church History at UTS and serves as the Director of the Center for the EUB Heritage. He prepares the TM for publication. Jim is also the son and grandson of Evangelical-EUB ministers.

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MY RELIGIOUS HERITAGE
by Paul W. Milhouse

Reflecting upon my religious heritage has made me more aware that God has spoken to me and guided me many times through other people. To these many people who have touched my life for good, I shall forever be indebted. To God whose providence has surrounded me with forgiving love and mercy, I shall be eternally grateful.

My religious heritage came to me, first, through my parents and the congregation to which they belonged—The United Brethren Church in St. Francisville, Illinois. As I push back my memory to those early years, I cannot remember a time when I did not think of myself as a part of that congregation.

I can see myself once again sitting on the little red chair, listening to a Bible story. The teacher is a small lady, with snow-white hair. She sits on a little red chair just like the one I am sitting on. She is holding a large picture card, and the picture on the card represents the Bible story she is telling. When the story is finished and the Sunday School class is dismissed with a short prayer, she gives each of us a small picture card just like the one she held in her hands. A summary of the Bible story is printed on the back of the card, and we are told that we can take the picture card home.

Our class met in the large room just off the auditorium (usually called the sanctuary today). Several classes of the Sunday School met in this large room, which was called the Sunday School Room. It was separated from the rest of the church by an elevation of the floor and doors that rolled up and down like our window shades at home. When I was older and the crowds at our revival services filled the auditorium to capacity, I was permitted to sit with other boys and girls on the ledge of that room. I do not remember much that took place in those church services, and probably did not understand much of it, but I was there. I can now understand that just being there left a lasting impression upon my life.

The church building itself had an important place in my religious heritage. It was a sacred place because my father and mother treated it as a sacred place. People went to church to spend some special time with God. It was a place where they could forget the daily cares of life and think about God. It was like dropping a veil to shut out the world for a while. Many times as we entered the sanctuary I have seen my father sit down in the pew, lean his head over on the seat in front of him, close his eyes, and spend a few moments in prayer.

I recall a lot of noisy visiting going on before services, but when Rev. W. O. Albert came to the platform at the front of the church and knelt beside his chair in prayer, the congregation became quiet. There was no more visiting during the service. As a little boy sitting in the midst of many adults, I was strangely aware that I was in the presence of God, and in a place dedicated for the worship of God.

The very architecture of the church building set it apart from the houses and store buildings in our town. It was a white frame building with large picture windows of stained glass that showed scenes from the Bible. Other buildings were white, but Bible picture windows belonged in church buildings.

The church building had a steeple. It was not a tall steeple, but one that pointed upward. As far as I was concerned, it was there to remind me of God. I do not know that I thought of God as being up in the sky so much as being above human beings in general, in charge of the whole universe. The steeple on my church was there as a reminder to remember God.

There was a bell in the belfry, just below the steeple. The bell was rung to call us to worship and to Sunday School—a half-hour before services began to remind us to change into our Sunday clothes, and again at the beginning of the services. The bell was tolled when a member of the church died, one toll
for each year of age. Since most people knew one another in our town, my parents could tell who had died as soon as the bell stopped tolling, and it would not be long until I would see the black "dead" wagon go by with the body. The bell would be rung again on the day of the funeral. It seemed to me that the town almost lived by the ringing of the church bells in our town.

Every Sunday morning, on the other side of the street, a couple walked by our house. They were neighbors of ours on their way to church. At church they occupied the end of the second pew from the front, on the left side of the sanctuary. Every Sunday they were there. It was the same on Sunday evening and during revival services. I never recall being in their home. I had difficulty understanding them when they spoke because they had a heavy German accent. I do not remember them ever speaking to me about my Christian faith. But I saw them walking to church each Sunday morning as long as they were able. I saw them in their pew every Sunday. Their actions spoke to me louder than any words they could have spoken.

I discovered early in my childhood that actions rated high in the life of my parents as well as in others I came to know. I do not remember a lot of discussion about religion at our house, but religious faith was evident in the way my parents lived. They did not talk much about prayer—we prayed. I have watched my father call back a customer to receive forgotten change or a forgotten package. I have overheard him and mother discuss giving groceries to some destitute family, or "marking off" a grocery bill for some family while the father was out of work. I can still see him studying Sunday's lesson before going to Sunday school. I have never forgotten words of tribute spoken by the pastor at my father's funeral, when he quoted a simple poem, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day."

From my parents and from neighbors, and from others in our community, my religious heritage contained a heavy dose of the importance of life's silent witness to one's faith, a reminder that faith and works consistent with that faith, belong together.

There was a Sunday School teacher who gave more than Sunday mornings to his class of boys. There were overnight camping trips before church camps were popular, homemade ice cream at his home, the gift of a pin that carried the initials, "B.B.C." (Boy's Bible Class), and Sunday mornings when Bible stories became living events to challenge the decisions of our boyhood minds.

There was a Sunday School superintendent who conducted the opening exercises for Sunday School. I do not remember what he said in his opening remarks, but I remember that he was always there on Sunday mornings, faithful in his leadership.

Pastors had significant roles in shaping my early faith. I do not remember what they said, but I remember them as being there when needed, faithful in their ministry to the congregation, giving leadership to community projects, preaching sermons that challenged me to be my best and reminding me of what others expected of me as a Christian.

In ways beyond my comprehension, the Holy Spirit of God was working through many people and events of my childhood and youth, to nurture me in the Christian faith and the responsibilities that come with commitment of life to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

THANK YOU, DON!

Dr. Frey, new Editor of Telescope-Messenger, has kindly allowed me to express these words of appreciation and gratitude for Dr. Donald K. Gorrell on his retirement as Editor. As a scholar Don has from his youth served our heritage as a writer and teacher. He was from its beginning in 1979 a central figure in founding the Center for the Evangelical United Brethren Heritage, serving not only as a member of its Advisory Board but also as a leading member of one after another of its various task groups and committees. It was thus
totally congruent with his lifework that in 1995, when Dr. Calvin H. Reber, Jr., founding editor retired, Don took up the work of editing these pages and has given to this task the full measure of his splendid gifts as historian, theologian and churchman. In beginning his six-year service, Don, with his accustomed straight-forward modesty, recognized the work of his predecessor and went on to issue the hallmark of his own tenure with these words: "To the solid foundation that he (Dr. Reber) established I hope to add my historical understanding and creativity so that readers will continue to better understand and value the heritage of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and its antecedent churches" (TM 5.1, 3). Always with integrity, often at considerable sacrifice to himself and his family, Don has honored this promise and more.

To his stewardship of the past he has added a consistent endeavor to represent not merely the EUB heritage as it has been received from those churches of yesterday, but also that heritage as it is being expressed today and tomorrow through The United Methodist Church. Our newsletter, the Telescope-Messenger, today constitutes the keystone of our work at the Center. For this we stand in gratitude to those who have made it so, particularly at this moment to Donald K. Gorrell.

--James D. Nelson, Director

OUR HERITAGE ENDOPTION

A year ago in these pages we announced the Heritage Endowment to support the work of our Center. Although the response was heartening we are still a long way from providing for adequate future funding of our work. It is thus incumbent upon us to keep this undertaking before our readers.

One very interesting response to our endowment appeal was the establishment of the Willson-Ohms Memorial Project, honoring family members who played a special role in the Evangelical United Brethren heritage. In the words of Paul E. Willson who established this memorial when he transmitted seven checks from family members to the Center, "The proposed Heritage Endowment for the Center seemed a timely opportunity for us to honor the memory of those in our family who served the Evangelical United Brethren Church and later the United Methodist Church." Those honored are:

Rev. Charles E. and Alice Burns Willson
Rev. C. Wesley and Violet Willson
Rev. Frederick and Sarah Willson Ohms
Rev. John F. and Virginia Davenport Willson

In response to our inquiry as to how this step had taken place, Paul Willson modestly proclaimed that although he had been the "selected volunteer" to coordinate the appeal, the whole project was initiated by his brother's widow, Virginia. Once more in his words, "Together we decided to contact my sister and brothers with the proposal and asked them in turn to reach out to their children. We wanted to plant a seed for the involvement of the next generation. It was all done by long distance telephone and mail."

This project, in turn, showed a degree of contagion as a few months later we received a contribution from Mrs. Eleanor R. Wolf of Reading, PA to create a memorial for her late father:

Rev. Dr. Oscar Andrew Hyden

When we receive inquiries about ancestors and kinfolk they often are accompanied by testimonials to the importance of the heritage we serve and now seek to endow. Thus we must believe that there are many others who would like to say with Mr. Willson, "It is with great love and pride that we remember these our loved ones for their many years of faithful service so willingly given to the Evangelical United Brethren Church."

All memorial contributions are welcome and will be entered in our Memorial Book. The names of those honored with a gift of five hundred dollars or more will be announced on these pages.

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ANECDOTAGE

Many students who attended United Theological Seminary can testify to the fear that gripped them when faced with the daunting task of preaching a sermon in Professor Edwin Burtner's Homiletics class. Professor Burtner's commentary on their efforts was often most direct and blunt. He did not waiver in his mission to mold the best preachers possible.

As a layman I never faced Dr. Burtner at the end of a sermon, but I can testify to his teaching ability. One evening, along with the Burtners and several other faculty families, my family was invited to dinner at the home of Dr. Arthur and Ruth Core. The Cores were delightful hosts, and I always looked forward to visiting their home. As a college student I was also interested in the conversation that took place on such occasions.

During the course of the conversation on that evening I used the word "irregardless." Dr. Burtner immediately commented in a polite, but firm, way: "There is no such word as 'irregardless.'" That stopped me in my tracks. Was I embarrassed? Yes, I was. Did I learn a lesson? You bet! I have never used that non-word again in the past 40-plus years. Furthermore, when I hear another person misuse the word it "grates" on my ear. Thus a belated thanks to Dr. Burtner for making me a better speaker.

--Robert L. Frey

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