

Immanuel and Lutheran Family Services

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Isn't it marvelous how the mission and ministry of Immanuel Hospital and the Immanuel Deaconess Institute live on today in Omaha and beyond! Thank you, Immanuel, for continuing to breathe life and "hope for the future" into the original mission of Pastor Fogelstrom and the deaconesses!

I begin my remarks by returning once again to the original mission set forth by Pastor A.E. Fogelstrom in October, 1887, when he said:

[Our mission shall be] the relief of the sick and suffering, the care and education of orphans and neglected children, the support of widows and aged persons, without reference to creed, color or nationality, and the establishment of hospitals, homes and other institutions for such works of mercy.

I hope you noted that Pastor Fogelstrom intentionally named as part of the original mission of Immanuel: "the care and education of orphans and neglected children." Today I stand here before you to thank you and to assure you that his original mission to care for our children is alive and well!" Thank you!

On any given day, Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska (LFS) has over 2,000 open client cases of children under the age of 18! Statewide during 2013, LFS served 4,736 children and their families within our core competency of Children Services! I doubt that the

Deaconesses and Pastor Fogelstrom ever imagined that what they began way back in 1887 would have that kind of “footprint” and impact today! You should feel good about your legacy and the legacy of Pastor Fogelstrom and the Augustana Synod!

So let’s take a quick minute to trace that rich history which led directly to the work LFS does today.

From Pastor Fogelstrom’s diary comes this direct quotation:

We had not thought about establishing a children’s home. But in January 1887 a man was killed by a train accident in South Omaha. He left a widow with four small children, the oldest of the children was six years. In June of 1887 the widowed mother became very ill. I prayed with the mother and promised that I would see to the care of her four young children when she died. The mother died in August. I contacted their uncle in Marshalltown, Iowa and asked if relatives could care for the children. The answer was that he was the only relative and was too poor to take the children. I dared not withdraw. I believed this was a sign from God that I should start a home for orphaned children. One of our Sunday School teachers, Miss Fredina Peterson, became the first housemother for the children in the church basement, our first children’s home.

Several years later (in 1901), a home for orphans was erected on the campus of Immanuel Deaconess Institute in Omaha. Children who were the victims of broken homes, illegitimacies, family illness, and neglect or death were brought to the Immanuel Children’s Home to be cared for by the Deaconesses.

In 1934 the Immanuel Children's Home staff decided that there was just no substitute for a more structured home atmosphere for the children so they launched a foster parent program, requiring high standards of Christian care in these homes before a child would be placed.

In 1958 the Immanuel Children's Home closed, ending nearly 60 years of institutional orphanage care to homeless children. Immanuel Social Service was then created to continue the work in foster care and adoption and to expand casework to include care for unmarried mothers and their children, as well as additional work with disturbed or disoriented children. In 1971, Immanuel Social Service merged with Lutheran Family Service (the LCMS organization) to form Lutheran Family and Social Services of Nebraska.

Which brings us to today! For 122 years Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska has been building and strengthening individual, family, and community life across Nebraska. What began as two orphanages, one by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in Fremont in 1892..... and one by Pastor Fogelstrom and the Deaconesses in Omaha in 1887....together they have become LFS, a statewide, community based, multi-service organization dedicated to bold and courageous human care ministry.

In the mid-1980s LFS expanded services to include outpatient mental health and substance abuse treatment, becoming today one of the largest behavioral health providers in Nebraska! LFS also responded to the devastating farm crisis during the 1980s, putting a pastor "on the road," counseling pastors and farmers caught up in the pain and trauma of that crisis. For some rural pastors they truly led "a house divided." On one side of the congregation would sit the family who was forced to sell their farm and on the other side of the congregation sat the

family who had purchased their farm for “pennies on the dollar.” LFS provided care to those pastors and to the farmers. LFS was there to minister to the family and the community when a farmer committed suicide and when a family broke apart due to the stress of the farm crisis.

Recall with me once again the words of the original mission statement written by Pastor Fogelstrom: He said they would “care for the sick and suffering, orphans and neglected children, widows and aged persons, without reference to creed, color or nationality...”

Continuing to live out that original mission in the 1990s, Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska began resettling refugees and today, LFS has the largest resettlement program in Nebraska, resettling 603 refugees in 2013. Most refugees are not Lutheran, they are not Caucasian, and they are most definitely not Swedes or Germans or Norwegians! They are Sudanese, Burmese, Iraqi and Karen! Imagine the joy they feel when stepping off the plane in Omaha or Lincoln, safe from rape and torture, famine and filth, after living 14—20 years in a refugee camp! LFS does this work “without reference to creed, color or nationality”.....just as Pastor Fogelstrom said to do!

Also in the decade of the 1990s LFS began providing immigration legal services....another bold decision, but one that an immigrant church understood!

It was also during the 1990s that LFS quietly, but courageously, began serving men who had committed incest or other forms of sexual abuse with children. Children, God’s precious gifts, who were and are too little to understand the reasons for such atrocities! LFS began these services with courage, knowing it was the right thing to do and also knowing that not all Lutherans would understand....just as Pastor Fogelstrom knew when he began the children’s

home. He knew not everyone agreed with him! But he...and we... did it anyway, and today, the LFS program for children who have been sexually abused is called R-SAFE. It is a nationally recognized program that serves over 300 children a year! LFS did not run from the problem. We did not wait until the tragedy at Penn State a few years ago when the coach allegedly engaged in sexual misconduct with young athletes. Just like Pastor Fogelstrom, LFS stepped out to respond, trusting in God's support and guidance, remembering the words of the Prophet Isaiah when he said: "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

At LFS we are deeply committed to justice and dignity for all of God's children... the sexually abused and their abuser; the poor and the rich; the homeless refugee and the homeless veteran; the pregnant teenager and the chronically mentally ill. It is our steadfast belief that "all people are created in the image of God" and we act on that belief with courage and faith! The Rev. Dr. Bernice King, Dr. Martin Luther King's daughter, wrote a few years ago: "Christians must be willing to listen to God, then step out of their comfort zones to accomplish what God intends."

In January, 1889, when Pastor Fogelstrom completed the hospital organization and incorporated it in the State of Nebraska, he omitted the name "Lutheran" and said that by doing this he and the deaconesses "were inviting all evangelicals to have a part in this work of Christian welfare." In 2008 LFS changed its Bylaws to allow for non-Lutherans to be elected to the Board of Directors, once again following in the footsteps of Pastor Fogelstrom.

Over the past 10 years LFS has intentionally focused on the development of prevention and early intervention services through three Centers for Healthy Families, one of which is

located only blocks from the original Immanuel campus in North Omaha! Research validates that positive change is most sustainable when education and intervention occur early in the lives of children and families who struggle. We know, for example, that 85% of a child's brain is developed by the time a child is 3 years old. We cannot afford to wait until something terrible happens to our children.....we must do this parenting work NOW.

Different but the same. Children. Safety. Some abused. Some neglected. Young moms who were born out of wedlock 16 years ago now having children. The LFS Centers for Healthy Families respond to the needs of young children and families in different ways than Pastor Fogelstrom, but with the same purpose and call from Christ in Matthew 25 to "care for the least of these...the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner, the naked, the sick and the lonely."

In 2014 Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska has 29 offices across Nebraska, 350 staff and an impact that touches the lives of over 35,000 people each year! This year we will serve about 150 children in foster care. We have a vision of safety, hope and well-being for all people. LFS is now embarking on a plan to create a Campus for Healthy Families in downtown Omaha. Our work is not done. Our mission is not yet complete.

Each year our Board of Directors welcomes all new members of the Board by participating in a Litany of Commitment where we say together....."May those who come behind us find us faithful." I don't know if Pastor Fogelstrom ever said those exact words, but I am sure he would be proud of the legacy that he began in 1887! I hope you are proud too! To God Be the Glory! Amen!

The mission of Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska is “to express God’s love for all people by providing quality human care services that build and strengthen individual, family and community life.”