

Origins of the Iowa Via de Cristo

Newell Bowers of Atlantic, Iowa, reports that in the late 1960's the Roman Catholics were holding Cursillo in Atlantic, Iowa, and Council Bluffs, Iowa. He provided bakery goods, delivering them to the Parish Center, which was completely papered shut, making him curious about "Cursillo".

Pastor Ramon Runkel of Des Moines, Iowa, was first introduced to Cursillo by Pastor Reid Seastrand, who was one of the first Iowa Lutherans to attend a Cursillo (February 1968, Ames, Iowa), was very enthusiastic and talked about the experience whenever he could, and he had many friends in the Catholic community. After a couple of years of nagging encouragement, Pastor Runkel attended Cursillo in March of 1970 and was the only non-Catholic among sixty-three candidates. It was a fantastic weekend. After his wife made her weekend, they encouraged pastors and lay persons to get involved.

The Holy spirit was really stirring things up and ecumenism was in the air. Pope John told the Catholics that "Christians in those other little white churches would also be in Heaven." So, in 1970 and 1971 Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Missouri Lutherans as well as interdenominational Christians went to a Catholic Cursillo in Atlantic, Iowa. As a result of the weekend, they asked the Catholics if they would help to organize Lutheran Cursillos.

Pastor Gene Hermeier of Fridley, Minnesota, was a mission pastor in a bi-racial parish in Council Bluffs, Iowa when in 1967 a Roman Catholic started "bugging" him to attend a Cursillo weekend. In 1969 he went, kicking and screaming, and stayed to pray. He was absolutely blown away by lay people sharing in such a deep and meaningful way. Pastor Gene believes that he still has the record for being the only Lutheran clergyman that he knows of who gave a talk on an entire Roman Catholic weekend.

In late 1971, Pastor Hermeier and several other Iowans who had attended a Catholic weekend went to Bishop Schlachtenhaufen and asked if they could conduct the first Lutheran Cursillo. The Lutherans wanted to keep the discipline of the Cursillo movement and be honest with the Lutheran faith. The first Lutheran Cursillo for the fall of 1972 in Atlantic, Iowa. All of the first several Lutheran Cursillos had Catholic rectors with a mixture of Catholic and Lutheran team members. It was a significant weekend and could not have happened without all the help from the Catholic community.

In 1975, Pastor Hermeier received a phone call from Pastor Ed Simonsen who had read in the Iowa newsletter, "Rooster Crows", while serving in a parish in Florida that Lutherans were holding Cursilos. "We thought we were the only ones." he said. Thus the Florida and Iowa communities got connected.

Origins of Florida (Sonshine South) Via de Cristo

Three Miamians attended at Catholic weekend in Opelousas, Louisiana, in 1965. Early in 1966, a men's team came from Louisiana to conduct the first weekend in Miami. In 1972, Pastor Ed Simonsen and Father Tom Berry got together to start the Lutheran Cursillo movement. Lutheran #1 was held in 1972 with a team comprised of Catholics. That same year, Lutheran groups in Iowa adapted the Cursillo to Lutheran traditions.

As more denominations were welcomed, the theology became more ecumenical. As originally intended, the three-day study course continued as a method to encourage leaders to become more active in their churches and communities. Not much has changed in the last few years. The movement continues to enjoy its ecumenical diversity and relies on the Holy Spirit during team meetings and weekends.

The Lutheran Cursillo changed its name to Sonshine Via de Cristo in 1977. As a result of the outreach of Lutheran Sonshine Cursillo, movements spread across Florida, up into Georgia, and into the prison system in Florida. There is a great heritage and legacy in South Florida's Sonshine Via de Cristo. A Catholic team brought the gift to Lutherans here in Miami, Florida Lutherans welcomed other denominations, different nationalities and cultures and soon we had a unique, widespread work of the Holy Spirit touching many diverse lives.

There is an interesting observation to be made regarding the Sonshine Via de Cristo "history" in South Florida. That observation is called to mind in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever."

So it is today; so it will be tomorrow. We are indebted to countless people for what God has accomplished, but suffice it to say, "To God be the glory...great things He has done."

"Together we serve."