

## **Interview with Vilgard Sorgen**

**Interviewed by Margaret Nordley [spelling] for the Heritage Education Commission**

**March 22, 1985**

**Vilgard Sorgen - VS**

**Margaret Nordley - MN**

**MN: This is an interview with Vilgard Sorgen for the Oral History Project of the Heritage Education Commission on the subject of religion in Moorhead. It is March 22, 1985, and the interviewer is Margaret Nordley [spelling].**

**Briefly, I'd like to hear about your background before you came to college.**

**VS: Well, it was across the ocean. I was born in China of missionary parents of the Lutheran Church, and I finished high school over there, although I didn't really graduate because the Communists coming into China made us flee and we left China in April. But because of our good school on the mountain, we were also affiliated with the Minnesota state schools so that we could step right into school when we came over here; and I came to Concordia in the fall of that 1927 after we had fled the Communists in April.**

**MN: Yes, would you give us some of your impressions of Moorhead churches and Trinity while you were in college?**

**VS: Well, we felt, of course, Trinity was our college church and they invited us to take part in their education program so the release time that was given for us to choose, I chose a fifth grade of boys. There were fourteen boys in that one class every, I think it was Thursday at that time, and they were very, very receptive and also very well behaved. There was one particular one with big brown eyes that I thought was so special, and he really did turn out to be that way, too, in life.**

**MN: Was the release time in the schools at that time?**

**VS: Yes, I think there was because at that time we didn't really know the contacts with the school system, but we did respond when Trinity asked us to teach.**

**MN: Do you have any impressions of other churches in Moorhead at that time?**

**VS: Not in Moorhead, but we used to go over to the other Lutheran churches, like First Lutheran and Olivet to give programs. And we were often asked by the education department in those churches to speak for their programs; and then, of course, having grown up in China, I did quite a bit of speaking to the women's organizations and to the conferences on Christian education, but also on my life as a missionary's daughter. And, of**

course, those were not the kind that paid but we were glad to share what we had experienced.

**MN:** Then I'd like to hear briefly your experiences between the time you left college and when you returned to Moorhead.

**VS:** We had several years in between there. I went out to teach at Watford City, North Dakota; and, by the way, when I had written to my parents who were out in China and said I was teaching at Watford City, my father had written a letter that was waiting for me at Watford when I came. He said, "I have looked at the American map to find Watford City, and I can't find it, so it must be a rather small place; but remember this, Vilgard, God never puts you in a place too small for you to grow in." And that has stuck by me. I'm grateful for that.

**MN:** Yes, and so then later you were married.

**VS:** Yes, and after four years of teaching, and we started up in Canada in a parish of eight congregations and two preaching places and then from there to Crosby, North Dakota; from there to Valley City, North Dakota; from there to LaCrosse, Wisconsin; and then we came back in '53 when my husband started the congregation of Good Shepherd from an onion patch.

**MN:** Yes, that we'd like to hear. What was it like when you came?

**VS:** Well, we came sort of on the installment plan because our oldest came down with mumps the day that the van came to move us, so he had to be left. The doctor didn't want him to move. And then our youngest became very, very ill with scarlet fever when we came. He had one day of school, but they had a wonderful school nurse, Marie Jorgenson, who saw that here was a boy, a newcomer that came to school for one day and was missing the second, so she went to the house and saw right away that this throat was bad and she called the doctor and he came over and said he had scarlet fever. As a result, then, he was in bed for five and a half months because it had been a very, very severe case. But Marie Jorgenson, in her very Christian compassion, came with large cans of apricot juice and said he must drink this and because it was also during Lent (we moved in January). And by Lent he was still in bed and because he had to have so much liquid, his dad gave him a penny for each glass of apricot juice that he drank. When he got ten pennies, we gave him the dime and he filled his Lenten folder with the dimes, and Easter Sunday he put that full folder into the offering place by his bed; and thank God that was his first day of having a normal temperature, too.

But we were very, very fortunate in the cooperation of this public school system. They let us have the Riverside School to worship in. Everything else was in our house, whether it was Ladies Aid or Council meeting or choirs or Council and brotherhood, and so on. We started out with everything in action, and it was all in our house, down in the basement where the rafters showed and we had clotheslines all over and an open furnace, but no one seemed to object. They really, really responded. And at that time, probably, it was very,

very ripe for a new congregation. And the public school system was very kind to let us use Riverside for services, and then the following year we were ready to break ground for our first unit. And then Trinity was also out with program to reach out into the south part of Moorhead, so my husband and the pastor at Trinity spent several hours together mapping out where that dividing line was to be so that there would be cooperation and not friction. And this was a must, of course, and was very, very well followed through. But people were very ready for another congregation; in fact, I might mention it was Sid Rand, who was teaching at Concordia, who decided that all these buses coming out with Sunday School children at Trinity proved that they needed a new congregation. And when he and T. C. Hanson and I can't recall--there might have been others, too--who wrote to the Home Mission Department at Augsburg at the headquarters and suggested that there should be a new congregation. A. E. Hanson was the District President at the time, and he was very, very cooperative; in fact, when we moved here our oldest son had been left in LaCrosse and then since our youngest was so sick, the doctor said, "Well, we can't let someone with a cold come into this house," and because our oldest had caught a cold on the train coming up, A. E. Hanson's took him to live with them for two weeks. And it was rough, but I can remember saying, "Oh, why didn't we stay in LaCrosse where we had everything going," and my brother, who was Bishop in Rocky Mountain, said, "Vil, you're going to have a lot more fun here than you will anywhere else," and we have had. It's been a very great joy to see that congregation growth. My husband used to come home and say, "Oh, I've had a million dollar experience today watching the men lay tile and paint while the women fed them and scrubbed up what had been already completed."

**MN:** Was some of the work done by the members of the congregation, then?

**VS:** Very much. Everything except the structure part. The men laid the tile, they finished the furniture--old furniture that had been given us. By the way, Olivet congregation in Fargo, with Pastor Moe, at that time, was so empathetic and cooperative they gave us all their old choir gowns and all their old folding chairs and so we were gowned, oh, by the time that we got into half a year. But the congregation, anything on home mission, was told by headquarters, "Well, we'll support you for six months, but after that you should be on your own." And this might be interesting for the archives, we were on our own after three months.

**MN:** Why, that's remarkable.

**VS:** Totally on our own. And one of the first things they did was to say, "Missions come first, and Concordia College is going on our budget." And Concordia College was immediately put on that budget, and the first congregation in the area that put Concordia on its budget. They'd always been given much by other congregations, but it was like at Christmastime or such; but this was on the budget from the very first. And Dr. Bolly [phonetic] and a few other professors called to say how wonderful it would be to start a congregation with such spirit. And the members were very, very eager to get going. My husband said, "I just sit at the wheel, suggest something, and off it goes."

**MN:** Yes, we should mention perhaps your proximity to Concordia College.

**VS: Right, right. That's only about six blocks south.**

**MN: So that made it convenient to have a connection.**

**VS: Well, and Concordia cooperated, too. We were allowed to have a room in the New Main for all our choir practices after a while and so we were up in one of the rooms for about four months and allowed to rehearse in the evenings which was something for the college to give.**

**MN: Maybe you could tell a little more about the choir. Who was director and were you director and how many people were in it?**

**VS: Oh, yes. We started everything alone, and I had the children's choir and the senior choir. We decided that participation by the people was what they were wanting and, of course, that would make really what a church is--it's [it is or its?] people. Even the Boy Scouts were started at the beginning of the congregation, and the children's choir--we had about 20-some--and our senior choir was very fortunate to have soloists from the Concordia College Concert Choir and then after we had our charter membership drawn up, Cy Running was one of the charter members; and, of course, with joy we turned this choir over to Cy and that really was a gift to our congregation to have a man like Cy Running give of himself so willingly and so ably. And he used to tell us the instructions in singing in such a homey way. His homespun way was so appealing, like we'd be singing "Children of the Heavenly Father" and he'd say, "Get those overshoes off your feet and sing it now like you are children of the heavenly father" and who could help but be inspired by such leadership.**

**MN: Yes, maybe you could tell a little about the women's work.**

**VS: Well, we started out with having women down in our basement and, in fact, there were 40 who started out our women's organization. Fortunately, the home mission kept track of these new congregations that were started. Alice Sande was the director of women's work at headquarters and the church sent her out, paid her expenses, and she came out to start our women's group--our Ladies Aid or WMF, Women's Missionary Federation--started it out with hanging maps on our clothesline down in the basement to show how we were a part of the whole. And the home mission department is also very, very diligent in stressing how they expected us to be giving a percentage to the benevolence, whether it was the women, or the church, or the men--whichever group that the benevolence was to be a large portion of the giving. And, as a result, right from the start, that very first night I can remember Alice Sande said, "Well, when would you like to organize?" And they said, "Now." And she said, "How about circles?" "Why don't we do it now?" And so somebody put names in a hat and we drew into circles, and we had six circles right from the start. And Mrs. Fuglestad was one of the helpers; she said, "Well, this is something; we can get going without even having to send out notices." And it was really. We set the table up down in the basement with a lace tablecloth and candles and heritage coffee pot servers, and there was such eagerness I wish it could have been just taped in some way to pass on to posterity because there was nothing like it. It was a joy; it just fun to work with them.**

**MN: It just occurred to me we haven't mentioned that the church was the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd that's usually called Good Shepherd Church, and it's a member of the American Lutheran Church.**

**Do you remember anything about the change in the service at the time that we changed the hymn book? Do you remember in 1960 we got a new red hymn book that caused a lot of discussion.**

**VS: Yes. Some of them said, "If we're going to have to give up our Concordia hymnaries, which is what we used to begin with--they were also given us, many of the copies--we're going to have to go into this heavy book, I'm going to leave the church," which we laughed at and yet we had to listen to. So what my husband did when he started using the red hymnary was to choose hymns out of it that had also been in the other hymn book and they began to feel the familiarity of it. There was no problem once they got into it, and the liturgy--we eased into it, and we used it all, and it just was a joy to see how they were turned over to accept it because they saw it was the similarity. These hymns were still our old heritage and many new ones that were really good for our needs. It was just a smooth turnover because it had to be done with compassion, with listening, with discretion, and yet it worked just fine once they got hold of it and saw the similarity, they accepted it easily.**

**MN: Maybe you could say a little about the youth work. Did that change and grow?**

**VS: Yes, our youth--we were fortunate to have a young couple very eager to work with the youth when we first started even. They met in our basement, and then actually perhaps we could give credit to the Word for that because they had Bible studies. They divided the group into small numbers--they were not large to begin with, of course, being such a young congregation. We had more baptisms than we had confirmations and no funerals, you know. But this young couple had, I think, been to LBI in Minneapolis, and they were very good at organizing for growth and we'd have fun, too, but they never, never let go of that Bible study part; and as a result, I feel and we all feel there is a great change now. I think that the kids maybe are losing some of that depth and the sense of values because they have to be entertained or to entertain themselves. But I can remember a panel discussion they had once that the Luther League gave to the church as a whole and each one was giving a suggestion as to how to keep the youth, and one of the boys said, "If we're going to have entertainment in our Luther League and compete with the public who are professional entertainers, who's going to give them what the church can give and only the church can give?" And this is something that can continue through life, not just for beginning congregations, you know.**

**MN: Yes, do you remember something about the relations with other churches? Did that develop through the years, too?**

**VS: Yes, it did. At the beginning we were looked at suspiciously. But then when the cooperation came, it also was a shot in the arm for the other congregations. This new congregation with its zeal brought out a contagion that could be shared with others; for example, when they had the Luther League convention in San Francisco, my husband had**

five in the car and they drove and took some side trips and all and were a part of the rest of the churches who were also going out. But because we could not afford to pay for the buses that the others were having and they were full, then my husband took this car with the five Leaguers and all of them--I think I can remember all of them. Our son was one, John Ylvisaker was one, Mary Ylvisaker, and their expenses were paid for by a neighbor friend, and there's Carolyn Nelson and a Sorenson girl--those five. It was important that they could feel a part of the whole, and Trinity had its group, a large group, but we also had meetings afterwards to keep this on course of remembering the worth of the convention. There was a follow-up, in other words, which is important. It isn't just to let them go and then forget about it, but these follow-ups. And then, of course, we had tremendous turnouts for Bible camps. Tremendous in the way of not only numbers but the heart that went along with it and support from the parents. In fact, confirmation--before they were confirmed in the fall--would have a confirmation camp, is it at Menahga?, that's owned by Trinity and they shared that ownership with us, too, at Good Shepherd. More and more cooperation came through. Each one had much to do and didn't have to worry about someone taking over for them. A new congregation was good for the whole community.

**MN:** Do you remember anything about the ministers in Moorhead getting together? Have they always done that?

**VS:** I think so. I can't recall any time when they didn't. I think that they met quite regularly, at least monthly because that was something that the district president would be very eager to see and I'm sure that they gleaned from each other and inspired each other from that.

**MN:** What about the non-Lutherans? Did you start working with them?

**VS:** Oh, yes, yes. We had a 15-year-old and I think probably his brother, too, had to distribute all these invitations up and down the street, both sides of the street, and that took in everyone. And then my husband did the doorbell ringing and he went to every home. In fact, the first adult confirmation class was that first year, too. There were seven adults, and our son was the only youth confirmand so in order to make it important and really meaningful for him, his grandpa came to help from Fergus Falls and that was Ingvald Dalem [phonetic]. But this adult confirmation class had professors' wives, people who had been in church and people who had not, so for a new congregation, seven sounds many, although seven is not many. But they have carried through and continued. They had their instruction classes upstairs in our living room and they were confirmed at Riverside.

**MN:** You mentioned to me earlier that there was such a change in the mission emphasis in the church, and that's true of our whole church; but maybe you can tell a little bit more about that because that's in your field.

**VS:** This is true. Mission emphasis was number one in preaching, my husband felt. And our bishop, A. E. Hanson, felt the same way. If we're not concerned about others, we can't expect the blessings at home. And, of course, my father, being a missionary for 46 years out in China, used to demonstrate by stretching out his hand and he'd say, "When the arm is

out, there are blessings from the fingertips back to the owner of the arm. You clench that fist and hold it against your chest, nobody has any blessings." So you start out by giving, you start out by caring for the others. We had missionaries coming through or coming home on furlough. Every year we'd have some mission emphasis week, whether it was once or twice; and the other churches did the same thing. Now, well, a few years ago they changed that system and there's very little emphasis on missions. Now they have to go begging for missionaries, and then they were begging for the money to send them. And one transfer member, one year, I remember so clearly when he was put at the head of the stewardship drive, or--I hate to use the word drive--stewardship outreach, he said, "I wondered before I joined this church how they could do so much in so little a time and do so much with so little. Now I know because they emphasize missions." So there was proof. He said, "That's why I came here." I'm sure there are others the same way.

MN: Yes, how long were you in Moorhead and what was it like about the time you left? I mean, with the size.

VS: We were there at Good Shepherd for 17 years and then that was when all three units had been built. The first one was the multiple purpose building, and then the education unit, and then the sanctuary. At that time we also had more than one pastor; it was a multiple parish ministry and many, many people involved. There was growth that was quite phenomenal because Moorhead was a center and was ripe for one congregation. And since then we've had other new congregations, too, you know. So it shows this is grass roots area, but also with caring to reach out. It's a strong church center.

MN: We might say you went away and then came back. Maybe you should just mention that.

VS: We left then--my husband said there should be a new face in the pulpit. So we went to Nebraska for five years and then came back when he had the call to be visitation pastor at Olivet. We couldn't find a house that we could swing in Fargo, and the Council said, "That's all right. We're one community; you just live where you can find a house that you can swing." And, of course, not having any equity at all because the parsonages were furnished, we had no equity and college and post-college and so on. I went back to teaching after I'd gotten my library science certificate and two years of teaching is all we had with no one in school and that's what went down to pay for our house. So we lived in Moorhead then and enjoyed very much the combination of being in Moorhead but also serving in Fargo because the two are definitely one community and the churches are very cooperative--very. It's a joy to be here.

MN: Can you think of any other comments you'd want to make about changes of religion?

VS: If this is going to the archives, I think there's a good boost for Trinity here in its history of supporting missions and missionaries. Trinity has done this, I suppose, since its inception probably and one of the missionaries whom I remember very well was Martha Kuhlberg [phonetic]. Would you like to hear that story?

It's unusual but my father used to say about Martha that she was one of the key single missionaries because she had such courage and such faith, never feared going into the inland all by herself in a wheelbarrow; that is, of course, sitting in a wheelbarrow over roads. She didn't push it; she had coolies who did. But she came to one inland village early to set it up for the next day's services and teaching. It was a week of teaching mission. She found that the room was full, so she couldn't understand this but went in and sat down in the back row and saw that up in front were magicians who had collected the village and all the surrounding area with curiosity seekers, and here these magicians were swallowing swords and pulling out burning paper and doing anything that she, naturally, could not do. Then they spotted her, and of course we missionaries were called "yunguadza," [phonetic] which is "foreign devils." And the magician saw her in the back and said, "There sits a foreign devil; well, she's here to tell you about her god and if she can do the things that we can do here, then we'll come back tomorrow and listen to her tell about her god." Poor Martha Kuhlberg could do nothing of the sort of magician work, but she asked God. She said, "God, I know you don't want to embarrass either you or me; show me what to do. Use me." She walked down the aisle still not knowing what in the world she would be doing. She faced the audience and smiled from ear to ear and showed her teeth and invited to come and then she took out her dentures and held one plate in each hand for them to see. And they were just horrified. And then she greeted them with her bare gums and asked them to come back and put back her teeth, her dentures in place. And she noticed in the audience one after the other feeling of their teeth, seeing if they could move them. Then she heard a little commotion behind her. Looking back, she saw the magicians picking up their wares and going out the door. But that shows what the Holy Spirit--he can use whatever we have, and this Martha Kuhlberg really did a lot for Trinity's interests in missions because she was so alive and very grateful for their support.

MN: Yes, I think the Women's Missionary Federation; that is, the Ladies Aid, supported her for many years.

VS: Yes, they did. And she came back and spoke, too. But I don't imagine she'd tell this experience of hers, so I figure it's kind of interesting for the rest of you to hear about it.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

MN: Yes, well, it certainly has been very interesting to hear what you have to say, and we do thank you very much for being here.

VS: You're so welcome. This was a joy to share. And we might say, too, that I don't know if I mentioned that Good Shepherd also helped support missionaries and they still do. I think most of the Lutheran churches here do, which is according to God's command as well as expectation.

MN: I thank you very much.

VS: Thank you, Margaret.



**[End of Interview]**