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# Zionsgemeinde, Palmenthal, Revisited

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**Michael Doyle**

*In introducing his article the author noted: "This article, which tells the story of Palmenthal, came about when Martin Ewald of Hacienda Heights, California, assisted Michael Doyle, one of the archivists for the Pacific Southwest District, in translating the January 1914 edition of Der Lutherische Botschafter. On the front page was the obituary of Rev. Christian Friedrich Meyer, the first pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Palmenthal, California.*

*Mr. Doyle recalled that one of his predecessors, Rev. Gottfried H. Naumann, had written an article on "Zionsgemeinde, Palmenthal," in the Spring 1985 edition of the Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly. In Pastor Naumann's article, he stated there was no record of Pastor Meyer's death. With the translation of the obituary and after doing research in the Palmdale Public Library, the Lancaster Museum/Art Gallery, and the Lancaster Library, the author decided to retell the fascinating story of the Pacific Southwest District's third congregation, Zionsgemeinde, Palmenthal, California. This article could not have been written if it weren't for the assistance of Norma Gurba, director of the Lancaster Museum; Dan Munz, the great-grandson of Johannes Munz; Dan Meyer, the great-grandson of Zion's only pastor, Rev. C. F. Meyer, who both shared copies of their great-grandfathers' autobiographies; and Marge Davis, the great-granddaughter of Erdmann Rathke, Sr."*

*For several reasons this article is of interest. The church in Palmenthal was one of the first Missouri Synod congregations to be organized in California. Second, descendants of its pastor, Christian F. Meyer, became prominent pastors and educators in this Lutheran body.*

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**T**he story of the colony of Palmenthal, California, established on July 16, 1886, begins with a group of German Lutherans coming to the Antelope Valley in 1886, drawn by the lure of land promoters who offered 20-acre plots and described the valley as a lush landscape with fertile farming fields. When the pioneers arrived either by train or wagon, they discovered a valley, approximately 3,000 square miles, which was located in the westernmost part of the Mojave Desert at an altitude of 2,600 feet and had an annual rainfall of eight inches with an average temperature of 56

in January and 98 in July. The northwest perimeter of the valley is separated from the San Joaquin Valley by the Tehachapi Mountains with the south and southwest separated by the San Gabriel Mountains, and the north and eastern boundaries separated by isolated buttes. The valley is a closed basin that has no outlet for the twelve creeks, Amargosa, Little Rock, Pallett, Sand, Big Rock, Bob's Gap, Deadman, Boulder, La Montaine, Muscal, Bone Yard and Sheep, which carry water in the wet seasons. All the rainwater either is absorbed into the ground or collects in the lower part of the valley. There is evidence that shows at one time, the valley was covered with a large fresh-water lake. The famous San Andreas Fault runs through the valley along the southern slope.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Earliest Inhabitants**

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Many hundreds of years ago before the German Lutherans came to the Antelope Valley, the Kitanemuk Indians, who were hunters and gatherers, occupied the floor of the valley. Since they depended almost entirely on the natural vegetation of the land, they did not farm or raise animals, but they did trade with the Chumash of Santa Barbara. Some believe that many other tribes, the Yokuts, Chumash, and Shoshone, probably lived in the valley at one time or another. Because the Indians were nomadic, there were no permanent settlements on the valley floor. The Antelope Valley provided a wonderful Indian trade route from Arizona and New Mexico to the California coast. In 1770 before the mission era began in earnest, the Indian population of California was estimated to be 133,000. By 1910, they only numbered about 16,350 in the state, with the Antelope Valley Indian population consisting of only a few families.

Even though California was discovered in the sixteenth century, it wasn't until the latter part of the eighteenth century that it began to be explored. Captain Pedro Fages, an officer in Portola's expedition, is credited to be the first white man to set foot in the Antelope Valley in 1772, as he was traveling westward along the San Andreas Fault searching for deserters from the Spanish army. While traveling from the Colorado River to the five coastal missions that existed in 1776, Father Garces, a Franciscan friar, crossed the western end of the Antelope Valley.

In 1827, Jedediah Smith, the first American to visit California by land, traversed the Antelope Valley. Kit Carson followed him in 1829, and explored the valley while on a trapping expedition. Finally, John C. Fremont, the most famous of all California explorers, conducted a scientific exploration of the region during 1844. With the exception of these explorers, the valley was left relatively undisturbed and untouched.<sup>2</sup>

The area was used as a hunting ground for antelope where almost 60,000 of these animals roamed. Between 1882 and 1885, the valley lost 30,000 head of antelope or almost half of the antelope for which the val-

ley was named. Because of the unusually heavy snows in both the mountains and the valley, it drove the antelope toward their normal feeding grounds in the eastern part of the valley. Since they would not cross the railroad tracks, many of them starved to death while others were attacked by coyotes and wildcats, or became easy prey for hunters in the area.<sup>3</sup>

The tranquility of the Antelope Valley would soon be disrupted when Don Alexander and Phineas Banning established the first stage line through the southern edge of it from Los Angeles to the north. Before the early 1870s, the valley floor was not considered suitable for human habitation. That would all change in the early 1870s when homesteads were established wherever surface water could be located. The idyllic valley totally changed in September 1876 when the Southern Pacific Railroad constructed its line through the valley as part of its route between San Francisco and Los Angeles. This brought many settlers to the area. The railroad built this route, as they considered the coast route to be too impractical. An 1877 map of the area shows three railroad stations: Lancaster, Alpine, and Acton.<sup>4</sup>

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### Early Arrival of German Lutherans

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The stage is now set for the immigration of the German Lutherans to the Antelope Valley in 1886. In his 1991 book, *Ghost Towns of the Mojave Desert*, Alan Hensher states, "Just as the land boom was taking off, a group of German Lutherans founded a small colony called Palmenthal." This group of thrifty Germans, originally from Germany, Switzerland, and southern Russia, was drawn to the area from their new homes in Kansas, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Illinois. They had been attracted by the ingenious land promotional schemes that portrayed the valley as a verdant place to farm and to establish a booming town. Approximately 50 to 60 families came to settle Palmenthal (German for Palm Valley), which was located about at Avenue R-8 and 27th Street East, three miles east of the present civic center of Palmdale. This thriving little, self-sustaining, German community consisted of about 250 people and had 40 buildings, a Lutheran church, a Christian day school, a one-room public school, a general store with a post office, livery stable, bakery, saloon, a doctor's office, land office, blacksmith shop, cobbler shop where shoes were made, sold, and repaired, many fine houses, and a Lutheran cemetery.

Palmenthal became the official name of the town when a post office was established on June 17, 1888, in the general store owned by a Lutheran, Johannes Munz. Some of these families built fine two-storied homes, had farms with fields of alfalfa, fruit orchards, vineyards, and their own livestock, horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens. The following article from the May 8, 1887, edition of the *Los Angeles Times* may have brought others from Los Angeles, as it stated the following:

. . . Although Palmdale is only a year old, we have more permanent improvements than any other place in the valley. We have an incorporated irrigation company, store, church, etc. Some 20,000 muscat vines have been planted, with about as many fruit trees, and all are doing fine. We are badly in need of a hotel. Among the buyers in the colony are Mr. Stoneman, F. C. Thomas, Von Keith, the artist, O. Hearn, Butler, Blumenthal, Schneider, Bohert, Compton, Schulze [a member of Zion], Redmond, and others of Los Angeles; F. E. Illing, a capitalist of Milwaukee; F. Mesenbring of Minnesota [a member of Zion]; C. Krull, of Iowa, and others too numerous to mention here. Land in this colony can yet be had from \$7 to \$25 per acre.

Peter Jones (Jonas) must have been the big local promoter of Palmenthal, as the following ad appeared in the *Antelope Valley Times* on August 1, 1889:

**PALMDALE COLONY LANDS**

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LOCATED TWO MILES NORTHWEST OF ALPINE  
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**CHEAP LAND WITH WATER RIGHTS  
FROM LITTLE ROCK CREEK**

The colony has so much Orchard and Vineyards planted as the whole of the Antelope Valley put together. Come and see the fine orchards and Vineyards of the Colony.

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Lands in Small Tracts at \$25 per Acre with Water Rights for each acre of land. A Discount in Large Tracts. No First Payment to Actual Settlers - Only one Year's Interest in Advance.  
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**TERMS EASY**

Will take Los Angeles City Property In Part Payment

-- CALL OR ADDRESS ---

**JOHN JONES**

West First Street, Los Angeles, Cal., P.O. Box 509  
OR PETER JONES, Palmdale/Los Angeles County, Cal.

Peter Jones (Jonas) and his father, Simon, lived in Palmenthal and were members of Zion Lutheran Church. Peter more than likely ran the land office in the colony, while John Jones, probably Peter's brother, lived in Los Angeles, running promotional activities there for the Palmenthal colony. Through their advertisements and the promotional lithographic poster by the artist, Professor E. S. Moore, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Herald* in September of 1887, many more people were brought to the area in the late 1880s and early 1890s. These included the Rathkes, Nickels, Ritters, Woock, Wyneken, and Blum families, who became members of Zion.

One of the first families to come to Palmenthal was that of Johannes Munz, a man from Switzerland, who had immigrated to America in 1878. While in Chicago, he met a young Swiss woman, Amalia Tishhauser, who had lived only 15 miles from his birthplace. After they married in 1880, they established a prosperous farm in Odell, Illinois. With the lure of Palmenthal as portrayed in advertisements, Johannes decided to sell the farm and bring his wife and four children to this new colony where he established a general merchandise store in the fall of 1886. When his family arrived, he had a seven-room home with a basement ready for them. The Palmenthal Mercantile Store had living quarters above it, where the clerk, Ferdinand Tetzlaff, a member of Zion from South Dakota, and his wife and four children, lived.

Storekeeper Munz was a jolly man, nearly six feet tall, with a full beard and blue eyes. He was also the postmaster of the town, a Firemen's Fund insurance agent, a news reporter, a poet, and a member of Zion Lutheran Church. Since he extended credit to everyone who had a hard luck story, he was forced to sell the store to Ferdinand Tetzlaff in August 1889. More tragedy befell his wife and him when their child, Wilhelmine Munz, died on October 6, 1896, shortly after birth, and was "buried in the garden of the father," according to the church record book. The final blow came when his dear 38-year-old wife died in 1898, seventeen days after their tenth child's birth. After his wife's death, he traded his 20 acres in Palmdale, with its house and store, for a 120-acre ranch of undeveloped land at the west end of Elizabeth Lake. He and his nine children moved there in April of 1898. Because he couldn't take care of the new baby, he had his 15-year-old daughter, Ingeborg, take the baby to Switzerland for a Swiss family to adopt.<sup>5</sup>

Another family that came to Palmenthal and became a founder of Zion Lutheran Church was the Erdmann Rathke family. They arrived in the area in 1888, probably through the influence of the romanticized flier of Professor E. S. Moore. Erdmann, Senior, was born in the colony of Rosenberg in South Russia on November 1, 1823, as was his wife, Regina Renata Rabe, who was born on April 18, 1825. They were married on April 18, 1846, in Danzig, East Prussia, which is now part of Poland. They had 10 children: Johann Erdmann (1847–1908), Renate Elizabeth, Florentine Renata, (both died of diphtheria and were buried near Yankton, South Dakota), Friedrich (who married Elizabeth Fiedler and came to America

in 1876 with her parents), Maria (married Johann Friedrich Fleischhauer), Wilhelmina (December 28 1856-August 29, 1950), Jacob (married Lena Fiedler in South Dakota), Johann (born on May 25, 1861, in Kobler, a German colony in the Crimea in Russia; his parents moved back to Rosenberg in 1864 or 1865), David (born in October 1865 in Rosenberg), and Samuel (born June 8, 1870 and died September 1, 1954). Samuel was a Lutheran pastor who had attended Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

In 1862, Erdmann and Regina moved to another Rosenberg in Zurichthal, Crimea, in Russia.<sup>6</sup> The family decided to leave Russia along with many other Germans, because the government was forcing the Germans to speak Russian, go to Russian schools, and join the Russian army. In 1877, they arrived in the United States, moving to Rosenberg about seven miles from Yankton, South Dakota, where he donated some of his farm land for Immanuel Lutheran Church and Cemetery, which was organized in 1877.<sup>7</sup> By 1920, the Rosenberg church was disbanded, but the cemetery is still maintained by St. John's, Yankton, South Dakota.<sup>8</sup>

Erdman Rathke Sr., Johann Erdman Rathke, Friedrich Rathke, David Schmidt, (Wilhelmina Rathke's husband), Jacob Rathke, David Rathke, and Johann Rathke, all signed the constitution of Zion Lutheran Church in Palmenthal some time in 1888, even though it [the constitution?] said that the constitution was adopted in the congregational meetings on May 25th and 30th of May in 1887. The names of Erdmann and Friedrich Rathke first appear in the communion records on October 21, 1888. When Jacob arrived in Palmenthal, he bought a claim from a Mr. Klinger for \$2,000; this included a team of two mules (brown and white) and a cow. Erdmann Rathke, Senior, died of the flu on April 23, 1895, at the age of 71; his son, Jacob, died on June 22, 1897, following a gallstone attack at the age of 38, leaving five small children. (Both are buried side-by-side in Zion Cemetery in Palmenthal.)

After Jacob's death, his wife, Helena, went back to her family in South Dakota. David and his brothers, Erdmann and Johann, took their families along with their widowed mother and moved to Olpe, Kansas, where they settled in late 1895. Their names last appear in Zion's communion record (Palmenthal) on September 7, 1895. David gave five acres of his Kansas farmland for a church and cemetery that was also named Zion. The story was told that he would preach in the church when there was no pastor and conducted family devotions at home. Friedrich Rathke and Johann Fleischhauer, who were brother-in-laws, must have stayed in Palmenthal until 1899, as they and members of their families' names appear on the communion record in 1899.

At one time, Palmenthal had two physicians, Dr. Victor Vink and Dr. A. E. Vogt; both were members of Zion Lutheran Church. Dr. Vink's son, Victor Ernest Hermann, was in the first confirmation class. He signed the first constitution and his name, along with that of his wife and two sons,

Arthur and Victor, appear on the communion register on April 1, 1888, and April 19, 1889. His name also appears in the baptism register as a sponsor for Louise Scherer who was baptized on October 30, 1887. After the April 19, 1889, communion registration, the name doesn't appear again. It may be that he was only in the area a short time.

Dr. A. E. Vogt's name first appears on the communion register on May 13, 1894, and continues to appear along with his wife's until the last communion service to be held by the congregation on May 21, 1899. His name also appears on the baptismal record as an emergency sponsor, along with pastor's wife, for Jacob Schmidt on June 25, 1896. Apparently, for some time from 1889 until around May of 1894, the town may not have had a resident doctor. Dr. Vogt must have been a very devout Lutheran, as his name appears as a charter member of St. John's Lutheran Church in Oxnard in 1900. This small Lutheran church and its members played a prominent role in the history of Palmenthal.

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### The Climate and Landscape

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The reason these German Lutherans named their town Palmenthal, or Palm Valley, was that they were told that when they saw palm trees, they would be close to the Pacific Ocean, which in reality is about 100 miles away. After arriving in the Antelope Valley, they noticed an abundance of Joshua Trees (*Yucca brevifolia*), found only in the Mojave Desert, which they mistakenly called palm trees, having never seen a palm tree. A group of Mormons, passing through the Mohave Desert on their way to Salt Lake City in 1857, called these strange-looking trees "Joshua," as they appeared to be pointing and guiding them to their destination just as Joshua led the children of Israel into the Promised Land many hundreds of years ago. The Germans used the petrified Joshua wood for fuel because it burned better than coal and left no ashes.<sup>9</sup>

When the Germans arrived in this dry, arid, desert land, they had a number of wet, rainy seasons, thus giving them water, which they stored in cisterns for use in their homes. The men of the community dug a ditch and installed a wooden flume for bringing the water from Little Rock Creek to the area. In 1896, they constructed a reservoir that was later known as Palmdale Lake. Johannes Munz, the owner of the general store, had a 200-foot well dug next to his store. During dry spells, everyone hauled water from the Munz well until it went dry.

While in the process of meeting their need for water, they, having "a thirst for the pure Word," also turned to their spiritual needs. Since there were only two Missouri Synod Lutheran churches in southern California, Trinity in Los Angeles and St. John's in Orange, both established in 1882, they called on Pastor George Runkel of Los Angeles to minister to them. He would take a 60-mile train trip to Alpine, and then travel by buggy or wagon another two miles to Palmenthal.

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### Establishment of a Lutheran Congregation

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Through the assistance of Pastor Runkel, a church was established in Palmenthal that would later become Zion Lutheran Church. According to the July 24, 1986, *Antelope Valley Press*, the date the church filed incorporation papers was April of 1887. The official name of the church was *Deutsche evangelische lutherische Zionsgemeinde* in Palmenthal, Los Angeles County, California (Zion German Evangelical Lutheran in Palmenthal, Los Angeles County, California). In conjunction with several Lutherans in or near Lancaster, they undertook the construction of a church building. With great joy, this young congregation dedicated their new house of worship to the Triune God in May of 1887, ten months after the town was founded.<sup>10</sup>

Although many of the Germans in the town were indifferent to the Lutheran faith, they felt a church would be an advantage and would attract newcomers to the area. This congregation was unique in many ways. First, it was the third Missouri Synod church to be established in southern California. Second, it was probable that the town was the only truly Lutheran community in southern California, as it was the only church in Palmenthal. Many of the German-speaking people in the town and the surrounding area became members of the congregation, attended German divine services, and sent their children to the Christian day school. This little German Lutheran church was the only church in the area at that time. It was not until 1889-1890 that the first church was built in Lancaster, which was 11 miles from Palmenthal, and this was a Roman Catholic church.



*Palmenthal Public School*

*The public school with the teacher, Mr. Shirley, standing on front steps. The young girl in the middle is Ingeborg Munz, a member of Zion. The town and church are in the background.  
(Courtesy of Palmdale City Library)*

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### Pastor Christian F. Meyer

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With a congregation and a building in which to worship, the parish now needed a full-time pastor. Because there were very few pastors on the West Coast, the congregation went to Pastor Runkel for help. In June of



1887, the prayers of the congregation were answered when Rev. Christian Friedrich Meyer stepped off the ship in San Francisco, arriving from New Zealand. One of the reasons for his immigration to the United States was that his son, Adolf William Meyer, had finished his studies at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and had accepted a call in the United States. Some time later, Adolf Meyer, the son, became director of St. John's College, Winfield, Kansas, a position he held for 32 years. The congregation called Rev. Christian F. Meyer to be their pastor shortly after his arrival in the United States.

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### **Pastor Meyer's Youth**

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In his autobiography written in three composition books in small German script, Christian Meyer wrote that he was born to John and Magdalena Meyer on January 21, 1830, in Buetlingen, near the Elbe River, in the kingdom of Hannover, Germany. He was the first of five children: John Peter, Anna, John Christoph, and Catherine. During his childhood, he had many illnesses and mishaps. He said, "Our schooling was a poor affair. We learned a little of reading, of writing, of catechism." Both his teacher and his pastor were rationalists—"not a true believer in the Bible, and you can imagine how he mutilated the Bible doctrines." Since his father couldn't afford to keep him at home, he was apprenticed to learn the carpentry trade. In 1848, he finished his four-year apprenticeship and became a fellow-craftsman. In the fall of that year when the cholera epidemic raged throughout northern Germany, he made coffins day and night, as the demand was so great due to so many deaths from cholera. He himself had a mild case of cholera, which left him weak.

Pastor Meyer said that during 1848 a remarkable change took place in him, as "I was to be brought to the true Christian faith and to find peace for my soul." He met a Christian family whom he visited, and where he met another Christian carpenter. His newly-found faith resulted in persecutions because his boss and his wife were rather anti-Christian. Because his boss would not take him back after he had recovered from cholera, Meyer found it necessary to relocate. He found a job for a short time in Lueneberg, which was not far from his hometown. When he went to Hamburg, he stayed with his aunt who had a profound influence on his religious life through their conversations. He said, ". . . good literature, in addition to the Bible, was a distinct help to me. It gave me a chance to pass my time profitably and it gave me helpful thoughts."

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### **Emigration from Germany to Australia**

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While he was in the city of Bremen, he gave serious thought to immigrating to South Australia where a classmate was living. Since he was 26 years old and had no prospects for a wife, he decided he had better find

a helpmate before leaving Germany. He discussed the matter with a friend who said he knew a nice young woman, a domestic in an acquaintance's house. He told him, "She is small in stature," but would be a good acquisition for a wife. After he met the young 25-year-old woman, Emily Henriette Nolte, they dated and became good friends. It was decided that he should go to Australia to prepare a place for them and she would follow later. In August of 1856, he set sail from Hamburg for Australia. His parents, brothers, and Emily were on the docks that day to bid him farewell. He described his departure in this manner:

A peculiar feeling crept over me, when the ship slowly slipped away from the dear ones who were waving their farewells, and from a home country I would never see again. The spires of the church were the last to fade from view, but they seemed to me to point to heaven and to God, Who would protect and guide me—also during the four months I was to spend on the water.

His trip on board the sailing vessel, the *Nord See*, was not without its perils. They encountered a severe storm off the coast of Belgium. On the long voyage he and the other 200 people endured many hardships. The drinking water in wooden kegs became stagnant in the hot zone, and the main fare for food was limited to salted meat and hard biscuits. Finally, toward the end of December, they reached Adelaide, South Australia. After Christian Meyer landed, he spent Christmas with his old school friend from Germany. He looked for work in Stockwell, a town 60 miles from Adelaide, where he purchased two lots and built a home. He wrote to Emily, saying that she should come to Australia, since they had been parted for over a year. Finally, in February of 1858, Emily arrived in Australia with her sister to set up residence in the new house and bear the burden of being deeply in debt. After a few days, they had a quiet wedding. Because the debt was so great, the house and lots were sold at public auction, leaving them with a liability of \$1,000, a large sum at that time. They moved into a small hut.

The need for teachers in Lutheran schools in South Australia, as well as for Lutheran pastors, was great during that period as there were no Lutheran colleges or seminaries in Australia. The congregation at Lightpass, where the Meyers were members, elected to have Christian Meyer serve as its teacher at a very meager salary. It was here that their son Andrew was born. Their other son, Johannes, when he was five-years-old, died of scarlet fever. Before he died he exclaimed, "Oh, Mama, the angels!" Their second son, Adolf William, who later served as president of St. John's College, Winfield, Kansas, from 1895 to 1927, was born on July 20, 1860. He also got scarlet fever and became very ill. With all these painful events happening in their lives, they decided to move to New Zealand, as they heard it was "paradise on earth" and that Lutheran pastors were needed there. In February 1866, they arrived in the port of Nelson, New Zealand, after spending about ten years in Australia.

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### The Meyers in New Zealand

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When they arrived in New Zealand, Christian went to upper Montere, 20 miles inland from Nelson, where he met Pastor Heine with whom he had corresponded. He found there was no opening for a German school-teacher, since all the children had to attend the state school. He organized a German class at Ranzau, which was about 12 miles from Montere and where Pastor Heine had a mission station; he conducted reading services there. The congregation at Ranzau decided to call Christian Meyer as its pastor. Before taking the call, Pastor Meyer had to take an examination given by Pastor Heine. After passing the examination, he was ordained in the upper Montere church on November 18, 1866; the following Sunday, he was installed as pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Ranzau. He stated the following about his time at St. John's:

Without any doings of mine, the Lord had pressed me into His service and I served this congregation at Ranzau for 17 years, also doing mission work at points near and distant. When I look back over this time, I find, on the one hand, many mistakes and shortcomings on my part, due largely to improper training for the ministry, and the lack of conferences and Synod. No synodical officials could visit us and help us out of a tangle. On the other hand, I was privileged to point many a soul to Christ, and I was richly repaid for all labor and trouble when those whom I had given to drink of Living Waters and to eat of the True Manna expressed their heartfelt gratitude to me.

The 17 years of our ministry in Ranzau were among the happiest we had. God gave us daily bread; yea, though the salary was meager, we were enabled to lay aside a little. However, we also had serious reverses.

One of the serious reverses occurred at 10:00 p.m. on Good Friday in 1870, when the parsonage caught on fire. The parsonage, a barn-like structure 48 x 25 feet with an old thatched roof, had served originally as the church, school, and parsonage. One end of the attic was for storage of hay for the family's milking goat, and the other end had been partitioned for a bedroom for the two boys, Adolf and Andrew, and for a study for the pastor. While the pastor was studying that night, he heard a loud crackling noise. Upon opening the door, he looked into leaping flames. He immediately grabbed the two boys and made his way through the flames down the stairwell. Fortunately, all the family managed to escape, but the building and all of its contents were destroyed. He rushed to the nearby church building and began ringing the church bell to alert all the people, as he was afraid the new church would also be burned. God heard the prayers of the faithful and preserved the new church structure. Within a year, the congregation had erected a nice, new frame parsonage.

Since his health was gradually declining due to his age, his wife wanted him to retire from the active ministry and invest their savings in a retirement home. He took a trip to the North Island where he discovered a few German families in Manganni, who had no pastor. After he purchased a section of land, he and his wife, Emily, and their children, Andrew, Fred, Annie, and John, moved to Manganni, while Adolf was in America studying for the ministry. He said this about the move, "I now consider it a mistake for a pastor to leave his flock, as I did those people in Ranzau, unless for reasons of the most urgent kind. God had some stern lessons in store for me." The congregation in Ranzau was very sorry to see him leave, writing many touching letters that expressed their regrets and their gratitude for his ministry in their midst. He stated that he still had these letters in his possession as he wrote his autobiography many years later.

When the Meyer family arrived in Manganni, they had to clear the land of the large trees and remove all the stumps in order to build a comfortable, roomy home and to build barns and sheds for the animals. The main source of income would be from the livestock, because the people in the church were poor newcomers and couldn't support a pastor. What they made on butter and eggs couldn't support the family's daily expenses either. Since the winters in Manganni were wet and rainy, their clothes and shoes were always damp. Their daughter, Annie, got inflammation of the bowels, which resulted in a long period of suffering. They grew tired of their life in this new place, but couldn't sell the property.

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### Removal to California

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Because their son Adolf had graduated from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and had a congregation, their thoughts turned to America. Christian Meyer wrote his son, who replied that he would do everything in his power to help them settle in Missouri. They finally found a buyer who purchased the property with one-third down and two-thirds to be paid at five per cent interest. With the cash, tickets were purchased and the trip to America became a reality, culminating in the arrival in San Francisco in 1887 after having lived in Manganni for four years. Their son Fred remained in New Zealand to settle affairs.<sup>11</sup>

Following their arrival in San Francisco, Pastor Buehler had the Meyer family stay with him in the large parsonage of St. Paulus Lutheran Church. Pastor Meyer consulted with him and decided that since Missouri had such an extreme climate, it would be better to stay in California. At the suggestion of Pastor Buehler, he went south to the new German colony of Palmenthal and investigated the situation. The result was that the Meyer family moved south to this new settlement where they purchased property. Fred later followed them to Palmenthal; Andrew moved to Missouri where he stayed with his brother Adolf and later took charge of a school. Eventually, Andrew became a pastor and served a congrega-

tion in Stone Prairie, Missouri. John attended Addison Normal School, which is now Concordia University at River Forest, Illinois, to become a Lutheran schoolteacher. Their daughter, Annie, lived with her parents all her life, as she never married. The September 5, 1889, edition of the *Antelope Valley Times* stated, "Rev. Mr. Meyer of Palmdale, was in Lancaster Tuesday after a load of lumber from James P. Ward's lumber yard, to construct a dwelling-house for himself." In April of 1898, the Meyers had a family reunion with their sons coming from the East. Their names appeared on the communion register that month.

In Pastor Meyer's new homeland of California, the Lord of the Church showed him his one and only field of work, the congregation at Palmenthal. On September 21, 1887, the California and Oregon District was formed at St. Paulus Lutheran Church in San Francisco with his name listed as one of 12 pastors who were present at the formation of this new District. On February 26, 1888, the Second Sunday in Lent, *Reminiscere*, Rev. Runkel installed him as pastor of Zion Lutheran Church. The church records indicate that he was in Palmenthal in 1887, but his obituary and the 1888 *Statistical Yearbook* both give the date of his installation as February 26, 1888. In 1892, Zion had a mission festival and the following year, on Sunday, May 14, 1893, Pastor Meyer was the featured speaker in the afternoon mission festival service at Trinity Lutheran Church in Los Angeles. He preached on Zephaniah 2:11, using its implications for mission work in the South Sea Islands. Even though the work was difficult in these islands, he showed it did produce much fruit for the Lord's kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

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### A Constitution is Adopted

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When Pastor Meyer arrived at Zion, a constitution had been written and stated the following at the end: *Vorsteh-ende Gemeindeordnung wurde von den Gliedern der Zionsgemeinde, in der Gemeinde-versammlung vom 25 & 30ten Mai 1887, einstimmig angenommen und unterzeichnet.* (The preceding congregational constitution was unanimously adopted and signed by the members of Zion congregation in the congregational meetings of the 25th and 30th of May 1887.) Although in actuality, it was signed in 1888 by Jacob Scherer, Heinrich Tiedemann, John D. Speck, Herman Vogt, Peter Jonas, Johannes Munz, Frank Mesenbring, Johann Bosch, Pastor Ch. J. Meyer, Ferdinand Tetzlaff, Friedrich Meyer [Pastor's son], Johann F. Fintel, Victor Vink, J. Enk, Erdman Rathke, Simon Jonas, Schmidt, Schonning, Erdman Rathke, Sr., Johann Schildhauer, Jacob Rathke, Johann Rathke, and David Rathke.

In the aged church record book, Pastor Meyer recorded in old German script, the official acts of the congregation along with the first constitution that had a *Nachtrag* (supplement) not found in the second constitution, stating that, with exception of the pastor, the following were elected: 1. president, 2. vice president, 3. secretary, 4. treasurer, and 5.

collector; each for three years. The reelection, or new election, was held for all officers at the same time, but in sequence of registered congregational members. The first constitution contained elements of legalism, such as self-excommunication as penalty for not giving to the church according to the member's ability with the exception of poverty. Also found in the first constitution was an unusual provision that a pastor or teacher, even if convicted of teaching or conduct that would deprive him of his office, could stay in his office upon 2/3-vote of the members who voted to retain him, unless it was a second offense. There was also an attempt in one article to keep the congregation from joining a synod. The congregation never joined the Missouri Synod, even though the pastor was affiliated with the District and Synod. Above this in blue pencil crayon are the words *die rechte Kirchenordnung sieh Seit. 16* (for the correct church constitution, see page 16). The second constitution was also adopted in 1888 with Pastor Christian Meyer heading the list of names followed by the 12 founding members: J. Scherer, J. Bosch, F. Fintel, H. Schoning, D. Schmidt, E. Rathke Sr., E. Rathke, F. Rathke, J. Rathke, D. Rathke, J. Rathke, and F. Meyer, [the pastor's son].<sup>13</sup>

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### Schools in Palmenthal

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Both constitutions contained a paragraph about a Christian day school that stated that there should be a school taught in German, and that the pastor would teach the school, because there wasn't a teacher in the area. The school was to use the Bible, Luther's Small Catechism, and all books that were in accord with the Evangelical Lutheran doctrines. Parents, who were members of the congregation, were encouraged to send their children to the school and have them attend confirmation classes. The parents, who were members, did not have to pay tuition. Pastor Meyer conducted the day school during his entire pastorate at the church, where he taught from 16 to 24 children five days a week. The September 12, 1889, issue of the Antelope Valley Times stated, "German school will begin in this burg October 1st. Rev. C. Meyer will till [sic] the place as teacher" where he had 20 pupils. The school terms in 1890-1896 went from September 1 to Easter, and in 1898 were from September 1 to December 31. According to the 1893 Statistical Yearbook, there was no school conducted that year, but the pastor did teach a Sunday school that had 26 children. In the 1892 *Statistical Yearbook*, it stated that a Sunday school was also conducted in Vineland and there was a preaching station. Rev. John William Theiss, a poet, painter, pioneer pastor, who arrived in Los Angeles as assistant pastor of Trinity and city missionary in 1904, and was the fourth president of the California and Nevada District, wrote in the *History of the Missions and Churches of Southern California*, "That the Reverend Christian Meyer faithfully preached Law and Gospel and taught the Christian day school, at one time 26 children."

After the 44 German-speaking citizens of Palmenthal petitioned the county to form a school district on April 10, 1888, elections were held in the Munz General Merchandise Store at which time the Palmdale School District was organized. That summer the little one-room schoolhouse was built. The first teacher, Mr. Henry Shirley from Downey, California, was contracted to teach the first term for \$65 a month. He had no formal credentials other than a "Grammar" certificate obtained that year. His little school had a globe, some maps, and a few charts valued at \$30. The Lutheran school also started that fall with 21 students. The October 28, 1892, *Lancaster Gazette* reported the following, "We [newspaper editor/reporter] had the pleasure of visiting the school of Professor George Pentland at Palmdale one day this week. On account of the German School, his enrollment is only 17 but these are a faithful few. . . . The scholars all seemed clean, studious, and attractive."

The German Lutheran School had an enrollment of 24 students in 1892. During its short history, the small public school had an enrollment of up to 50 students with the girls seated on one side of the room and the boys seated on the other side. The little wooden school structure is the only building of the town to survive and is now located in McAdam Park in Palmdale.

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### Congregational Growth

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Pastor Meyer's faithful and energetic work produced fruits, as indicated in the Synod's 1888 *Statistical Yearbook*. The congregation had 67 souls, 37 communicant members, and 15 voting members that year. Each year the congregation continued to grow, peaking in 1892 with 123 souls, 64 communicant members, and 24 voting members. His first confirmation service was held on Palm Sunday, March 24, 1888, when he confirmed three boys: Heinrich Friedrich Fintel, Victor Ernst Hermann Vink (son of the town's Lutheran doctor), Wilhelm Samuel Scherer, and three girls: Anna Katherina Jonas, Anna Magaretha Wilhelmine Meyer (the pastor's daughter), and Martha Jonas. His largest class was confirmed on Palm Sunday, March 18, 1894, with four boys: Wilhelm Gottfried Jung, Johann David Schmidt, Gottfried Schmidt, Albert Bosch, and three girls: Magdalena Hulda Tetzlaff (the pastor's son married her around the turn of the century.), Anna Maria Fintel, and Lydia Louise Maria Scherer. The last confirmation class was confirmed on Palm Sunday, March 26, 1899, having two confirmands: Wilhelmine Fleischhauer and Helena Renata Rathke. In all, he had eight confirmation classes and confirmed a total of 34 confirmands.

During Pastor Meyer's 12 years at the church, he conducted 51 communion services, which were usually held on Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter, Pentecost, and either the end of August or the beginning of September for at least four times a year. The first communion service in

which 15 communed was conducted on November 15, 1887, a few months before he was installed. The communion service where the most people communed, 48, was held on Good Friday, April 15, 1892. He baptized 78 children and one adult with the first recorded baptism of Louise Magaretha Vogt on September 11, 1887, the daughter of Hermann Vogt, whose name appears on the communion register until April 4, 1890. He performed three marriages—that of a farmer, an architect, and a miller. He conducted 19 funerals of which six were for children whose ages ranged from birth to five years old with four of the children buried on their parents' property. The ages of the adults who died were between 32 years and 75 years, with the most adult deaths occurring in their 30s or early 40s, four women and three men.<sup>14</sup>

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### The Cemetery

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The congregation had a 20-acre cemetery located north of the town on what is now 20th Street East, just north of Avenue S, donated to the church by the Jonas family. The headstones and markers have names of some of the church's members: Erdmann Rathke, and the families of Nagel, Ritter, Munz, and Jonas. After the town of Palmenthal failed in 1899, the cemetery continued to be used by the settlers, but gradually it fell into disrepair and was closed in 1979 due to incomplete records. In 1981, it was reopened when the Palmdale Kiwanis accepted the responsibility of keeping accurate records. Today burials are limited only to people who have relatives buried there. The cemetery is now named the Palmdale Cemetery and occupies only 2.5 acres of the area, which is fenced off and occupies the northwest corner. There are approximately 187 marked graves; many more may be within the grounds and outside the fence.



*Zion Church Cemetery Today*

*Zion's old church cemetery as it looks today; it is now called Palmdale Cemetery.*

*(Courtesy of author)*



After the Lutherans left the area in the early days, Indians and Chinese laborers were often buried outside the cemetery boundaries.<sup>15</sup> In 1902, the land was sold to the state for nonpayment of taxes. Over the years, it has been in many hands. Ownership of the cemetery is questionable, and may be vested in the citizens of Palmdale. According to the September 14, 2004, article in the *Antelope Valley Press*, the county was to approve a quitclaim to the city as they proceeded in developing a park that would incorporate the old cemetery to honor the early pioneers of Palmenthal.

The early years of the 1890s were years of heavy rainfall, making them prosperous years for the farmers. As many as two hundred horses and mules could be seen lined up on Tenth Street in Lancaster waiting their turn to unload the harvests of alfalfa. The year of 1893 was the banner year with sixty thousand acres skirting the foothills planted in wheat and barley. Some 730 carloads filled with the harvest of the fields were brought to Lancaster to be shipped to Los Angeles. However, the year 1894 ushered in a series of dry years. The cattle were the first to suffer; as they were driven north in large numbers, the stage road was trodden with dust. The years 1895-1897 continued to be dry years; in 1897 nearly all the people left the valley, including residents of the little town of Palmenthal. By the late 1890s, business all over the valley came to a complete standstill. Lots along Tenth Street and Antelope Avenue in the main part of Lancaster could be bought for \$25, but no one wanted to buy them.<sup>16</sup> The membership of old Zion as listed in the 1898 *Statistical Yearbook* had dropped to 61 souls, 40 communicant members, and 14 voting members.

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### The Decline of Palmenthal

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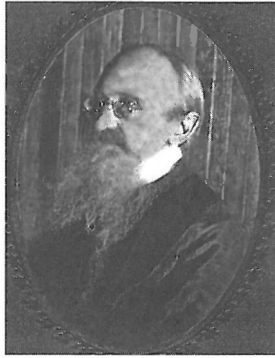
By 1899, because of the drought and the fact that people could not get clear title on their land after they had paid for their properties, all but a few families moved from Palmenthal, leaving the Lutheran church and other buildings abandoned.<sup>17</sup> Their deserted homes were eventually carried off piece by piece for the wood and other building needs. Some of the buildings were moved to the new Palmdale to serve as places of business by those settlers who chose to move closer to the railroad station. Some old Palmenthal settlers moved to Leona Valley, Elizabeth Lake, and other local areas where water was more plentiful. Some of the church members moved to Oxnard, Santa Monica, and other cities closer to the coast, and helped establish Lutheran churches there. The post office was discontinued in Palmenthal on May 29, 1899, and moved to the new town site of Palmdale near the railroad station. The postmasters in Palmenthal were members of the Lutheran church; the dates of appointments were Johann Munz on June 17, 1888, Ferdinand Tetzlaff on January 15, 1889, Johann Munz on September 26, 1896, and Friedrich H. Fintel on October 26, 1898. By the end of the year in 1899, the community of Palmenthal

was relocated to the heart of present-day Palmdale with the town's name permanently changed to Palmdale.

Pastor Meyer said of his Palmenthal experience:

I had my family come and once more we had to build a house and start from the beginning. The experiences were such as beginners had, but still everything might have turned out well if the water company had furnished sufficient water for irrigation. It did not rain or snow enough in the winter to fill the reservoirs. Family after family left; the church that had been built was about empty on Sundays. . . .

I saw many fruits of my pastorate at Palmdale, but after all our families—but one or two—had left, we also concluded to leave.



*Christian F. Meyer*

*Pastor Meyer about the time of his retirement in 1899. (Courtesy of Daniel Meyer)*

In July of 1899, with a heavy heart, Pastor Meyer retired at the age of 69 to Redondo Beach where his son, Fred, who now had a good job in the Los Angeles post office, had purchased two lots with a house on one of the lots. In his retired life in Redondo Beach, he had a garden, raised a few chickens, spent part of his time writing a sketch of his life and wrote meditations. Beginning in 1900 he also conducted the first Lutheran services in the area in his home at 408 North Broadway. He continued to conduct regular afternoon services each Sunday, with his daughter Annie playing the organ, until his death in 1913. During this time the attendance rose from six to ten.<sup>18</sup> Some of his descendants were charter members when Immanuel Lutheran Church of Redondo Beach was established in 1925. His dear wife, Emilie, “who had been to me a faithful and loving helpmate, fell asleep in Jesus in the summer of 1894 [1904].<sup>19</sup> The loss of my wife I felt keenly after a married life of nearly forty-four years, but I say, ‘*Auf Wiedersehen!*’ ”

Meyer spent the remainder of his life with his daughter Annie. According to the August 1912 issue of *Der Lutherische Botschafter*, Pastor Meyer was a featured speaker at the Pastors and Teachers Conference of Southern

California on August 27-29, 1912, which was held at First Lutheran in Pasadena. He spoke on the topic, "Exegesis on Hebrews 3."

With Pastor Meyer's retirement, services in Palmenthal were discontinued and the church disbanded. This was because most of the members, discouraged by the drought and by the inability of the land office to provide them with a clear title even though they paid for their properties, had left the area. A few families remained in the area: Ritter, Nagel, Blum, and Munz families. The ad in the *Botschafter* for Zion Lutheran Church in Palmenthal doesn't appear after 1899, and the 1899 *Statistical Yearbook* only lists Pastor Meyer's name with no statistics and states the congregation died.

After 1899, the church does not appear in either the *Botschafter* or *Statistical Yearbook*, even though the church record book lists communion registrations for a service on March 25, 1902, and the last baptism of Anna Ritter on August 25, 1906. It may be that Pastor Meyer came back to the church to hold a few communion services and baptisms after he retired. In 1970, J. Shelton Gordon collected letters written to him by pioneers in the valley, which he compiled in a book, *Incredible Tales, Stories, Letters, and Reminiscences of the South Antelope Valley*. In one letter, Evan Evans relates, ". . . the old church was moved to a lake where it now stands." No one seems to know which lake or where the church building is now located.

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### Former Members in Oxnard

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Rev. Martin Hemann, the first pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church of Oxnard when the church was established in 1900, gives an excellent account of the charter members of his congregation who were from Palmdale. In his May 22, 1951, letter to Rev. August Hansen, he describes, in the following passage, what happened in the sad chapter of Palmenthal's short existence and tragic demise:

. . . The most prominent and active [members], as I recollect were, . . . Dr. Vogt, practicing physician and pharmacist in St. Louis, but lately from Palmdale, Friedrich Rathke, Mr. Lemke, Johann Fleischhauer [Friedrich and Johann were brother-in-laws), also lured to Palmdale by glowing literature sent them at their farm homes in southeastern S. Dakota and northeastern Nebraska, by an enterprising land developing company. They were chiefly instrumental in getting our Synod to supply them with a minister. Those Palmdale families who had sold their eastern farms and invested the proceeds in acquiring land and building nice comfortable homes at Palmdale, depending on the abundance of water from a reservoir in the nearby mountains, to mature their crops and to assure them of bountiful fruit crops, were within a few years deeply disappointed and thoroughly dis-

illusioned. The meager supply of water from the reservoir was inadequate for their needs; consequently, no income and delinquent taxes forced the majority of them to acknowledge defeat, gather their remaining household goods, board up their homes, leave their withering farms and orchards, and migrate with their families to Oxnard, El Rio, and vicinity, where things were then booming and farmers were prospering due to plenty of water from artesian wells for both domestic and irrigating purposes. They were good industrious farmers and good loyal Lutherans.

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### The End of Pastor Meyer's Earthly Ministry

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On December 28, 1913, at 4:00 a.m., Pastor Meyer fell quietly asleep in His Lord at the age of 84. About two weeks before, "he started having severe suffering," according to his obituary as recorded in the January 1914 edition of *Der Lutherische Botschafter*. He stated, "God be praised for everything. The scripture I chose is from Psalm 103:1-4, 'Bless the Lord O my soul. . . .' I want this to be emphasized in the funeral sermon about me: There is nothing in life and on this earth worth mentioning except for Christ Jesus and what He gave me." Rev. John W. Theiss preached the sermon based on the text Pastor Meyer had chosen. The family, the pastors, Rev. Tietjen, Rev. Haeuser, Rev. Troeger, Rev. Theiss, and friends followed the coffin to the grave site on a hill at Pacific Crest Cemetery in Redondo Beach where he was laid to rest next to his wife on December 29, 1913. Of the five surviving children only two could be present, Friedrich Meyer, a postal worker in Los Angeles, and Anna Meyer, who took care of her father for many years. Director A. W. Meyer of St. John's College, Winfield, Kansas, Pastor Andrew Meyer of Missouri, and Teacher John Meyer were unable to attend due to the great travel distance. Pastor Meyer must have been well loved and well respected in the District, since his obituary took two columns on the front page of *Der Lutherische Botschafter* and one column on the second page.

Rev. August Hansen of First Lutheran Church in Pasadena, wrote the following about Pastor Meyer in the same edition of the *Botschafter*:

The now deceased father in Christ served this congregation with diligence and dedication. He was not only a model of childlike faith in the Savior but also to members of the Palmenthal congregation. The members of the congregation praised their faithful pastor, remembered his love, and held him in high esteem.

The following letter from a former member of Pastor Meyer's parish who resided with his family in Napa appeared in *Der Lutherische Botschafter*:

As you know, the old Pastor Meyer went into everlasting peace on the 28th of December. Pastor Meyer was a modest and faithful servant of Christ. He was poor in material goods but rich in the

faith. He had a strong faith in God and his sermons were from the heart and went to the heart. I will never forget the great blessings that were brought to us by his sermons. The last four years in his ministry in Palmenthal were for him and the congregation, very difficult times. They were dry years making it a hard test for the pastor and the congregation. Many times we traveled the 12 miles to church with heavy hearts, but received new strength and comfort from his sincere sermons. We came empty but traveled home richly blessed. The whole congregation loved their unpretentious preacher. Once he was sick and then he was healthy again. When asked how he felt, his wife said he was fine. The congregation didn't want to lose their pastor and prayed for his renewed health. We always remember him in love.

Greetings from family S.

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### An Epilog

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Although Zion Lutheran Church in Palmenthal disappeared from the valley along with most of its members, a faithful few who remained continued to desire the Word. In 1910, Rev. Arthur E. Michel, of Trinity in Los Angeles, made several trips to Palmdale in hopes of reviving the work there. Although 20 adults would attend these services in the Presbyterian church, they showed no interest in establishing a Lutheran church. A group of good Lutheran people of German descent who lived in the Lancaster area had maintained their membership at Trinity Lutheran Church at 18th and Cherry in Los Angeles. In 1920, their pastor, Rev. A. E. Michel, moved with pastoral concern for these members, conducted services in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Erdman Krubsack. From this small beginning, Grace Lutheran Church of Lancaster was organized on June 26, 1921, with Anna Marie Ritter, a former member of Zion in Palmenthal, becoming one of the charter members. Grace Lutheran Church is now a large congregation of over 810 souls and also maintains a large day school with 168 pupils. In 1954, First Lutheran Church of Palmdale was established,<sup>20</sup> which now has 225 souls. Even though Zion Lutheran Church of Palmenthal had a short life, the seeds that were cast in that place have spread throughout the Antelope Valley and beyond.

*“My Word . . . shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”* Isaiah 55:11  
*Soli Deo Gloria!*

### NOTES

1. Palmdale City Library. *Palmdale, How It All Began*, June 1991, p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

3. Ibid, p. 6.
4. Ibid, p. 2.
5. Munz Family biography (translation).
6. Information was supplied by Marge (Rathke) Davis of Fort Collins, Colorado.
7. Information was supplied by Nadine (Rathke) Pospishil of Yankton, South Dakota.
8. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Yankton, South Dakota, 1982 Centennial Booklet.
9. Gordon, Shelton J., "History of the Nagel Family," *Incredible Tales, Stories Letters & Reminiscences of Some of the South Antelope Valley Pioneers*, 1971.
10. *Der Lutherische Botschafter*, January 1914.
11. Christian F. Meyer's autobiography (translation).
12. *Der Lutherische Botschafter*, June 15, 1898.
13. Naumann, Rev. Gottfried H. "Zionsgemeinde, Palmenthal," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 58, (Spring 1985), p. 32.
14. Information compiled from Zion Lutheran Church Record Book.
15. Palmdale City Library, *Palmdale, How It All Began*, June 1991, pp. 5-6.
16. Lancaster Web Site, April 12, 2005.
17. Stark, Milt, and De Witt, William. *Antelope Valley History*, The Kern Antelope Historical Society, Incorporated, 1990, vol. 3, p. 12.
18. "Early Mission Work in a Beach Town," an address given by Rev. Walter F. Troeger at the Fiftieth Anniversary Banquet of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Redondo Beach, California, in 1975. With the work that Pastor Meyer had started in his home, Rev. Troeger began preaching in Redondo Beach in a rented public hall in early 1914.
19. In his autobiography, Pastor Meyer listed his wife's date of death as 1894, but 1904 is given on her gravestone. She is also listed in the Zion Lutheran Church Record Book as taking communion up to the time the church closed in 1899.
20. *The Lutheran Annual* 2005.