

SECRETS TO SURVIVAL:

A History of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church,
Hatchville (Spring Valley), Wisconsin

Church History
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SECRETS TO SURVIVAL

On Sunday, October 6, 1985, the members of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Hatchville(Spring Valley), Wisconsin, gathered together once again. The church bell rang with a special joy, and the service began. On this particular day many visitors attended, many former members who had moved out of the area, many members of neighboring congregations. With 457 people in attendance, the small church was bursting at its seams. It was a special day, the celebration of St. John's Centennial.

It was a big day in Hatchville. News of the centennial celebration was noised abroad in the local papers, yet it was not an earthshaking event. The bell was not heard around the world, and the story was not covered on the 10:00 p.m. news. To most, St. John's centennial seemed insignificant. To most, the congregation itself seems insignificant. Even within our own synod, in certain ways, St. John's could be considered a rather insignificant congregation. After all, although it has existed for a century, the church still has only about 200 communicant members, and it is not likely to experience any outstanding numerical growth in the next century. The church building is situated alone, in the country, 15 miles west of Menomonie, the nearest sizable town. The stranger, who for some reason has occasion to drive past the church, might ask, "What is this church doing here?" Let us ask a more significant question: "How could a church survive here for 100 years?"

I. Members With an Intense Desire to Survive

Any church's survival depends upon the people who make up the congregation. St. John's congregation, and the community around it, were begun by people with an intense desire to make a new home for themselves and their

descendents.

(The) first church members were pioneers in the real sense of the word. They had come from Dodge County, Wisconsin, to make a home here in a dense forest, and they had brought with them a desire to succeed and a deep love of their Lutheran church. They were all of old German stock; work was a pleasure to them, prayer a necessity. Of earthly wealth they had none, money being especially rare in those days....The men then had to go into the woods, often in 30 below zero temperatures, cut down the trees, haul the logs with oxen ten to twenty miles to a saw mill and to the market (Wilson or Menomonie) and from the proceeds they had to provide the necessities needed by their families, pay the taxes and support the church.

(Sarenba, 60th Anniversary History)

At first these settlers did not have a pastor or an organized congregation. The beginnings of St. John's congregation are as follows, quoted from Mrs. C. Frank, Sr., whose husband was a member of the first church board:

It was either in 1878, '79, or '80 that a certain business man from Menomonie, Wm. Schuette, brought the Rev. Kleinlein (then pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Menomonie) out to visit the first settlers and get acquainted with us. They found us all working in the harvest field.

Our men were cutting grain with cradles and we women bound the grain into sheaves and stacked them up. Appearing shortly after dinner, Pastor Kleinlein asked the harvesters if they would be willing to stop work and assemble in one of our log houses to conduct a Lutheran service. All of us agreed, gladly, for we had had no church service for a long time. We all gathered in one of our homes and Pastor Kleinlein preached "Christ and Him Crucified for the Sins of the World" for the first time in the community. After this service he made arrangements with the menfolk concerning the next time he should come. When these arrangements were made we all went back to our work in the fields.

(Sarenba, 60th Anniversary History)

From 1880 to 1885 services were conducted in the homes of the early settlers. In 1885 land was deeded to the congregation, and St. John's was incorporated as a legal church society. In August, 1886, the first resident pastor was installed, the congregation consisting of 29 communicant members. On November 14, 1886, the first church building was dedicated, and a few years later the first parsonage was built, along with a barn for the pastor's horses.

These first German settlers succeeded in establishing a new community and a new church, leaving to their children and grandchildren the intense desire to continue to survive in the Hatchville area.

From early on, the Hatchville area has consisted largely of small family dairy farms. These farms have been passed along from father to son down through the years. Even today it is not uncommon to find three generations living on the same farm. The result is very strong family ties. While these ties can at times cause tension, in general they are a factor that contributes greatly to the strength and stability of the congregation. The children who remain in the community learn to live basically the same kind of life that their parents and grandparents have lived, and this includes church life. If the chain were ever broken, the survival of St. John's would be severely threatened. It is frightening to note that today's breakdown of the family is a severe threat to St. John's and other congregations.

During the past 100 years the Hatchville community has experienced relatively little population change, compared with the rest of the country. It's an area where people most often move from, not to.

Until the fifties, the area about three miles all directions from the church was nearly all church members, with the road going by St. John's called German Street in contrast to the road to the west known as Norwegian Ridge. To that time it was an unwritten understanding that anyone selling a farm would sell only to a German Lutheran family. Since the sixties this practice no longer prevails and the immediate area of the church isn't as solid with members. This has had a limiting effect on membership, since St. John's area is hemmed in by St. Peter's, five miles to the south, and St. Matthew's, six miles to the northwest. During the fifties St. John's membership seems to have reached its peak, with communicant membership in the area of 200-230 ever since. Membership has held fairly constant because of the loyalty of members retiring and moving to Elmwood, Spring Valley, Menomonie, etc., and still retaining their membership at St. John's and often attending more faithfully than those living very close.

(Willitz, Notes)

The 1969 booklet for the dedication of the third church building

lists the names of the seven members of the first class confirmed in the new building, followed by this comment; "It is interesting to note that after 84 years time all of these family names, except one, appear in the list above of the first members of the congregation." Through the years, perhaps one of the greatest sources of newcomers to Hatchville has been the parsonage.

Along with being very stable, the community is just a bit old-fashioned. Indoor plumbing is a fairly new development for some. Until recently, horses were still used to do some of the field work. Now they have been replaced by antiquated tractors and machinery. It's an area that is slow to change. This, too, can at times cause friction within the congregation, but it provides a stability that many congregations lack.

Hatchville is not a financially rich community, nor has it ever been a rich community. The people today, no doubt, have more money and an easier life than the original settlers, but it's still no picnic. The farmers struggle to keep from going bankrupt, especially in a day when the small family farm is said to be a thing of the past. I think that most of these farmers realize that they could make more money by moving to town and doing something else for a living, but they love to farm. It's the only life they know, and Hatchville is the place they feel they belong. They want to stay close to their relatives and friends, and hesitate to face the unknown as their settler ancestors did. They don't know what it means to flourish, but they do know what it means to survive.

These later generations are also responsible for a number of major accomplishments under God's grace. In 1912 the second church building was erected, and the lumber from the old building was used to build the church school house. A new parsonage was completed in 1919. The old one

had burned, and many records were destroyed, contributing to the brevity of this paper. In 1968 the second church building was destroyed by fire, and in about one year the present building was completed.

St. John's congregation and Hatchville survive together, for the church is intertwined with the community. They began and grew up together. The congregation was built ^{for} (around) the community, and the community was built around the congregation. At St. John's the members bury their grandparents. At St. John's they attend their children's weddings, their grandchildren's baptisms and confirmations. On Sundays, year after year, the farmers get up early, do the chores, gather together at church, and then go back home to do chores again. In the spring, the services are often enhanced with the sweet smell of freshly spread manure on the neighboring fields. At times, the members, unable to unravel the church from community life, might give the outward impression by words and actions that the church is simply the community center. But I believe that deep in their hearts there is a special place for God's Word, and a deep love for what the church really is, even though it often goes unexpressed. God's Word is living and active. What a direct channel that force of the Word must have when proclaimed in a church that is so tightly knit to the lives of its members!

A 1962 article in the local Spring Valley paper tells about the life of one of St. John's members:

Sunday morning, sprightly 77-year-old William Eick will ring the bells of St. John's Lutheran Church of Hatchville, starting his second 50 years of service as custodian....It was back in 1912 that the then 27-year-old Eick volunteered to serve as janitor for the newly-dedicated church.

"People were donating to the church when it was built and I didn't have a cent," he remarked. "I told them I would be janitor for five years at no pay, and they took me up on it." After his five years were up he was asked to continue. It was during the horse and buggy

days and hard for people to get around. "Since I lived across the road from the church I agreed. They paid me \$10 a year then, but I'm up to \$65 now..."

He has sat in the same chair in the balcony nearly every Sunday for the past 50 years. Small holes are worn into the floorboards showing where the back legs of the chair rested as he leaned back against the wall.

"I've fired a furnace here for 50 years and burned out two of them. I couldn't seem to get the church warm with the old wood furnace, so one Sunday I stuck in 11 sticks of cordwood. The furnace couldn't take it." The original furnace is now in Eick's pasture, being used as a bridge. A coal furnace was installed and Eick "shoveled a good many tons of coal into it. They're putting in an oil furnace now, and I haven't touched that one yet."

(Ringhand, "Area Custodian")

II. Pastors Who Learn What It Means to Survive

The members of St. John's have played an important role in shaping the congregation and making it what it is today. The same could also be said about the pastors who have served at Hatchville. Their leadership and advice have given strength and direction to the congregation. Yet they are only human shepherds, so weaknesses have become apparent at times. But in spite of these weaknesses, St. John's has survived, under the care of the Good Shepherd. St. John's has been served by 20 pastors, whose greatest contribution has been the persistent proclamation of the true Word of God. That Word has given the congregation the cause, the conviction and the strength to survive for 100 years.

But what about the pastors? How well have they survived at St. John's? Since Hatchville is somewhat unique, pastors, like other newcomers, have to learn from experience what it means to survive there.

The first two pastors did not need to survive in Hatchville. They served from Menomonie. Pastor Kleinlein, pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Menomonie, was the first Lutheran pastor to conduct Lutheran services in the Hatchville community. He served until Pastor August Pieper succeeded him in Menomonie. Pastor Pieper continued to

*St. Martin's
in 1902*

serve the Hatchville area throughout his pastorate in Menomoneie. In 1886 he accepted a call to ^{he became} be a professor at our Thiensville Theological Seminary. There is no way of knowing to what extent the Hatchville group contributed to making Pastor Pieper an exceptional professor and dogmatist. It was during Pieper's time that St. John's was legally organized and incorporated as a religious society in 1885. It was also during his time that the congregation bought a two-acre plot, decided to build a church, and to call a resident pastor.

The first resident pastor was Pastor Henry Gieschen. It is unknown where he lived, since there is no mention of a parsonage at that time. He served St. John's for less than two years, from 1886 to 1888. During his stay, the first church building was dedicated, and the congregation consisted of 14 voting members, 29 communicant members.

F. Rottlauf, a theological student, served the congregation February through August of 1888. In August Pastor August Kirchner was installed. He served until Easter, 1891. During his pastorate the first parsonage was built, as well as a barn for the pastor's horses. Pastor C. H. Auerswald then served until January, 1893. He was succeeded by Pastor Ed Laible, who served until June of 1894.

These first five resident pastors had to survive in Hatchville. But it should be noted that for whatever reasons, they stayed only for a very short time. This must have been hard on such a new congregation.

Pastor Adolph Habermann served for a longer time, from June 15, 1894, to May 15, 1904. During his pastorate the church and parsonage were enlarged and a new barn was erected. Pastor Habermann wrote: "In the 20 years from the establishment of this congregation the membership of the congregation has doubled and according to all expectations has a good

opportunity to grow still larger and to prosper with the help and blessing of God." (Saremba, 60th Anniversary History)

Pastor Habermann was remembered by one member as a fast driver who tipped over in the snow more than once. Perhaps he had good reason for being a fast driver, because he served not only Hatchville, but also Plum City and Eau Galle, 15 to 20 miles to the south, Cady, 6 miles to the northwest, and Wilson, 12 miles to the north. He did all this not with a car, but with a team of horses.

Often...he was struck by a blizzard, or was unable to ford a creek, or, on account of too severe weather, had to take refuge in a farmer's house and stay for hours, yes, for days. His predecessors had to perform the same hard work. Rev. Gieschen froze his hands while driving from the Wilson congregation. Perhaps because of these long and hazardous trips these first pastors had to make in performing their pastoral duties, their stay in one congregation was of a short duration.

(Saremba, 60th Anniversary History)

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cady, was built in 1897. Before the building of the church, services were held by Pastor Habermann in a nearby schoolhouse. One member, originally from Eau Galle, remembers boarding the winter near St. John's so she was able to take confirmation instructions from Pastor Habermann.

Mission activity in the area during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was rather unique. It was not so much a matter of converting people, but rather a matter of gathering the Old German Lutherans together and somehow serving them. The Hatchville pastors were directly involved, and these daughter congregations no doubt gave the members of St. John's something to be proud of, and an added reason to survive.

Habermann's successor, Pastor G. E. Luedtke, stayed only a short time, from July, 1904, to May, 1905. He was followed by Pastor Max Taras, of whom the record says, "With joy did Pastor Taras begin his work in this congregation." (Saremba, 60th Anniversary History) According to all

reports the first two years of his work were blessed with much success.

But "the foe came and sowed weeds among the wheat." (Matthew 13:25) The unity of the congregation was seemingly destroyed; it's very existence was at stake. To end this disunity the synodical officials were called and meetings held. It seems now that the trouble was unforgiveness towards one another.

(Saremba, 60th Anniversary History)

As a result, one member was excommunicated. The congregation again worked in Christian harmony, but for years the effects of this incident were evident.

It has been said that feelings ran so high at this time, that a few members nailed the church door shut. Some of the people who left the congregation at this time were instrumental in forming St. Peter's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Elmwood, five miles south, established in 1912.

Under the circumstances, Pastor Taras resigned his charge on October 6, 1910. His final words were: "I commend the congregation into God's hand, Who knows His own and Who will deliver them in His manner from all evil. May He soon open the eyes of the blind, and bring back those who have erred. And may God strengthen His faithful and keep them in the true Word, so that the Lord's church remain in this place, whom the evil foe cannot harm. Amen." (Saremba, 60th Anniversary History)

Pastor J. Ablemann then served from 1910 to 1914. During his pastorate the second church building was erected, and not a penny of debt was left after the dedication ceremony, October, 1912.

Pastor Carl Bast succeeded Pastor Ablemann in 1914 and served until 1919. Mrs. Bast died shortly after they arrived in Hatchville. During Pastor Bast's stay the parsonage burned, and the present parsonage was quickly built. The comment is made, "It seems that Pastor C. Bast was too young a man for this congregation; or, shall we say, the congregation

was too old for him?" (Sarenba, 60th Anniversary History) St. John's was only 35 years old at the time, but I think it could be said that in some ways, St John's has been an old congregation from the day it was born.

By this time, some of the other congregations in the area were strong enough to have their own pastors. At times, St. John's had their own pastor, at other times they shared a pastor with St. Peter's in Elmwood or St. Matthew's at Cady. Since 1939, St. John's and St. Matthew's have been served by the same pastor.

An older man, Pastor A. Bauer, served the congregation next, from 1919 to 1922. During his pastorate, a few members asked for English preaching and catechism instruction. Since Pastor Bauer could not provide them with English preaching, he resigned.

In the centennial booklet, it is interesting how many times the language question is mentioned under "Milestones in St. John's History." In 1922 English services were introduced and held every other Sunday. In 1929 the confirmation class was first conducted in English. By 1935 all minutes and records were written in English. In 1944 it was decided to hold German services only once a month. In 1954 it was decided to hold German services only four times a year, and at the end of that year, German services were discontinued.

Pastor O. Netzke served at Hatchville from 1922 to 1930 and introduced the English services. Pastor August W. Sarenba succeeded Pastor Netzke, and served from 1930 to 1949. He seems to have learned to secrets to surviving in Hatchville. During his pastorate a sun porch was added to the parsonage, a double garage was built, electricity was installed in the church and parsonage, a two-manual reed organ was purchased, and the church was repainted. Some of these events may seem rather insig-

nificant, but not in Hatchville.

Pastor Phil G. Fritz, a retired pastor from Emmanuel, Fairfax, Minnesota, and also father-in-law of the council president, served a short vacancy until Pastor Karl Nolting was installed in May, 1949. He served until 1945⁵⁴⁷, in which year he conducted the last German service. During his time there, the church interior was redecorated. Pastor Nolting, an older pastor, was remembered as being a persistent missionary, making Sunday afternoon visits or sending written reminders to people who were missing in the services. He confirmed large classes of 20 or more adults both at St. John's and St. Matthew's. Pastor Henry Ellwein served the congregation next, from 1954 to 1960; following this, St. John's experienced a two-year vacancy.

Pastor Roger Uitti from Plum City served as vacancy pastor for a time. While in Plum City, Pastor Uitti led that congregation to leave the Wisconsin Synod and join the Missouri Synod. To the credit of the St. John's members, when he commented in Bible class that certain portions of Scripture were not actual fact, but myth or embellishment, he was promptly discharged as vacancy pastor.

Pastor Chester Zuleger was ordained and installed July 15, 1962, and served until April, 1973. During his pastorate the church burned and the present building was constructed. Pastor Ruddatt, from St. Peter's in Elmwood, served as vacancy pastor from April through June, and seminary students conducted the Sunday services.

Pastor John Willitz, the present pastor, was ordained and installed on July 1, 1973. Before graduating from college, he had spent ten years farming himself, which no doubt gave him insights to surviving in an area like Hatchville. Besides serving St. John's and St. Matthew's at Cady, Pastor Willitz also served an eight-year vacancy at St. Peter's, Elmwood,

from 1973 to 1981. There was a shortage of pastors in those years, and there was an even greater shortage of money to support a pastor in the Elmwood congregation. Building projects during Pastor Willitz's pastorate have included an addition to the parsonage, and renovation of the fellowship area in the church.

St. John's has not given many to the full-time work of the church, two pastors and six teachers, the majority of them being pastors' children.

The trend at St. John's seems to be turning toward lengthier pastorates, which generally adds stability to a congregation. Perhaps our pastors are better learning how to survive, or perhaps Hatchville is becoming an easier place in which to survive.

III. Acts of God That Contribute to Survival

The intense desire of St. John's members to survive is, indeed, important, as is the leadership and many contributions of her pastors, but the most important factor in St. John's history has been the guiding hand of the Lord. His all-loving care has become evident on a number of occasions. Several times apparent calamities have struck St. John's, and one might have wondered, "Where is the Lord?" But upon later investigation, one can see the hand of a loving God graciously nurturing his congregation.

It is the providence of God that gave those first settlers the strength and ability to establish a congregation and build a church, and it is the providence of God that has continued to enable the members to sustain St. John's congregation. As has been mentioned earlier, the Lord has not blessed St. John's with exceptional earthly wealth. Especially during the Depression, times were tough.

During the thirties, in order to provide needed support for the church, it was decided to levy an assessment on each family, according to the number of children. The results were predictable. One family with many children said they were too poor to pay. Another family offered to pay their assessment for them, or until

they could repay, but this would not be accepted, and their children were sent instead to St. Peter's in Ellwood for instruction. This was the reason given for some other families joining other area churches. This event left its mark on the congregation. To this day, the idea of making pledges or asking other members to make pledges is vigorously resisted. It must be said that on numerous occasions for both home purposes and for missions, a willingness to give has been displayed by many members, at times beyond the expectations of the leaders of the church. The offering for the three-year Reaching Out offering ('82-'85), besides the regular mission offering, was over \$23,000.00.

(Willitz, Notes)

For a number of years during the forties, St. John's made the highest general offering in the entire district per communicant member. (Saremba, 60th Anniversary History) Despite many other shortcomings in the area of stewardship, St. John's certainly has reason to thank God for enabling them to serve him to such an extent.

St. John's church and parsonage stand on a hill, a bit closer to heaven, but with that goes the risk of fire from heaven. In 1914, the first parsonage burned, the fire probably being caused by lightning. The present parsonage was quickly built, but that, too, has been struck numerous times by lightning. I am happy to report that in September of 1986, lightning rods were installed on the church and the parsonage.

Fire from heaven struck the church on May 15, 1968, a date well remembered and described as "a sad day for St. John's." The steeple was hit, and the church started burning from the top down. The members of the immediate area gathered, but with the limited fire-fighting equipment of near-by towns, about all they could do was stand and watch their church burn to the ground. On June 10, the decision was made to build a new church, and on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1969, services were held in the present building. Until the building was completed, services were held at St. Matthew's, Cady.

With three small churches as close together as St. John's, St.

Matthew's, and St. Peter's, the question has occurred more than once,

"How can these three congregations be combined into two congregations,

each capable of supporting its own pastor, or even one large congregation?"

Of course, when the church in the middle burned, these questions surfaced.

When F. Kogler, pastor of St. Peter's, heard that a planning meeting was scheduled at St. John's, he contacted the area circuit pastor, P. Kurth from Stillwater, Minn., to attend that meeting to help St. John's congregation to disband, half joining St. Matthew's, and half joining St. Peter's. When he arrived at the meeting and offered his assistance, everyone was surprised. He was promptly informed, "This meeting was called to decide on an architect and a contractor. There's no thought of disbanding. Who asked you to come?"

Pastor Kurth commented later, "I never felt so foolish in my life. If I had known why that meeting was called, I would never have gone at all."

(Willitz, Notes)

While the fire seemed to be a calamity, in the end it served to strengthen St. John's. The members pulled together and learned that, committed to a need the Lord had made obvious, they are capable of greater things than they had previously realized. After the church was rebuilt, the comment was heard a number of times, "Before the church burned it had been debated many times whether to install indoor bathrooms, and it was always decided that the congregation couldn't handle it financially. When the church burned to the ground, there stood the two outdoor toilets, as if the Lord was telling us something." After the mortgage was burned in 1974, the remark was made, "We didn't even think we could install indoor bathrooms, but the Lord made us able to build a new church and indoor bathrooms, and be clear of debt."

One thing lacking after the construction of the new church was the bell. In years past, the bell from the former church building's steeple was heard on Saturday evening, proclaiming the coming Sabbath; on Sunday, one hour before the service, at the beginning of the service, and during

the Lord's Prayer. The bell also announced the death of a loved one, tolling the age of the departed one. And it sounded at midnight on New Year's Eve to ring out the old and ring in the New Year. Since 1969, services were opened to a tape recording of the Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church bells from the Town of Wellington, Fairfax, Minnesota.

On August 29, 1985, the long-awaited bell tower was erected, and the dedication was held on Sunday, September 15. A bell that had belonged to a former area school house was donated by a friend of the congregation. On October 6, 1985, St. John's centennial celebration, the ringing of the bell brought special joy, as it announced the proclamation of God's Word for 100 years in Hatchville. And the fellowship meal that followed, where there was no lack of food, marked the fellowship of St. John's congregation under God.

What the future holds for St. John's, only time will tell. But "such grace in the past certainly speaks a future of hope." (Rejoice!, centennial booklet) The members of St. John's rejoice in the blessings, the heritage that God has given them, and I am proud that Hatchville is part of my heritage. The secret to survival is found in Psalm 127:1, "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman worketh but in vain."

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