

Twenty Five Years in the Life of St. John's Ev. Luth. Church

Church History 331

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St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, founded in Newburg, Wisconsin, in 1859, has been the subject of two previous historical studies by WLS students. Jason Jobs, a son of the congregation, detailed the first 25 years of the church as an offshoot of work begun in West Bend. Former senior assistant Matthew Holtz continued the history another 50 years. His work brought the congregation's history up to the year 1934, only five years after church meeting minutes began to be taken in English. This essay will undertake to examine the next 25 years of St. John's congregational history. Besides the benefit of English minutes we have the advantage of living memory to help us understand life at St. John's, Newburg between 1935 and 1960.

In 1935 Pastor Adam Petermann had been serving St. John's for 19 years. During those years a new church building had been erected and services in English had been introduced alongside the German ones. The coming years would see more new construction and the slow ascendancy of English over German as the preferred language of worship and instruction. Pastor Petermann's career would continue another seven years until his death in 1942.

### **Church Dues**

The years preceding World War II were thin years for many in the United States. They were especially thin years for a small country church made up mostly of farmers. The issues of church debt and membership dues in arrears came up in congregational meetings again and again. The debt had come from the handsome, red brick church building which was less than ten years old. The subject of debt is familiar to many congregations even today. Construction costs soar ever upward. The matter of membership dues, or church dues, is somewhat less familiar to us. Beginning sometime before the nineteen-thirties members were accepted into the fellowship of the church with the understanding that they would support the work of the church with some

specified amount to be given each month. Up until 1942 dues were \$10 per year.<sup>1</sup> Members who had not made their payments were said to be “in arrears.”<sup>2</sup> At one point Pastor Petermann was sent out to visit those in arrears to discover the “real reason” for their non-payment.<sup>3</sup> Later on, the church even resolved “to enter [a] claim in Probate Court against the estate of any member who is in arrears with church dues at the time of death.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the harsh tone of some resolutions there were times when the minutes expressed a measure of understanding about inability to pay. Two separate resolutions concerning a certain member confirm that she would receive the full services of the church in return for the expectation that she pay “as she was able.”<sup>5</sup> In 1937 the congregation resolved to let all those desiring a reduction in church dues “appear before the council and present their case.”<sup>6</sup> During the war years, men who served in the military were exempted from church dues during their time of service.

It’s difficult to tell when the formal system of church dues came to an end. Beginning in 1943, monthly envelopes were used to collect dues. Dues are mentioned in council meeting minutes as late as 1953.<sup>7</sup> Sometime before 1959 a weekly envelope system was adopted that seems more in keeping with the way we make offerings today.

### **From German to English**

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<sup>1</sup>St. John’s Ev. Luth. Church Congregational Meeting Minutes. January 10, 1942. (Hereafter cited as Minutes.)

<sup>2</sup> ibid. July 7, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> ibid. January 10, 1933.

<sup>4</sup> ibid. July 1934.

<sup>5</sup> ibid. October 1, 1933 and April 8, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> ibid. January 10, 1937.

<sup>7</sup>St. John’s Ev. Luth. Church Council Meeting Minutes. April 6, 1953. (Hereafter cited as Council Minutes.)

The change from a German speaking church to an English speaking one was gentle. For a long time the services and instruction were necessarily bilingual. Mr. Elmer Wilkens remembers the procedure for confirmation class in 1933-34. Confirmation class was held in the upstairs of the school. Four members of his nine member class would go up to be taught by Pastor Petermann in German. After they were finished, the other five would receive their catechism lessons in English. The 1934 confirmation class marked the turning point. Thereafter more students would receive their catechetical instruction in English than in German. Such a turning point is harder to identify when it comes to worship services. St. John's had already begun to alternate languages Sunday by Sunday under Pastor Petermann. In January 1938 the congregation decided to start celebrating the Lord's Supper in English. Starting in 1940 "special holiday Sundays" would provide the occasions for dual services. English services would begin at 8:00 a.m. and German at 9:30. Perhaps the best sign of a shift in the language of the congregation took place after Pastor Petermann died. The new pastor would be installed in the English service. After this, German services would become more occasional events to serve a shrinking number of those who had learned to know their Savior in German.

### **Parsonage Fire**

The night of December 15, 1943 was bitter cold. The new pastor, Alfred Maaske, checked the furnace as he usually did before going to bed. Sometime during the night, the Maaske family was awakened by the sound of pounding at their front door. Someone driving by on Highway 33 had noticed a fire burning rapidly across their roof. Everyone got up and got out of the house while the volunteer fire department was called out. As the fire department arrived the Maaske's were hurriedly pulling belongings out of the lower story of the parsonage. The firemen set up their equipment but quickly realized that the nearby cistern had no water in it.

They then attempted to get water out of the river by chopping a hole in the ice. Because of the sub-zero temperature their hoses froze solid before any water could be directed upon the fire. Ultimately, the parsonage was lost along with the Maaske's upstairs furniture and all of their clothing. Church records kept in pastor's downstairs office were some of the few items saved.<sup>8</sup> A new parsonage, built out of brick veneer, was dedicated in 1946.

### **Tensions**

Sometimes disagreements and differences of opinion between called workers can grow up into sinful words and actions. It is difficult to know whether such stories should be recounted in a congregation's history. Yet, in the end, remembering how things were wrongly done can serve two purposes. We can take warning lest our own words and actions become dominated by our sinful natures. We can also find good examples in cases where differences were resolved and forgiveness given in a Christian, brotherly fashion. Let us thank the Lord for those who went before us, standing in God's grace. Let us also ask him to guide our mouths and hands in Christian love.

There are two instances recorded in the minutes where synod officials were called in to settle disputes. In early 1950 a situation developed concerning the teaching qualifications of Mr. Bartsch. It appears that he was a graduate, called for the 1949-50 term after a period of rapid teacher turnover. In April of 1950 the council held a special meeting with Pastor Maaske, Teacher Bratsch and a certain Mr. Trettin in attendance. At that meeting Mr. Trettin gave his opinion that Mr. Bartsch ought to resign in order to receive further training. He agreed to resign as of June 2 and the council moved on to discuss painting the parsonage. That would have been

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<sup>8</sup>Wilkens, Elmer. Personal Interview. May 6, 2003.

the end of it except that later the congregation voted not to accept his resignation. Another round of meetings took place with the council requesting the district president come in, along with Mr. Trettin, to explain the reason for the resignation to the congregation. That meeting took place, seemingly without the district president, on May 8. After hearing Mr. Trettin's explanation that the teacher could use some more religious instruction the congregation still resolved to uphold their previous decision and not grant the release. The next month, in June 1950, Pastor Maaske was granted a release by the congregation to accept a call to Manistee, Michigan. Mr. Bartsch taught another year before accepting a call to Hadar, Nebraska, in July of 1951.

Strained meetings were again held less than five years later regarding the relationship between pastor and teacher. This time it was the actions of Pastor Waldemar Zarling, Pastor Maaske's successor, that were being called into question. Pastor Zarling had been installed on August 27, 1950. He and Teacher Bartsch only worked together for about one year from August of 1950 to July of 1951. Sometime during that period Pastor Zarling wrote a letter to Teacher Bartsch asking him to resign. Mr. Bartsch did resign, but tension in the congregation grew steadily until 1955. In December of 1954 the church council decided to hold a special meeting in order to "clear up the differences in the congregation."<sup>9</sup> They also acted unanimously in making an apology to Pastor Zarling on behalf of the congregation. During the special meeting held in February 1955 visiting pastors were in attendance to facilitate the discussion. Although the minutes of the February meeting were heavily emended later in April, the meeting did succeed in bringing the matter to a conclusion. Pastor Zarling admitted to overstepping his

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<sup>9</sup>Council Minutes. December 14, 1954.

authority when he asked the teacher to resign. The congregation admitted that its "slanderous implications" against pastor were not in line with Christian love.<sup>10</sup> The two sides apologized for their actions and agreed to forgive one another.

Both the pastor's letter and the church council's apology were no doubt done with the best of intentions. Unfortunately, they were done without the knowledge of the congregation. When it did become known what had happened, people's feelings were clearly hurt. Thank God that everyone involved was able to forgive and forget. Such a blessed resolution makes this difficult incident a victory in the life of St. John's congregation.

### **Building a School**

St. John's educational program has<sup>d</sup> its beginnings in a one room school house erected in 1884 for the teaching of Sunday School and confirmation. A regular day school such as we would recognize began in 1904 under the leadership of the newly arrived Pastor William Mahnke. By 1906 the large number of pupils necessitated the construction of a new school building. The old building was moved and became an addition to the parsonage. The 1906 school building served for forty years as the place of learning for the children of St. John's congregation.

By 1946 the congregation again had to face the problem of a need for more space. Late in the year a committee was appointed to discuss whether a new school could be afforded. The committee reported in June 1947 with a plan to build a two room school that would be connected to the church building. The congregation accepted the plan with the provision that 75% of the needed funds be on hand before construction could begin<sup>11</sup>. That provision would hamper the

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<sup>10</sup>Minutes. April 21, 1955.

<sup>11</sup>ibid. June 15, 1947.

start of school construction until 1957. During the years from 1947 to 1954 several committees studied the school issue, drew up plans, and solicited funds but the congregation was still unwilling to take a plunge into debt. In January 1954 the congregation changed the stipulation that 75% of needed construction funds be on hand to read "75% of the amount of the estimated cost must be gotten by statements of intention before the actual building of a new school can begin."<sup>12</sup> After that, new architectural plans were drawn up but no further progress could be made. Finally, on April 30 1956, just two weeks after Pastor Gerhardt Kionka was installed, two unanimous votes got things moving on the right track. The congregation resolved to declare all former resolutions with regard to a new school null and void. Then they declared simply: "we are going to build a new school." Separate building and finance committees were elected and instructed to report the next month. Less than a year after those two committees made their first reports, ground was broken on the new school. The congregation authorized the trustees to borrow up to \$70,000 against "the [property], buildings, and equipment of the church."<sup>13</sup> The building was dedicated with joy on December 8, 1957.

### **Split with Missouri**

The years leading up to the Wisconsin Synod's split with Missouri were years of protracted controversy between the two synods. Members of St. John's congregation did not necessarily see it as an issue that affected them directly. They dutifully sent their members as delegates to district and synod conferences. Pastor Zarling even attended the Synod Convention in Saginaw in 1955.<sup>14</sup> St. John's members saw the problems with Missouri as a scouting issue,

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<sup>12</sup>Minutes. January 17, 1954.

<sup>13</sup>ibid. May 26, 1957.

<sup>14</sup>ibid. July 15, 1955.



and an issue with which city churches had to deal. Some families would be divided by the split but they trusted their leaders and accepted the break in fellowship as the right thing to do.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the difficulties of economic depression, world war, and personal conflicts the Lord richly blessed St. John's congregation during the nineteen forties and fifties. He sent them faithful leaders and rewarded their concern for Christian education. Evidence of their spiritual harvest can be seen by taking a walk through the church cemetery. There one sees the names of St. John's members who are enjoying their heavenly reward, whose labors here on earth are still bearing fruit for worshipers and school children alike. May we follow their example of faithful Christian service in all our labors for the Lord.

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<sup>15</sup>Wilkins, Elmer.

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