

St. Matthew's Evangelical
Lutheran Church,
Port Washington, WI

An Exercise in Faithful Service
by the Grace of God

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May 12, 1998
Senior Church History Paper
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INTRODUCTION TO ST. MATTHEW'S, PORT WASHINGTON, WISCONSIN

In December of 1993 my wife and I joined a Wisconsin Synod church in the little town of Port Washington, Wisconsin. It was the first time either of us had been members of such a small congregation. At that time St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church had a membership of 85 households which consisted of 191 baptized souls, 144 of whom were communicant members. We had just transferred in from Atonement Lutheran Church on the north side of Milwaukee. In comparison to St. Matthew's, Atonement had a baptized membership of over 1,000, two pastors and a Lutheran Elementary School from kindergarten through the eighth grade.

In many ways this transfer was a difficult decision for us to make. For one thing my wife had just become a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran by profession of faith under the gentle guidance of Pastor Fred Piepenbrink, one of the pastors of Atonement. My wife had developed a close affinity to Atonement and its pastors. It was perfectly understandable that my wife would have the affection she had for Pastor Piepenbrink. He was the one who led her to understand the differences between her former church body, the Missouri Synod, and ours. It was he who led her through God's Word to the conviction that in the WELS the gospel of Christ was being taught in its truth and purity. And it was he who, as it were, led her away from the spiritual dangers of the false doctrines being taught and allowed in the LCMS. At the same time Pastor Piepenbrink is the one who joined us in marriage, proclaiming God's remarkable love to us and our families on that wonderful day.

Because we had known that we would be living in Port Washington after our wedding, we took seriously the decision we would be making in

regards to our future church membership. Even though the Atonement congregation was over a half-hour drive away from our new home, Atonement had become our church home. Still it seemed only logical that we should transfer our membership to a WELS congregation closer to home. We decided that since the distance between Atonement and Port Washington wasn't so great as to make going to worship impossible, there was no need to rush into looking for a new church home. We were both used to larger congregations, and we felt comfortable with that. Before our membership at Atonement I had been a member at Faith in Fond du Lac, WI, which for most of my stay had a membership near and sometimes over 1,000. My wife had been a member for almost all of her life at St. Paul's in Grafton, WI, which had a membership in excess of 2,000. Both of us had attended the grade schools of our churches.

Living in Port Washington left us with few options if our desire was to remain in a larger congregation. St. Matthew's in Port Washington was the only WELS congregation in town. The closest WELS church outside of Port Washington was Our Savior in Grafton, about five miles away. They had an Lutheran Elementary School with which I was familiar -- a close friend of mine had been a member there. But they were about to embark on a building project with a new church and a new addition to the school. With things being somewhat up in the air for them at that time, we thought it to be wiser to hold off transferring membership to them for the time being. Since Atonement was known for having members who lived far away, some as far away as Oconomowoc and Pewaukee (one of their members even lived in Australia!), we had considered just keeping our membership there. But that left us with few opportunities for service in the church.

So we faced a dilemma. For a few months that fall after our marriage, we commuted to church every Sunday. Once in a while when worship in Milwaukee was difficult due to out-of-town family obligations, we would worship at St. Matthew's. It was a friendly enough congregation, that's for sure. The members were warm and we never left that building without someone coming up to us and greeting us. But it was small, a bit too small for our comfort level. We left our names and address on the friendship register and it wasn't long before we were contacted by St. Matthew's pastor, Donald Thompson. He came by for a friendly visit to welcome us to the community and to worship at St. Matthew. We told him where we were worshipping and shared our frustrations at worshipping in a congregation that was so far away. Of course he invited us to become members at St. Matthew's, but besides the fact that it was a small church, there was also another negative from our standpoint. St. Matthew had no elementary school, nor had it any plans to start one in the near future. Add to that the fact that St. Matthew was not even in the federation for Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School and we couldn't help but wonder about this congregation's commitment to Christian education. We were planning on having our own family and a WELS education for our children was very important to us. The fact is, Pastor Thompson had himself previously been a teacher at Kettle Moraine Lutheran H.S. and he personally was very committed to Christian education. As a pastor he was doing what he could to put in a positive light the blessings of Christian education to the members of his church. He told us that at that point in time St. Matthew had committed itself to paying the cost of school to those members who sent their children to Our Savior in Grafton. But he cautioned us that this was a

yearly budgetary item and he could give us no guarantee that St. Matthew would continue this pledge without interruption in the future.

Ultimately we did determine to transfer to St. Matthew. The decision was not made without hesitation. There were questions confronting us. Would we become comfortable in a small congregational setting? Were there spiritual or doctrinal problems lurking beneath the surface that were the impetus to the failure to commit to Christian education for the children of the congregation? Pastor Thompson had told us that families with children often transferred from St. Matthew to Our Savior because of Our Savior's school. Would that situation prevent St. Matthew from growing and thriving as a congregation?

The fears that I and my wife originally had as we embarked on our lives in this new church did not materialize. Not only did we never regret having transferred to St. Matthew, but we even got to the point where we were saddened at the thought of having to leave. Looking back to that time five years ago, I'm not so surprised at our change in attitude toward St. Matthew. I remember writing my request to Atonement for a transfer. In that letter I mentioned that the pastor and congregation of St. Matthew held to Scripture as the inerrant Word of God and that they accepted and held to the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Any congregation which has that as its foundation is bound to not only "succeed," but to be able to weather the storms which every church body faces in the world. As I looked back at the history of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, from 1987 (the last year covered in a previous Church History paper) to the present I recognized that St. Matthew has thus far in its history stayed true to its stated purpose and objectives. As stated in Article III of their constitution,

Section 1.

The continuing purpose of this congregation, as a gathering of Christians, is to serve all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures.

Section 2.

The primary objective of this congregation shall be:

To proclaim the Law and the Gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation.

To strengthen believers in faith and sanctification through the means of grace.

To equip believers as disciples, stewards, and witnesses for sharing the Gospel of Jesus with our fellowmen.¹

A SMALL CONGREGATIONAL SETTING

St. Matthew's is located in Port Washington, WI, a small community with a population of just over 9,000. Once well-known all over the state as a fishing community with commercial and private smokehouses scattered throughout the city, Port Washington today has the reputation in Ozaukee County as more of a working class area. Today Lake Michigan no longer has the distinction of being a highly profitable, commercial fishing area.

¹ *Constitution of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church*, revised 11/94.

Instead prominent in Port Washington now is the Simplicity Manufacturing plant, noted for building lawn mowers and snow blowers. Trak International is also in town and makes fork lifts and other heavy machinery for the manufacturing industry. And Allen-Edmonds Shoe Bank, the outfitter of footwear for the rich and famous, makes its home in "Port" as well.

But this doesn't mean that Port Washington is just a working-class community. Even though cities like Mequon, Thiensville and Cedarburg are preeminent as the homes for the well-to-do in Ozaukee County , Port Washington also has its fair share of upper-middle to upper class inhabitants as well. Wealthier neighbors from the south harbor their boats in Port, and make the city their second residence. Professionals such as doctors and lawyers and business people enjoy the quiet, laid back setting of this low crime town.

It was in this sleepy town that St. Matthew was situated. Holding its first worship service on November 4, 1979, its membership began with a group of about 40.² Serving that infant congregation were Professors Richard Balge and John Jeske from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, until June of 1980 when Daniel Simons was assigned to the mission congregation as its first called pastor. By December of 1984 St. Matthew had not only grown from that small number to 156 souls, they were already in five short years recommending to the voters that they receive only interest subsidy from Synod.³ By January of 1988, just three years after moving into and

² This information is taken from *15 years of God's Grace: A Brief History of St. Matthew*, a reprint of an article in *Topics*, an annual devotional booklet put out by the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society.

³ A letter from the St. Matthew Board of Trustees to Rev. Howard Kaiser, chairman of the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board, December 9, 1984. In that letter

dedicating their new worship facility at 1525 N. Grant Street, St. Matthew's membership consisted of 199 souls from 74 households.⁴

SMALL IN SIZE, BIG IN FAITH

Pastor Dan Simons faithfully served St. Matthew from June of 1980 until February of 1990, just shy of ten years. Those who were members of St. Matthew when Pastor Simons was still serving speak fondly of him to this day, and some of them keep close correspondence with him. His ministry offered the congregation ten years of stable spiritual leadership, something that perhaps some mission congregations miss out on when their pastors are called away after only a few short years of service.

Congregational minutes from 1987 to 1990 reveal nothing out of the ordinary for a WELS pastor. Pastor Simons' years were marked with the "common" pastoral acts: confirmation classes for both adult and children, Sunday School, Sunday morning and midweek Bible classes, and the usual worship services. Adult Bible classes studied books of the Bible and dealt with issues of the day.

Tony Branda, President, writes, "in these five years we have seen how the Lord blesses us with joys and successes as well as through the sorrows and set-backs. We move into our new status in the confidence that through His Word and Sacrament our Savior will cause His kingdom to flourish in Port Washington. May this new challenge we take up be used by Him to bring about spiritual growth in St. Matthew congregation to the glory of His name." This faithful attitude was typical throughout the minutes of Board, Council and Voters' meetings.

⁴ Pastor's Report on 1988.

But there were some things that were a little "out-of-the-ordinary." In a report given to the Voters from the Board of Evangelism, chairman Norbert Netz reports:

Every visitor is noted by a visitor card and then evaluated as to visitor or PROSPECT for membership. Prospects are then visited the next day or as soon as can be arranged by Pastor Simons. All prospect cards are saved and then entered on computer so that they are not lost by "falling thru (sic) the cracks." ALL visitors are sent a card to thank them for worshipping with us. All new faces, children and adults, from Vacation Bible Story Time, Sunday School, Adult Bible class on Sunday Morning and on Tuesday morning at Bible and Coffee Break Time, all are kept track of on computer. Most of these names end up on our mailing list. These people are kept informed as to new Bible classes, new Bible subjects, or vbst [Vacation Bible Story Time], and Sunday School.⁵

While this outreach work is not necessarily something new and different (even though unfortunately there may be some WELS churches which do not so faithfully pursue outreach prospects) it does give evidence of the persistence St. Matthew had in reaching out to the lost. There were

⁵ from a report dated January 15, 1989.

included in that same report some imaginative accomplishments for the Board of Evangelism.

** Raised \$1200 for a audio tape ministry. (We wear out lots of tapes). The need for tapes is growing.

** Raised \$1356.85 for a new G.E. Video camera. Our Sunday morning services are video taped. Tapes go to the Heritage Nursing Home⁶ and shut ins.

** Raised \$750 for lithographing our six by nine full color post card.

** Raised \$2000 for a computer and printer for our Pastor. With this equipment he puts every Sunday sermon in print, and they go all over the world. Some go to Japan, some to Germany, but most stay in Wisconsin.

** We also have committed to us \$500 for a second six by nine full color post card for a pre lent mailing. Approximately 7000 cards go out in the community.

** I have at this time the entire city of Port Washington on a computerized bulk car. rt. sort, non profit list...When I am done we should have a mailing list of ALL -- Port Washington, Saukville, Belgium, and Cedar Grove, Wisconsin.

** We have also raised approximately \$3500 for food to the needy. The recipients all know that it was done in the name of their Savior thru (sic) all the members of St. Matthew.

⁶ To this day Heritage Nursing Home in Port Washington is visited twice a month by Pastor Thompson who gives a devotion to the residents.

Every item listed was nonbudgetary! Every effort was expended with the view towards sharing the message of the one Savior for the lost and condemned. Sometimes things didn't always go as hoped and planned. But St. Matthew faced its challenges head-on, trusting that their Savior know what was best.

PASTOR SIMON'S PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

Under Dan Simons' pastoral care, from the years 1987 to 1990, St. Matthew did not experience phenomenal growth. A casual glance at the membership statistics show that in fact St. Matthew did not grow numerically at all.

End of 1987...199 souls...74 households

End of 1988...202 souls...84 households

End of 1989...210 souls...83 households

End of 1990...198 souls...82 households

The last few years of spiritual care under Pastor Simons was one of stability and perhaps spiritual growth.⁷ Yet these numbers can be deceiving if one judges that there was no numerical growth. For while the Pastor's Report for the year ending 1989 lists membership to have increased by eight souls and decreased by one household, at the same time, he lists a total of 18

⁷ Pastor Simon's final report on January, 1990 records average worship attendance to be 123. Average attendance for 1987 was 107.

subtractions: two by death, one released, ten removed and five transferred. This shows a large turnover in membership, suggesting St. Matthew to be a congregation that does indeed grow in numbers, even though the number of those who leave or are removed from membership may at times be large.

It is apparent that Pastor Simons' service was one of self-reflection. He allowed time in every Council meeting for criticism and suggestions as to his shepherding. But nowhere is this concern for his work and the work of the congregation more evident than in his *Parting Personal Pastoral Perspectives* which he delivered as part of his final Pastor's report in the 1990 January congregational meeting. Here is his outline duplicated in part:

I. Please avoid these dangers and pitfalls:

- A. Forgetting who's in charge of "running" the church.
- B. Tangible results become more important than people and loving each other.
- C. Criticizing church leaders to other church members.
- D. Losing focus on the double mission of the church:
 - 1. "Feed my lambs"
 - 2. "Make disciples"

II. Strengths and Weakness to keep in mind:

- A. Mine
 - 1. Draw your own conclusions about my strengths
 - 2. Weaknesses: inexperience; too patient?;
sometimes erred when attempting to walk
line between leading and equipping,
encouraging lay leadership; others, too!
- B. Congregation's

1. Strengths: friendly, outreach oriented, loving
2. Weaknesses: stewardship of Word, finances, time, and talent

C. Board of Elders'

1. Strengths: Spiritually well-informed, active
2. Weaknesses: Too patient in dealing with inactives?

D. Church Council's

1. Strengths: eager to serve Savior
2. Weaknesses: attendance at meetings; personality clashes sometimes complicate work.

III. Please be encouraged to...

- A. Keep kingdom work in front and ego's behind.
- B. Focus on your (emphasis his) job description and carry out the tasks the congregation has assigned to you (emphasis his).
- C. Communicate, communicate, communicate!
- D. Think before you speak and act!
- E. Treat the new man in as well as you treated me!
 1. Support him generously
 2. Pray for him continually
 3. Encourage him often
 4. Love him always
 5. Respect his office
 6. Understand him
 7. Let him be different

V. Reflections on my decade at St. Matthew:

- A. the parable of the mustard seed come[s] to life!
- B. The gates of hell have not prevailed against her!
- C. Fertile soil for my personal growth as a pastor!
- D. A richly blessed congregation!
- E. To whom much is given, much is expected!

St. Matthew truly can be thankful for the years of faithful leadership from the dedicated shepherd God had called to lead his flock in Port Washington from 1980-1990.

STABILITY -- BUT CHALLENGES

Pastor Donald Thompson took over as shepherd where Daniel Simons left off. Pastor Thompson inherited what had become an established congregation. It had become part of Port Washington's landscape, yet even to this day it struggles to make itself known in the community. If one were to give directions to St. Matthew, he would probably say, "It's the church behind Thomas Jefferson Middle School." But even then St. Matthew might be confused with the other Lutheran Church just a couple of blocks from the middle school - Christ the King, the ELCA congregation in town. Since St. Matthew is practically hidden in its current location, on a plot of land on the outskirts of the north end of town, it finds itself in a battle to make itself known. Port Washington's residents are predominantly Roman Catholic, members of either St. Mary's on the hill overlooking Port, or St. Peter's. Those who have canvassed the city will often find as many as nine people

out of ten identifying themselves with St. Mary's, although experience reveals that many so identified are in reality unchurched.

The Missouri Synod is represented in Port Washington by St. John's. St. John's has just opened the doors to a three and four year old preschool, as well as a five year old kindergarten. They hope within a few years to have established a pre-kindergarten through eighth grade elementary school. With the problems confronting the Port Washington - Saukville school district, St. John's finds itself in the enviable position of quickly gaining support for building its school.

Under Pastor Thompson's guidance, St. Matthew's has had to step back and evaluate itself in light of the spiritual needs of its membership and the spiritual opportunities posed by the unique circumstances of its community. In light of these conditions, a "Statement of Vision" was produced for St. Matthew's.⁸ It included in part:

1. That all members take a course in friendship evangelism and be active in reaching their friends, relatives, associates and neighbors.
2. That a lighted church sign and a steeple be erected as soon as possible, preferably before the end of 1993.
3. That paid weekly advertising begin in 1994.
4. That yearly canvasses be made to identify every unchurched souls in Port Washington.

⁸ This "Statement of Vision for St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church," was presented to the May, 1993 Voter's meeting.

5. That St. Matthew offer multiple Bible Studies throughout the year, as well as a specific curricula for growth in the Word and doctrine, and training for Christian ministry.
6. That a midweek service be conducted year-round on Monday evenings.
 - More and more of our members are working in service related industries
 - To effectively reach as many unchurched as possible
7. That giving to the current building fund be promoted as a high priority among our members and organizations, and that an educational wing be built as soon as possible.
8. That St. Matthew, by God's grace, double it's membership and it's church and communion attendance by 2005.
 - Port Washington is a growing community. People are moving out from Milwaukee and Brown Deer looking for safer places to live. Most will be looking for new church home.
9. That St. Matthew actively promote Christian day-school and high school education through support of Our Savior Lutheran School in Grafton and joining the Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School Federation.
11. That we make a concerted effort to go completely self-supporting at the beginning of 1994.

The objectives facing St. Matthew were clear: create for themselves a more visible presence in the community, establish a conscious awareness of the church in the city, nurture the members and reach out to the unchurched.

St. Matthew has erected a lighted steeple and church sign. They canvass all of Port Washington every five years with the help of students from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary by canvassing one-fifth of the city at a time. Those students, along with Pastor Thompson and members of the congregation, make evangelism calls on those prospects gleaned from the canvas. The Board of Elders makes their calls on delinquents every month. And St. Matthew has its church services every Sunday morning and Monday evening to best serve not only the spiritual needs of the congregation, but the needs of the unchurched community as well.

EDUCATE THE CHILDREN

Since Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church in Grafton lies on the east side of Grafton, making it practically adjacent to Port Washington, it has as much the ability to serve the elementary education needs of WELS children in both cities. This did not mean, however, that St. Matthew would shirk its responsibility for education. There were still possibilities. The leaders of St. Matthew set out to meet those responsibilities in 1997 with its "Affirming Christian Elementary and Secondary Education at St. Matthew's." The essence of the resolution presented to the voters is as follows:

- 6) Whereas our Vision Statement, adopted in 1993, states,
"that St. Matthew actively promote Christian day school and high school education through support of Our Savior Lutheran School in Grafton and joining the Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School Federation," and

- 8) Whereas we have been losing families from the city of Port Washington because Our Savior's has a Lutheran elementary school and we do not...be it...
- 1) Resolved that St. Matthew Congregation commit itself to pay the tuition costs of all children of current members and new members until they complete their eighth grade at a WELS elementary school, and be it further
- 2) Resolved that St. Matthew Congregation pay the difference in tuition between federation and non-federation students attending Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, and be it further
- 3) Resolved that we ask the Early Childhood Education Committee to also research the possibility of starting a Christian elementary school here at St. Matthew and report their findings to the Voters...

As of May, 1998, St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Port Washington, Wisconsin, continues to financially support its members who send their children to a WELS elementary school. It has also since joined the federation of Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School. And it has broken ground for a new addition which will serve as a pre-school child care, for which it is calling its first teacher/administrator.

IN CONCLUSION

The year end membership numbers for 1996 are "only" 185 souls. But there has been tremendous growth in the little WELS church in Port. The growth may not be in membership numbers, and perhaps St. Matthew

may never experience "numbers" growth due to the nature of the shifting inhabitants of Port Washington. But there is a qualitative growth. St. Matthew's is doing what it has done since its inception, searching for ways to serve its Lord. The "drawbacks" mentioned at the beginning of this paper to membership in this congregation are being removed one by one. St. Matthew's is establishing a gospel proclamation presence in the community. It's reaching out in its evangelism efforts, not only by canvassing homes and making evangelism calls on prospects, but will with its new child care center as well. It is able to do these things because the faith of its members are being nurtured with the gospel themselves. St. Matthew doesn't really do anything different or special in comparison with any other confessional, orthodox Lutheran congregation. The pastor, leaders and membership simply go about their lives of faith and experience the rich blessings that come from the Holy Spirit. The Mission Statement for St. Matthew sums up its objectives very well.

- proclaiming the Law and the Gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation;
- strengthening believers in faith and sanctification through the Means of Grace and Christian education for all ages;
- equipping believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses for sharing the Gospel of Jesus with our fellow man at home through personal and congregational efforts;
- helping believers to reach our fellow men throughout the world with the message of the Gospel through Synodical mission efforts;

- encouraging individual believers to extend their love and compassion to all sinners and saints.⁹

May God grant that St. Matthew continue to be blessed by him to remain faithful to his Word.

⁹ Adopted at the Voters' Meeting of December 2, 1991.