

A History of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church
Lewiston, Minnesota

Senior Church History

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When a history of a congregation is written, many factors other than the organization of the church itself have to be taken into account. A study of the area in which the church is located is a necessity. It is good to look at the various backgrounds from which the first members of the congregation came from. Were they all German? Did they establish a new church because of religious persecution somewhere else? Were they farmers looking for new land who also brought their God and their beliefs along with them? Did they have any kind of religious affiliation before they arrived in the new area?

Questions abound. Some of the answers may be harder to locate. Complete records are not always kept and things may be forgotten over the passage of time. Some things are always passed on by word of mouth and are never written down. Many legends and sayings may have some basis in truth, but so many years and people have come and gone, that it is impossible at times to tell truth from fiction, fact from fantasy.

People first started settling around the Lewiston, Minnesota area in 1855. The city of Winona had been founded in 1854, so they had a good starting-off point for travel to the west. In 1862, the railroad had reached a point about one mile east of the present site of Lewiston, at a place called Dutchman's Crossing. This was still situated in the valley, and some local boys saw an opportunity for mischief. After it was dark, they would go and knock the blocks away from the wheels of the freight cars and send them careening down into the valley. The railroad needed a solution to their problem. They offered some of the neighboring farmers \$50/acre for their land, but they were not willing to part with their choice land. The railroad needed level land for their freight cars.

What were they going to do? Finally, a man named Jonathon Smith Lewis donated 10-15 acres of land to the railroad so that they could establish their station on more level land. The station was needed there so that the farmers could be saved a trip into the valley to sell their grain. All this occurred in 1863. The railroad gave the name 'Lewiston' to this station to honor Jonathon Smith Lewis. The area grew quickly after that because the land was able to grow grain and other crops equally well.

What kind of men were these first people to come to Lewiston, eventually to found St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church? They were definitely pioneers. The first meetings of this church were held in 1866, only three years after Lewiston itself was founded. This church was one of the first churches in the Lewiston area. These people knew what it was like to travel across the new land to their new home. They did not forget to bring along their most important possession, the Lord himself, and His Word. "Many, however, were the difficulties and struggles from without and within our pioneer fathers had to encounter and overcome. These early pioneers came, some from Wisconsin, others from their German fatherland, to this southeastern section of the state of Minnesota to establish a new earthly home for themselves and families. While building their temporal homes and tilling the soil, to sustain the body they also fully realized that "man liveth not by bread alone," that they were but pilgrims and strangers here upon earth who had no abiding city, but were seeking the one to come. Therefore they resolved to establish a church home for themselves, their children, and for generations to come where they could regularly hear the Word of Life, have their children baptized, instructed, and

confirmed, commune together at the Lord's Table, have their marriages solemnized in a God-pleasing manner, receive comfort in sorrow and afflictions, and especially in the hour of death. But despite handicaps, opposition, and financial difficulties, by their courage of conviction, the thorough indoctrination they had received in their youth, they carried on, fought the good fight of faith, battling against lodgism, unionism, and indifference so that today, by the grace of God, St. John's has grown like the mustard seed in the parable to a large tree which has spread its spiritual and moral influence over this village and its immediate community."¹

Very few primary sources exist for the congregation at Lewiston. The first record of minutes of any meeting held is dated July 3, 1866. No records exist of any meetings held before this date. It is not known whether the homes of the members were used for gatherings, where their first pastor came from. It is not known whether the pastor who conducted the services at these gatherings was a resident pastor or a missionary of the old Minnesota Synod. He may have been sent to explore this particular field.

There are also no records telling when the first church building was put up. From later records, it is assumed that the first church was built in the same year as organization, 1866. It was built on a tract of land one mile west of the village limits of Lewiston. This building served a three-way purpose: worship facility, school, and living quarters for the pastor. This served the congregation until 1879 when they moved to a new building in the village of Lewiston, on the north side of town. From the beginning, this piece of land also served as the cemetery. St. John's congregation still owns this land

today, and it continues to serve as the cemetery for the church. There is still much room for expansion.

When the move to the new building took place in 1879, much opposition was encountered. It was not argued that a new building was needed. They had outgrown their old place of worship. Those who opposed the move wondered why they had to move. They felt that the old location was the place to build. God definitely had a hand in helping the congregation to decide this matter. The building which was erected in 1879 in the village of Lewiston continues to serve the congregation as their worship facility today. It has undergone a number of remodeling projects, but, those members who have gone to their eternal rest still recognize it as their place of worship, the same building in which they sang their praises to God. In 1883, a one thousand pound bell was hung in the belfry. Today, this same bell still rings out the call to worship, telling everyone that services are beginning. The pipe organ which was installed in 1904 served in leading the congregation in song until 1976, when a new Casavant pipe organ was installed at a cost of \$70,000. In 1966, the centennial remodeling project included adding a new narthex to the front of the church. A mother's room, additional space for coat racks, a new office for the pastor, and the passageway to the school next door were also part of this remodeling project. At this time the interior of the church was also refurbished. New carpeting was installed, a new coat of paint was applied, and a new pulpit was erected. At the time of the 75th anniversary, the stained-glass windows were installed. Some of these windows were purchased by memorials. Eight of them plus the window above the front entrance were purchased by the Ladies Aid for a total of \$316.

Today these windows are priceless.

The most recent addition to the church structure itself are four ceiling fans. These were installed in the interest of energy conservation to help circulate the warm air trapped there in the cold winter months, and also to help keep the air moving during the hot summer months.

From the beginning of St. John's congregation, it has been evident that the education of the young has received top priority. As told earlier, the first building served as school, church, and parsonage. There were no teachers at that time. In addition to his pastoral duties, the pastor was entrusted with all the teaching of the children. In 1879, when the decision was made to move to Lewiston itself, some of the opposing families left the congregation for that reason. In a move to placate some of these families, the old building continued to serve as the school for a number of years. However, this situation proved untenable. Having the church building in the town, and the school in the country with the pastor having to make the trip back and forth just did not work. Therefore, in 1882, the old building was moved to the site in the village of Lewiston to serve as the school. It did serve that purpose until 1912, when a new school building was erected with a large classroom on the main floor and a basement meeting room for the Ladies Aid, other organizations, and the confirmation classes. In 1950, a large project added two modern classrooms and a large auditorium to the main school building. The basement meeting was converted to a kitchen to serve a hot lunch to the students at the noon hour. Miss Edna Steuernagel was the cook for a number of years. In 1960, Mrs. Edwin Dorn and Mrs. Catherine

Bartsch became the school cooks, and they continue to prepare hot meals for the children today. They also assist in the education of some of the students by teaching home economics twice a week.

In 1980, the school again had a major remodeling. Four new classrooms were added, a new library and an office for the principal. Two of the old classrooms were converted for other purposes. The one now serves as a congregational lounge, where a Bible class is held between services. The other room is now used as a wood shop for the students who are interested.

The first school board members were Henry Neeb and Bernhardt Ringele. As stated above, for many years the respective pastors taught school, and later on teachers were employed on a temporary basis for four months during the school year to relieve the pastor from some of his ministerial duties which increased as the congregation grew. On April 9, 1899, Mr. Oscar Frey was called as the first permanent teacher. So for thirty-three years, the pastors had served also as the teachers. It was also at this time that certain secular subjects first began to be taught in the English language. In 1920, a lady teacher was added because of increased enrollment. The lower room was then equipped for use as a classroom. The men who have taught in St. John's school are: Oscar Frey, 1899-1900; Hugo Wachholz, 1900-1902; Albert Stindt, 1905-1923; Paul Hippauf, 1923-1930; Waldemar Pape, 1930-1934; E.A. Wilde, 1934-1978; David Menges, 1973 to the present. The lady teachers were: Mabel Kinney, Adeline Mittelstaedt, Laura Meyer, Margot Schuetze, Judith Otte, Judy Wallner, Donna Luehmann (Windmeyer), Judith Westendorf, Mary Meyer, Linda Karlofsky, Gloria Boch, Naomi Menges (Knickelbein), Rita Bartsch (Castillo), Cheryl Loomis. The present faculty includes David

Menges, principal, Mrs. Myrna Luehmann, Miss Kari Lutze, and Mrs. Marcia Fischer.

This author feels special mention should be made concerning Mr. E.A. Wilde and Miss Margot Schuetze. Mr. Wilde was principal of St. John's school from 1934 until he retired in 1978. Miss Schuetze was primary grades teacher from 1929 until she retired, also in 1978. Her last five years were spent teaching kindergarten exclusively. They were both graduates of the Dr. Martin Luther College class of 1928. Mr. Wilde spent 44 of his 50 years in the teaching ministry at Lewiston, and Miss Schuetze spent 49 of her 50 years teaching in Lewiston. The Lord truly was gracious in giving St. John Lutheran School two such dedicated teachers of His Word. They continue to live in Lewiston and are members of St. John's.

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church organized on July 3, 1866. Pastor Weise presided at this meeting and the following officers were elected: Henry Neeb, president; Henry Beise, secretary; Conrad Rausch, treasurer. Henry Meyer, Fred Erion, and John Neeb were elected to serve as elders and trustees. The original signers of the constitution included John Neeb, John Sackreiter, Casper Neeb, Fred Erion, John Weber, Hartmann Yackel, Conrad Rausch, Henry Meyer, Henry Beise, and Bernhardt Ringele. Other names were added at subsequent meetings, so it is difficult to determine exactly who signed at that first organizational meeting. Many of the present members of St. John's are descended from these original signers. Names like Sackreiter and Erion are still found on the membership lists.

How St. John's congregation became a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is an in-

teresting story. At the time of its organization, it was affiliated with the old Minnesota Synod, and it was served by pastors from that church body. However, in 1877, an interesting turn of events took place. The pastor of Immanuel congregation in Silo, three miles north of Lewiston, began serving a vacancy at St. John's. This pastor, G. Schaff, persuaded the congregation to sever its connection with the Minnesota Synod, and to become a mission of Immanuel Lutheran Church at Silo. Immanuel was affiliated with the Missouri Synod. St. John's applied for and received their release from the Minnesota Synod. But, contrary to what Pastor Schaff had planned, St. John's became an independent congregation, with regular Sunday morning services and Sunday school. When Pastor Schaff resigned in 1878, Pastor Philip von Rohr, then pastor at St. Martin's, Winona, and also president of the Wisconsin Synod, was asked to take the pastoral duties and serve the vacancy. O.H. Koch, a candidate of theology, was called to serve St. John's in 1878. In 1879, during Koch's pastorate, the congregation became a member of the Wisconsin Synod, and was incorporated according to the laws of the state of Minnesota as St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lewiston, Minnesota. It is the author's opinion that the time served in the vacancy by Philip von Rohr from Winona was a turning point for this congregation. He was president of the Wisconsin Synod, a very intelligent man and quite influential. No doubt it was his influence which led St. John's congregation to affiliate with the Wisconsin Synod. St. John's has experienced steady growth since those first years and now has a membership numbering around six hundred fifty souls.

St. John's has been in existence for one hundred fifteen years. The following pastors have served St. John's since its beginning: Pastor Weise, 1866; L.A. Schmidt, 1867-1869; A. Blumer, 1870-1872; L. F. Frey, 1872-1874; H. Frese, 1875-1876; G. Schaff (Immanuel, Silo), 1877-1878; O. H. Koch, 1878-1884; A. F. Siegler, 1884-1888; L. Boehning, 1889; A. F. Froehlke, 1889-1897; H. Gerhardt, 1897-1902; E. A. Klaus, 1902-1917; H. W. Herwig, 1917-1928; R. P. Korn, 1928-58, Robert A. Beckmann, 1958-68; and David A. Fischer, 1969 to the present.

The Lord, in all his grace and mercy, has continued to bless St. John's congregation throughout the years. Many, many souls have been brought to Him there, and have heard His saving Word preached in all its truth and purity. The Lord has built His church, and He will continue to send blessings upon His church and upon its members.

"I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord."
-Psalm 122:1.

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Notes

1. The quote is taken from page 1 of the booklet prepared by the 75th anniversary committee of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church for the congregation's 75th year celebration in 1941.

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