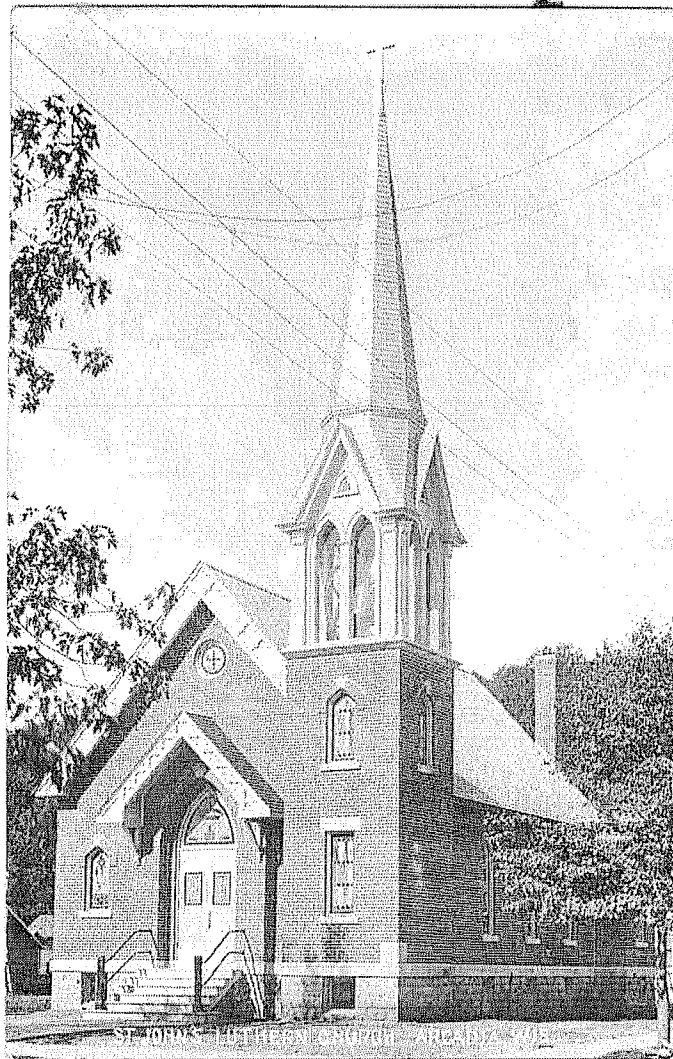


The History of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Wisconsin



**Church History CH3031
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Why do Christians go to church? What is it that drives people to wake up early on their day off, to sit in an uncomfortable pew and listen to a preacher? It sounds like a simple question and it has a simple answer: Jesus. A Christian goes to church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus in both Word and Sacrament. After a long week of dealing with stress, frustration and sin, a Christian goes to church to receive comfort in the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers. A Christian goes to church to be reminded that no matter what happens in life, a better life is waiting in heaven, because of Jesus. A Christian goes to church to praise and thank Jesus for giving life to people who do not deserve it. The one thing that ties all these answers together is Jesus. Without Jesus there would be no church, no members, no pastor, no prayer, no forgiveness, and no hope whatsoever. While the question and the answer remain relatively basic, putting it into practice can be a completely different story. What happens when church members lose this focus? What happens when the pastor of the congregation loses this focus? What happens when the focus is placed away from Jesus and on something else? Needless to say problems will occur. Family feuds may spring up. False doctrine can creep in undetected. Financial struggles can become the main concern. Stubbornness, pride and so many other problems can take the front seat, which places Jesus not even in the back seat, but in the trunk or out the door. But rather the Apostle Paul proclaims, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."¹

¹ Hebrews 12:1-2 (New International Version).

What happened to St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Wisconsin? Did they lose their focus? Or when their church disbanded in 1962, was it because they simply did not have enough people or money to keep it going any longer? Was the almost one hundred years of its existence a waste or did the church serve its purpose? This paper will examine the history of St. John's from its founding to its closing in an attempt to answer these unanswered questions.

The Early Years 1863-1910

The history of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church starts in 1863. At this time a pastor from Fountain City, Wisconsin, Ernst Strube, began worship services. The services took place in the homes of people in Glencoe Township, an area to the immediate west of Arcadia. He traveled once a month to this area to provide these people with the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Rev. Strube had great success as a missionary. In 1862 before he started his mission work in the Glencoe area, there were only two places he claimed as preaching stations.² In 1869 that number jumped to five.³ Besides Glencoe township, he also began doing ministry in the Montana township, just north of Glencoe. It is from these two churches that St. John's in Arcadia has its roots.

Rev. Strube began as a "Wisconsin Synod medical Missionary."⁴ There are records of Rev. Strube serving in the Wisconsin Synod as early as 1860.⁵ Another Wisconsin Synod source even calls Rev. Strube "one of the veterans of our synod."⁶ This is important to note as we begin

² "1862 Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," p. 16.

³ "1869 Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," p. 29.

⁴ Cf. Addenda, History Papers: "St. John's-Christ Lutheran Church," p.2.

⁵ "1860 Proceedings of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," p. 7.

⁶ "The Nebraska District and its Twenty-fifth Anniversary," The Northwestern Lutheran. August 1926, p.

our understanding of St. John's. After Rev. Strube left St. John's, the congregation did not always call Wisconsin Synod pastors. As will be shown in the next several pages, for years the congregation was split doctrinally. Some favored the Iowa Synod. Others favored the Wisconsin Synod. This will eventually cause a physical split in the congregation creating two separate congregations. Some sources make the claim that St. John's joined the Wisconsin Synod in 1896. While this is true, it was not the first time they joined the synod. In 1870, under the leadership of Rev. Strube, St. John's congregation in Glencoe township joined the Wisconsin Synod.⁷

While St. John's has its deepest roots in the Wisconsin Synod, the congregation wanted a change. In 1875 after 12 years of service, Rev. Strube left to serve a congregation in Newton, Wisconsin. At this time St. John's decided to leave the Wisconsin Synod. They insisted on calling an Iowa Synod pastor. No reason is given for this other than that the "congregation was insistent on leaving its former synodical association."⁸ This writer feels that this is the beginning of a controversy that will plague the church for the next 21 years until the congregation finally divides into two groups, a Wisconsin Synod congregation called St. John's Evangelical Lutheran and an Iowa Synod congregation called St. John's – Christ Lutheran.

In 1875, the Glencoe congregation called Ernest Giesel, an Iowa Synod pastor. He was the first resident pastor of St. John's. While serving, he lived in the home of one of the church members. Rev. Giesel can be credited as the pastor who brought organization to this congregation. During his ministry, he established two official congregations with constitutions,

⁷ Norbert M. Manthe, Pastors and Congregations of the Antecedent Synods of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1850-1917. (Madison: Omnipress, 2001), p. 85.

⁸ Richard Voswinkel, Intersynodical Relations Between the Synods of Iowa and Wisconsin During the Years 1867 through 1901. (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 1980), p.6.

Christ Church in Montana township and St. John's Evangelical Church in Glencoe township. It was at this time that the members of St. John's built their first church in Glencoe.⁹

The next pastor to be called to St. John's and Christ was Rev. Christian Probst (1877-1879). Rev. Probst was an Iowa Synod pastor. Although the two congregations called an Iowa Synod pastor, it seems that is not what they received. In 1878, while Rev. Probst was serving the St. John's and Christ congregations, he had a change of heart. He decided to join the Wisconsin Synod by colloquy because of doctrinal reasons. It was said of the former Iowa Synod pastor, "Da er deren falsche Lehrstellung nicht theilte und durch ein Colloquium seine Glaubens Einigkeit mit uns bewies."¹⁰ (Since he did not share their false doctrinal position, he demonstrated his unity of faith with us by means of a colloquy). Rev. Probst did not stay in the Arcadia area for very long after this. He took a call out of Arcadia the very next year.

Throughout the next ten years, St. John's will have five pastors come and go. The reason for this is unknown, but this writer believes it has to do with doctrinal differences in the congregation which are similar to the doctrinal differences between the Iowa Synod and Wisconsin Synod. The two synods were not in fellowship at this time, but they were having close relations in an attempt to gain fellowship. One writer explained, "Relations between the two synods were quite close, as evidenced by the fact that S. Fritschel [an Iowa Synod pastor] led a Thursday evening meditation for the Wisconsin Synod convention."¹¹ In the year 1867 the discussion on doctrine began between the two synods. The main teachings discussed were the four points: altar and pulpit fellowship, secret societies and millennialism.¹² While these were

⁹ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: St. John Ev. Lutheran Church (1886-1959) Arcadia WI, "American Lutheran Church:1875-1975."

¹⁰ Richard Voswinkel, Intersynodical Relations Between the Synods of Iowa and Wisconsin During the Years 1867 through 1901. (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 1980), p.6-7.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹² Ibid., p. 5.

the main teachings discussed between the synods, it is unknown exactly which doctrines were controversial in the rural Arcadia churches.

Whatever doctrine it may have been, it definitely caused congregational disunity. The church members of this dual parish were split on their beliefs. This is based on the fact that the next pastor, Rev. Johann Burchard (1879-1881) was an Iowa Synod pastor. The following pastor, Rev. Johann Weirauch (1881-1883) was a Wisconsin Synod pastor. The next, Carl Ziebell (1884), was a theological student from the Iowa synod and stayed only five or six months. The next four pastors that are called are Wisconsin Synod pastors. Noticing the differing synodical affiliations of these pastors and their relatively short pastorates, shows that this doctrinal controversy continued for quite some time. The problems that arise in the next several years of the congregation's history will further confirm this.

Rev. Julius Badke was the next pastor of St. John's. He served from 1884-1887. It was under his leadership that Christ congregation in Montana erected a church building. Also "a small frame church was built in Arcadia so that parishioners would not have to travel to Glencoe to worship on Sunday.¹³ A separate congregation was not formed."¹⁴ It was at this time that a parsonage was built in Arcadia for Rev. Badke and his family. During Rev. Badke's pastorate at St. John's, another church was added to the three existing preaching stations. St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Whitehall, joined the Wisconsin Synod on June 12, 1885. This church shared pastors with St. John's until 1904. They will become a dual parish again in 1941 and will continue until 1962 when St. John's finally disbands.

¹³ This "small frame church" still exists. In 1910 when the next church was built this building was enlarged and improved and was used by the Ladies Aid, confirmation class, meetings of the Young People's Society, and for various social gatherings. Addenda, History Papers: "A Short History of St. John's Wis. Synod Luth. Church – Arcadia, WI." p. 1.

¹⁴ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: St. John Ev. Lutheran Church (1886-1959) Arcadia WI, "American Lutheran Church: 1875-1975."

The next pastor was Rev. Albert Froehlke. He graduated from Northwestern College and in 1887 graduated from the Theological Seminary in Milwaukee. Both were Wisconsin Synod schools. On January 5, 1888 he was ordained in Arcadia. He stayed until 1890. Rev. Carl Rutzen followed as the next pastor of the four congregations. He graduated from the Wisconsin Synod's seminary in 1889. He served as the pastor of these congregations from 1890-1896. The following pastor, Rev. Herman Gerhard, joined the Wisconsin Synod by colloquy in 1893.¹⁵ In 1896 he was called to serve St. John's and three other congregations. He, however, only stayed for about ten months. One source states that "congregational disunity forced his withdrawal."¹⁶ Apparently the congregation is still split in some way. This writer believes the problem continues to involve some doctrinal differences similar to the doctrinal differences between the Wisconsin Synod and the Iowa Synod. It should be noted about Rev. Gerhard that in a family biography he is considered to be "a strict interpreter of the Wisconsin Synod rules."¹⁷ This leads one to believe that possibly the reason Rev. Gerhard left so soon was that he would not put up with any false doctrines that were still lingering within the congregation from the Iowa Synod. This opinion is strengthened by what happens next in the congregation's history.

In 1897, Christ Church in Montana township, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Glencoe township and a few of the members attending the church in Arcadia called an Iowa Synod pastor, Rev. Adolf Werr, to serve them. Besides holding services at Christ and at St. John's he also held services in an upstairs room of the parsonage in Arcadia for the few Arcadia members that called him. During this time, the remaining majority of the Arcadia church, who favored the Wisconsin Synod, called Rev. Theophil Brenner, a graduate out of the Wisconsin

¹⁵ Norbert M. Manthe, Pastors and Congregations of the Antecedent Synods of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1850-1917. (Madison: Omnipress, 2001), p. 6.

¹⁶ Cf. Addenda, History Papers: "St. John's-Christ Lutheran Church," p.3.

¹⁷ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: Gerhard, Herman (1869-1960) Marburg, "Biography."

Synod's seminary. This group continued to worship in the small frame church in the village of Arcadia. To summarize, in the town of Arcadia there are two Lutheran pastors, but from different synods.

It is unknown exactly how long Rev. Brenner served in Arcadia. Sometime during the next year he left.¹⁸ The new pastor that was called by the Wisconsin Synod group of Arcadians to replace Rev. Brenner was Rev. David Metzger. While serving the group of Arcadians, he also served St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Again, what is about to take place happens because of the doctrinal differences between the Wisconsin Synod and the Iowa Synod. One source reads, "Quite suddenly, and for unknown reasons Rev. Werr shifted his synodical affiliation to the Wisconsin Synod. Part of the congregation followed and he served them in the church building in Arcadia."¹⁹ Another history record reads, "[Rev. Werr] later changed to the Wisconsin Synod, apparently to restore church unity and served in the Arcadia church as well as the other two churches. However, this did not restore unity."²⁰ This is the second Iowa Synod pastor who ended up joining the Wisconsin Synod while serving in Arcadia. The two groups of Lutherans in the Arcadia area never shared a pastor again. The smaller number of people who worshiped in the small frame church in Arcadia only called pastors from the Wisconsin Synod. The Iowa Synod group, made up of Christ Church in Montana township, St. John's Church in Glencoe township, and a group of people who worshipped in the parsonage in Arcadia called their next pastor from the Iowa Synod. But after he stayed only four years, they called a pastor from the Ohio Synod. It was under his leadership that they started construction on a church building in

¹⁸ His obituary does not even mention that he served in Arcadia. The 1898 Wisconsin Synod Proceedings do not list any reason for leaving. They only show his address being Reedsville, WI, where his father served as a pastor. One would assume that he returned to live with his parents. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: Brenner, Theophil S. (1872-1994) WLS 1896, "Pastor Theophil Samuel Brenner 3/26/85".

¹⁹ Cf. Addenda, History Papers: "St. John's-Christ Lutheran Church," p.3.

²⁰ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: St. John Ev. Lutheran Church (1886-1959) Arcadia WI, "American Lutheran Church:1875-1975."

Arcadia. On August 10, 1910 ground was broken for the church which is presently known as Christ Lutheran Church, and is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). At that time this church was not organized. They simply worshipped there and “any new member living in the village was constrained to take membership in either one of the township churches.”²¹ It wasn’t until 1929 that both of the township congregations officially combined to form “St. John’s – Christ Lutheran Congregation of Arcadia.”²²

In 1903 Rev. Metzger left the small Wisconsin Synod group in Arcadia and Rev. Louis Krug took his place. Rev. Krug served at St. John’s in Arcadia and St. Paul’s in Whitehall from 1903-1904. At this time St. Paul’s in Whitehall built a parsonage and, for the time being, no longer shared a pastor with St. John’s. The Rev. Krug served only for that one year in Arcadia, but continued to serve at St. Paul’s until 1910. St. John’s then called back Adolf Werr, who remained for about a year (1904-1905). The next pastor, Rev. Henry Viestenz, stayed for a little over a year. Carl A. Otto started serving in Arcadia in 1908 before he graduated. This must have been simply a temporary call as he stayed only a short time, but returned a year later.²³ Rev. Chris Sauer, a new graduate from the Wisconsin Synod’s seminary, would stay only a year. After Carl Otto’s graduation he would return in 1910 and stay till 1917. It was under his leadership that the congregation would finally find some stability.

Sixteen different pastors in thirty years of a congregation’s existence is a sign of persistent congregational strife. After the separation of the two Lutheran church bodies, St. John’s could enjoy fellowship and peace with those whom they knew believed and taught the same Biblical teachings. St. John’s will continue to be the smaller of the two Lutheran groups in

²¹ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper clippings, p. 2.

²² Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: St. John Ev. Lutheran Church (1886-1959) Arcadia WI, “American Lutheran Church:1875-1975.”

²³ This was probably some type of seminary training to give the students practical experience in the parish, similar to the vicar program which is currently the part of the curriculum at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

Arcadia for the life of the congregation. But the church regained its focus. For the next several years the church will be able to carry out the work of the church with relative peace in the congregation.

The Middle Years 1910-1958

Although this section of the paper covers the largest span of time, it is the shortest section. As the old saying goes, “No news is good news.” This writer feels this is an accurate assessment of the so called “middle years” of the history of St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia. During these years the church flourished. It should, however, be noted that the success of a church is not measured by the number of people who come through its doors. If this were the case a pastor could draw massive crowds simply by giving away free food or money on a Sunday morning. The success of a Christian church, however, is measured by whether or not the gospel is proclaimed. In this sense, St. John’s truly did flourish. The members of St. John’s were able to do the work of the church with minimal distractions. They kept their eyes focused on Jesus as they carried out the great commission by baptizing and by teaching with the power of the gospel.

On March 27, 1910 the members of the congregation voted to construct a new church building, “because the old frame church was too small.”²⁴ On April 10th, of that same year the congregation made plans to buy the two lots where the church stands today. The laying of the cornerstone took place in the summer of 1910. The old frame church which was across the street from the new edifice was enlarged and improved. St. John’s members used it for various fellowship activities throughout the years. Ladies Aid, confirmation class, meetings for the

²⁴ Fiftieth Anniversary of the Building of the Church and Dedication of St. John’s Independent Lutheran Church, Arcadia Public Library: Church History Files. (author unknown), 1960.

Young People's Society all took place in the old church building.²⁵ Also a Sunday School was formed. They were blessed to begin this ministry with about thirty children.²⁶

The Ladies Aid program was a tremendous help to the congregation in many ways. It was organized during the pastorate of Rev. Carl Rutzen (1890-1896). After the church was built, "it became evident that many things were lacking to make the interior of the church complete."²⁷ The Ladies Aid filled this role as they beautified the church with altar trimmings, and other furnishings. One former member said that once a month the Ladies Aid would serve coffee after church for the members to enjoy fellowship with one another.²⁸ For special occasions they even served dinners after the worship service. It is no wonder this group was considered "the most active group in the church."²⁹

In 1935, the congregation prepared for its 25 year anniversary of the building of the church. The members hired a professional church decorator from Milwaukee to beautify the sanctuary. The detailed description of what was redecorated in the church is probably one of the best sources available for what the inside of this church originally looked like.

The wainscoting is done in stone effect, likewise the windows. Fitting emblems are used in the proper spaces. The sanctuary is set off from the auditorium by a triumphal arch. The sanctuary an entirely new design with a hand painting of Calvary in the center. The altar, pulpit and baptismal font were cleaned and refinished in white and gold. The woodwork was either cleaned and polished or revarnished. . . . The choir will furnish new lights for the church, six modern type lamps, to be hung on chain fixtures, three on each side, directly over the pews for better lighting results.³⁰

The newly decorated church was ready for its anniversary ceremony in late August of 1935. The newspaper article regarding this eagerly anticipated day stated,

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1. ²⁵ Cf. Addenda, History Papers: "A Short History of St. John's Wis. Synod Luth. Church – Arcadia, WI." p.
 - ²⁶ Ibid.
 - ²⁷ Ibid.
 - ²⁸ Interview with Albert Pahl, Phone Interview. 8 December 2005.
 - ²⁹ Cf. Addenda, History Papers: "A Short History of St. John's Wis. Synod Luth. Church – Arcadia, WI." p.
 2. ³⁰ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper clippings, p. 18, B.

At the morning service (9:30 a.m.) Rev. C. A. Otto will preach in German and Rev. R. Lederer in English. In the afternoon (2:30 p.m.) Rev. Rud. Korn will preach in English and at the evening service (8 p.m.) Rev. Rich. W. Mueller will speak also in English. The choir will provide special music at each service. . . .Dinner and supper will be served by the ladies of the congregation in the old church building.³¹

During this era in St. John's history they flourished by keeping their eyes focused on Jesus. The church records show that from the organization of the church in 1875, 361 people were baptized, 284 people were confirmed, and eighty-seven marriages were performed. The church was successful because ministry was being done to the glory of God. During this time period, however, the church was slowly losing members.³² One of the former members said he remembers only about "a couple dozen people in church."³³ This can be partly explained in a newspaper article which briefly stated, "The church lost membership when it denied membership to lodge members back in 1944."³⁴ This accounts for the major decline in the membership statistics in the 1940's.³⁵ One interviewee remembered that the same problem occurred around the same time at St. Paul's in Whitehall, which at this time shared a pastor. He said they lost "a handful of members in the 1940's because some congregational members belonged to Odd Fellows Lodge."³⁶ These membership losses turned into financial problems for the congregation in Arcadia.³⁷ But the lodge issue was not the only reason members left the congregation. One former member stated, "It was dying because of a general lack of interest . . . Some people got worn out. A small group of people were doing everything and it got to be too much. The ministers weren't bad, they were all fairly good. But they didn't have enough people to do

³¹ Ibid. p. 18, C.

³² Cf. Appendix, "Membership Statistics of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia."

³³ Interview with Albert Pahl, Phone Interview. 8 December 2005.

³⁴ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper clippings, p. 3, A.

³⁵ Cf. Appendix, "Membership Statistics of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia."

³⁶ Interview with Norman Froseth, Whitehall, Wisconsin. Interview, 31 July 2005.

³⁷ This seems to be the consensus with the former members of St. John's who were interviewed. Interview with Albert Pahl, Phone Interview, 8 December 2005. Interview with Lee Wieland, Phone Interview, 4 August 2005. Interview with Ruth Kube, Phone Interview, 8 July 2005.

anything.”³⁸ Another previous member commented on the reason the membership went so low. “Sometimes it was just family feuds. They had a disagreement so one left the church. There were only a few families.”³⁹ The comment was made that it was not the only Lutheran church in town. So if someone left St. John’s, there was another option for them, St. John’s-Christ.⁴⁰ The last pastor of St. John’s, Rev. Buege explained the difficulty of growth for the small Arcadia church. He mentioned how the large majority was either Catholic, or belonged to the St. John’s-Christ church, so there were very few prospects and it made it very difficult to grow.⁴¹

While the membership at St. John’s definitely fell during these years, the remaining members continued to do the work of the church. But there are many fond memories of St. John’s, memories that give a glimpse of what this church was like. There are memories of the “great church picnics where they had ice cream and pop,” something that was a rarity for them.⁴² Some remember the Christmas services that were always packed with people.⁴³ There was always a candy bag and an apple waiting for them after the service.⁴⁴ One man recalls that as a teenager, his job was to be janitor of the church. Every Sunday morning he would have to get up early and get the wood furnace going. He said, “The furnace never got the church very warm, but people came anyways.”⁴⁵ He also recalls one of his duties at the church was to turn the crank on the organ while the organist played.⁴⁶ There are memories of the Easter service being “very religious. It didn’t focus on Easter eggs and Easter bunnies.”⁴⁷ They were keeping their eyes focused on Jesus. Some saw the last few pastors as very energetic, good speakers, and very

³⁸ Interview with Lee Wieland, Phone Interview, 4 August 2005.

³⁹ Interview with anonymous, Phone Interview, 3 August 2005.

⁴⁰ Interview with Lee Wieland, Phone Interview, 4 August 2005.

⁴¹ Interview with Richard Buege, Phone Interview, 26 July 2005.

⁴² Interview with anonymous, Phone Interview, 3 August 2005.

⁴³ Interview with Albert Pahl, Phone Interview, 8 December 2005.

⁴⁴ Interview with anonymous, Phone Interview, 3 August 2005.

⁴⁵ Interview with Albert Pahl, Phone Interview, 8 December 2005.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Interview with anonymous, Phone Interview, 3 August 2005.

outgoing.⁴⁸ The last pastor of St. John's, Rev. Richard Buege, admitted that the congregation in Arcadia was made up of "great people." And that "he has never been to a church where he was treated so well."⁴⁹ He said about this small group of Christians that they were the "best and most devoted Christians in the world."⁵⁰ Rev. Buege used the terms, "devoted," "faithful" and "dedicated" when describing the small congregation. He said that they were a group who "loved God's Word."⁵¹

Although this congregation had its share of difficulties through the years, Jesus still remained the focus. The remaining members still gathered together around the Word of God week after week. While the church was not growing numerically, they were growing spiritually. But how long can such a small group continue to support this church financially? One woman vividly recalls as a child, counting the heads of the people in church on a particular Sunday. There were only 14 people there.⁵² It seemed like this church wouldn't be around much longer. The last pastor commented, "There was no chance of growth. Growing wasn't possible."⁵³ While this strong opinion may or may not have been the case, in the next few years the congregation would be faced with difficulties that would prove fatal to the existence of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia.

The Final Years 1958-1962

The following section will center on the events that brought about the termination of fellowship between the Wisconsin Synod and the two Wisconsin Synod churches in Arcadia and

⁴⁸ Interview with Ardell Schroeder, Jean Schroeder, and Rachael Herman, Whitehall, Wisconsin, 16 July 2005.

⁴⁹ Interview with Richard Buege, Phone Interview, 26 July 2005.

⁵⁰ Interview with Richard Buege, Phone Interview, 26 July 2005.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Interview with anonymous, Phone Interview, 3 August 2005.

⁵³ Interview with Richard Buege, Phone Interview, 26 July 2005.

Whitehall, WI, St. John's and St. Paul's respectively. As we go through these events we must consider the question, did the church fall apart because it lost its focus? Or did the church disband for other reasons? And finally, did the church serve its purpose? The purpose of this section is not to place the blame on any one individual or group. This writer will simply state the events and facts and will not present any bias opinions so as not to hurt feelings to those who were involved and to be as honest as possible to both sides.

Rev. Richard Buege was the pastor of St. John's in Arcadia and St. Paul's in Whitehall from 1955-1962. Beginning in 1958, the Wisconsin Synod began its investigation of the charges of false doctrine against Rev. Buege. There were two doctrinal issues that the Wisconsin Synod officials investigated:

- 1) Woman's suffrage – There were reports that women were voting in the congregation.
- 2) Fellowship – There were reports that Rev. Buege participated with pastors of different denomination in a way which violated scriptural fellowship principles.

The Wisconsin Synod started taking action against Rev. Buege after they heard reports of these two items. They heard about these problems from members of the congregation, Wisconsin Synod pastors in the area, and from newspaper articles which mentioned changes in the church. One such article read,

For the first time in the church's history, women and confirmed children were given the right to vote, the practice to continue at all future meetings. The congregation agreed it will continue to recognize all Lutherans as equals regardless of their nationalities. 'This fellowship with all Lutherans has done much to help the church in its work,' commented the Rev. Richard Buege, pastor.⁵⁴

After similar reports had spread about these possible false doctrines, Wisconsin Synod Pastor Harold Backer from Winona who served as the Conference Visitor, wrote to Western Wisconsin District president, Rev. Richard Mueller, on Oct. 3, 1958, "I believe the time has

⁵⁴ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 16,B.

come to act on our part. In regard to Arcadia, I know that the constitution does not allow women suffrage. I am quite certain that it has not been legally changed. The selling of the parsonage could perhaps be delayed. I don't know if Arcadia is worth trying to save. If so, the time would be now to try to do so."⁵⁵ The reason he feels Arcadia is not worth saving could refer to longstanding doctrinal differences regarding women's suffrage with the Wisconsin Synod or to financial issues or both.

In the St. John's constitution there is a clause under article VI entitled "Suffrage". It states, "All members of the Congregation both male and female, who have been confirmed shall have the right to vote."⁵⁶ This was apparently in the constitution since 1934. A similar statement was made in St. Paul's constitution. This is why a newspaper article wrote about this controversy,

'Our constitution . . . gave the women the right to vote in 1934 – If it is so wrong why haven't they done something before this? [Why] didn't you try to suspend some of our other ministers?' The church had five ministers between 1934 and Pastor Buege's call in 1953.⁵⁷

While this may have been the case, this writer found a copy of the constitution in the record book of St. John's. The constitution states under Article VI, Suffrage, "Only such male members of the congregation as have complete their twenty-first year and signed this Constitution shall have the right to vote."⁵⁸ This constitution was signed in 1936. It is unknown exactly what happened here. The same situation, however, occurred in the constitution of St. Paul's. A letter was written by a former member of St. Paul's congregation to Rev. Buege concerning this issue. In the letter he points out that he was there when the constitution was

⁵⁵ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, Case File: Wisconsin—(WWD); Arcadia & Whitehall; St. John's and St. Paul's & Pastor Richard L. Buege, letter dated "October 3, 1958." (Hereafter cited as WLS Archives, Buege Case file)

⁵⁶ WLS Archives, Buege Case File: "Constitution of St. John's Lutheran Church of Arcadia, Wisconsin" (no date is given).

⁵⁷ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 14,B.

⁵⁸ Cf. Addenda, Record of St. John's as a WELS congregation from 1936-1960, p.2.

written and that he has one of the three copies of the constitution which state under Article V, "Voting rights shall only such masculine members of the congregation possess who have attained twenty-one years of age."⁵⁹ If it is true that St. Paul's constitution was tampered with, he considers this "The subversion, perversion, and confounding of this constitution which was originally set forth by the charter members."⁶⁰

But doctrinal issues weren't the only problems affecting this congregation at the time. Financially the congregation was hurting. Another newspaper article reads, "Members of St. John's Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church meet Sunday . . . The group must vote either to give a dollar each Sunday . . . or disband at the meeting."⁶¹ In order to solve this financial problem St. John's decided to sell the parsonage, since it wasn't being used by the pastor.⁶² He had his residence at the parsonage in Whitehall, adjacent to St. Paul's.

When synod officials, however, wanted to meet with Rev. Buege it was not in regard to financial concerns, but in regard to the aforementioned doctrinal issues. Rev. Walter Wegner scheduled a meeting for 1pm on Oct. 13, 1958 at Rev. Harold Backer's home in Winona. Synod officials apparently thought this was going to be a private meeting. The assumed attendees were Rev. Backer of St. Martin's in Winona, second vice-president to the district Norbert Paustian, first vice-president to the district Pastor Walter Wegner and Rev. Richard Buege. The following is part of the report to Pastor Mueller written by Pastor Wegner on what happened.

Pastor Paustian and I arrived at the parsonage in Winona at the designated time. Shortly afterward Pastor Buege arrived together with approximately 45 members of the Arcadia and Whitehall congregations. I counted 22 men and 23 women. He stated that he had announced to the congregations the previous day that he had been summoned to appear

⁵⁹ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, "Jordan Evangelical Lutheran Church" Sept. 11, 1959.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 2.

⁶¹ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, Newspaper clipping attached to "October 3, 1958" letter, "Arcadia Congregation Faces Decision Sunday."

⁶² Archives, Buege Case File, Newspaper clipping attached to "October 3, 1958" letter, "Arcadia Church to Sell Parsonage."

before Synod representatives to defend himself with reference to the matters referred to in the letter mentioned above; also that he had invited interested parties to attend the meeting with him. Comments made by the people as they gathered outside the parsonage indicated that some of them had come there with the intention of voting on the question of whether or not to continue their affiliation with the Synod.”⁶³

The rest of the letter states that the people were allowed into the church so that they would not be left outside. But no formal meeting with the entire group was held. They held an informal discussion on the items at hand, but the synod officials admitted they were not ready for a formal explanation of the biblical principles of the role of men and women and fellowship issues with those not in the Synodical Conference. Later that day, the pastors were able to speak with Pastor Buege in private and discuss the issues. Continuing his letter Pastor Wegner wrote about this private discussion, “[Pastor Buege] defended his Communion fellowship with the non-Wisconsin Synod pastors of his area by declaring that there are no doctrinal differences between the Evangelical Lutheran Church and our Synod. He gave the impression that the matter of woman suffrage in the church was not in violation of Scripture.”⁶⁴ Since it was getting late in the afternoon they decided to stop the discussion. But before they left Pastor Wegner confirmed, “We again assured Pastor Buege of our readiness to meet with the Arcadia and Whitehall congregations at their invitation to explain the Synod’s position to them.”⁶⁵

The very next week, an article in the Eau Claire newspaper stated one side of the happenings in Winona. “No one was able to prove at the meeting that the actions of the two congregations were contrary to Christian practice, and he said both congregations will continue

⁶³ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, “Report to President Mueller on the Meeting with Pastor Buege at Winona, Minnesota on October 13, 1958,” p. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

to allow women to vote and will enjoy complete fellowship with members of other Lutheran synods.”⁶⁶

Over the next couple of months letters go back and forth between Rev. Buege and Synod officials in an attempt to decide upon a date when a representative from the Wisconsin Synod can explain to the congregation the Synod’s stance concerning women’s suffrage and fellowship with those not in the Synodical Conference. The date chosen is January 5, 1959.

The meeting began at 1:30 pm at St. Paul’s in Whitehall. Those present were the church council, Pastor Buege, Pastor Mueller and Pastor Paustian.⁶⁷ The issues discussed were women’s suffrage and fellowship with Lutherans not in doctrinal agreement with the WELS.

The following reactions of this meeting are from a newspaper and from a report from the Synod officials to the Synod. The Synod officials said that “five of the six church council members . . . were at odds with Pastor Buege, especially regarding his doctrine and practice” and, furthermore, that Pastor Buege gave no assurance that he would desist in his so-called unscriptural practice.⁶⁸

A newspaper article concerning this meeting remarked,

“St. John’s Wisconsin Synod Church of Arcadia, also served by the Rev. Mr. Buege, has already voted to allow women to vote on church questions and to allow fellowship with Lutherans of all branches of the church. The dispute was brought to light in a conference Monday with officials at St. Paul’s Church and the Rev. Richard Mueller of Jefferson, president of the western district of the synod, and Rev. Norbert Paustian of Oconomowoc, vice president. The 6 members of the council of St. Paul’s are split in their opinion-three favor their pastor, three against.”⁶⁹

⁶⁶ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, Newspaper clipping attached to letter dated “Nov. 25, 1958”, “Area Minister Defends Actions to Synod Board.”

⁶⁷ It is not specified if St. John’s church council was present with St. Paul’s church council. It can however, be assumed that the decisions made at St. Paul’s will directly affect St. John’s in Arcadia.

⁶⁸ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, “Report of meeting of Pastors R Mueller and N Paustian with Church Council and Pastor Buege at Whitehall on Jan. 5, 1959.”

⁶⁹ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 12, A.

The newspaper article and the report from the Synod officials differ only in the number of council men who support the Rev. Buege. The obvious observation is that the congregation is split. Some support the pastor, and some do not. Knowing, however, who was on which side is not important. The real question that needs to be addressed is: Where is the focus of the congregation right now? The congregation's pastor and church was publicized all over the radio, newspaper and even television. No doubt, there were rumors all over the area about what is "really" going on in the church or in the synod. Where was the focus of the two Buege congregations at this time? This writer can only assume that these distractions blurred the churches' focus. But whatever the case truly was, the following events took their course.

The above meeting brought about the need for another meeting the following week. The agenda of the meeting was to vote on whether to dismiss their pastor. Before the meeting on Jan. 11, 1959, members of the church council invited the District Presidium to be present at the meeting. Pastor Wegner accompanied by Pastor Backer arrived at the church at 1:00 for the 1:30 meeting where they were invited to "present the Synod's position in the matters of controversy."⁷⁰ After this the details seem to be skewed by some bias opinions on both sides. The facts, however, are that the two Synod officials never even entered the church building. They remained outside. In a report given to Rev. Mueller, the synod officials claimed that a man would not allow the men to come into the church. He stood at the top of the steps until the meeting began, all the while shouting "insulting and abusive remarks about us from the church steps."⁷¹ The two men remained in their car until about 3:00 when they were met outside by about a dozen church members who said they had just left the congregation. They said that the first order of business for the meeting was to vote whether or not the Synod officials could enter

⁷⁰ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, "Report to President Mueller on trip to Whitehall – January 11, 1959."

⁷¹ Ibid.

the meeting. They voted in favor of having only members of the congregation vote. Then they voted whether Pastor Buege will remain as the pastor of St. Paul's. They voted in favor of retaining Pastor Buege 70-19.⁷²

More trouble started to brew when the newspapers found out about the results of the meeting. It seems, however, that not all the facts were correct in one of the newspaper articles. The LaCrosse Tribune wrote an article January 12, 1959, saying about the meeting on January 11th, "Officials of the church . . . said they would overlook the Rev. Mr. Buege's extending the vote to women, as other member congregations of the synod have been allowing women to vote prior to this."⁷³ Needless to say, when other Wisconsin Synod members from the LaCrosse area read in their morning paper that their church body had abandoned scriptural beliefs regarding the role of men and women, they were confused to say the least. They wanted to know if it was true that "officials of the synod are quoted as being willing to overlook the matter of women's suffrage because it is apparently in common vogue."⁷⁴ Pastor Wegner cleared up this matter in a letter verifying that "the article in the LaCrosse Tribune . . . is NOT based on any statement released to the press by representatives of our District."⁷⁵

For the next few weeks the public heard even more about this issue than they heard in the past. A series of letters and went back and forth from the Synod to Pastor Buege and St. Paul's for the next several weeks. On Feb. 23, 1959 the Synod wrote a letter of suspension to Pastor Buege stating,

You have given us no reason to believe that you will desist from the practices in which you have departed from accepted Lutheran practice. We refer especially to 1) your unionistic practice of Communion fellowship with pastors outside of the fellowship of the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, letter dated "January 13, 1959."

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, letter dated "January 14, 1959."

Lutheran Synodical Conference; and 2) your introduction and toleration of woman suffrage in your congregational practices.⁷⁶

The congregation, however, did not accept this suspension stating that the synod's action against their pastor was not "valid."⁷⁷ It seems that they felt as though the Synod did not have the right to do such a thing.

This however is not the case according to the Wisconsin Synod's constitution. Under article VII "Supervision of Doctrine and Practice" it reads:

The Synod accords the supervision over doctrine and practice of their members to the respective Districts . . . Any person who has been subjected to such discipline shall have the right to appeal to the Synod . . . Such case shall thereupon be reviewed on the basis of Christian principle and equity by a special Committee of Review . . . Until the Synod shall have taken final action, the decision of the District in which the case originated shall stand and shall be respected by all members of the Synod.⁷⁸

While this may be the policy of the Synod, the Synod can not physically stop the pastor and the members from continuing to meet in their own church building. So this suspension, in a sense, was not valid to Pastor Buege and to the members of St. John's and St. Paul's. They still continued to meet and will do so for a number of years.

There were a couple of attempts on the part of the congregation to meet with Synod officials to resolve these issues. One letter was sent by the congregation on April 6 and the other on April 20, 1959. Both letters requested a meeting in which the members of the Wisconsin Synod could explain the doctrinal statements to the congregations in order to settle the controversies once and for all. Those invited were the church councils of St. John's and St. Paul's, Rev. Mueller, Rev. Wegner and Rev. Paustian. What brought about these last two letters in an attempt at reconciliation is unknown. Perhaps a contrite heart, a hurting conscience or a

⁷⁶ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, letter dated "February 23, 1959."

⁷⁷ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, letter dated "March 9, 1959."

⁷⁸ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, "Wisconsin Lutheran Synod President Defends the Action of District Officials," p. 2.

feeling of synodical loyalty wrote those letters. Whatever the case, it seems as though the synod officials felt like they had already taken enough verbal abuse. This can be seen in the response of the synod officials to the aforementioned letters. There are some very harsh demands in this letter. This, however, does not excuse the other side. It seems this harsh letter is a reaction to months of public verbal abuse through the newspaper, radio, and television. It also seems to be a reaction to past negative dealings through one on one correspondence on the side of Pastor Buege or others in the congregations. The letter signed by Rev. Mueller, Rev. Wegner and Rev. Paustian written to Pastor Buege states,

Replying to your demanding invitation that we, the Presidium of the Western Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Synod, meet with you and your church council to further discuss with you the differences that separate us, we should like to state that all of your protestations notwithstanding, your suspension is valid and is being honored by all the Districts comprising our Wisconsin Synod and also in all areas of the Synodical Conference of North America. In no way may an acquiescence to your request on our part be construed as invalidating that suspension. However, because we are deeply concerned for your physical and spiritual wellbeing, we shall attempt to arrange a meeting with you on the following conditions:

- “1. That you publicly retract your condemnatory and inflammatory invectives against us such as:
 - 1) that we suspended you because of hatred and jealousy, which is sitting in judgment on our hearts and on our motives; . . .
 - 2) that your predecessors have carried on a campaign of hate in the congregations which you now serve, which has given them grave and great offense;
 - 3) that no one ever told you what the differences between the various Lutheran Synods are, which is casting aspersions on all of your consecrated Christian teachers and also upon our faculty at our seminary in Thiensville;
 - 4) That we are a disgrace to God and to the Church.
2. That you deliver to us for publication such a statement of your retraction of the above mentioned statements.
3. That you meet with us privately and not with your church council nor with your members, inasmuch as your suspension is valid, and inasmuch as any meeting with you is of a private and personal concern by us for you.
4. That you solemnly promise to refrain from reporting to the newspapers the purpose and progress of any meetings which may eventuate between you and us, since your news releases in the past have not served the best interests of the Church which our Lord Jesus bought with His most holy and precious blood.

Should you agree to the above conditions, we shall be only too happy to meet with you at a time and at a place which shall be designated by us.⁷⁹

The two sides, then, are this: Pastor Buege claimed that no one proved him wrong in his doctrinal stance regarding women's suffrage and fellowship with non-Wisconsin Synod Lutherans.⁸⁰ The synod officials claimed that Pastor Buege did not retract his public and private statements of false doctrine regarding the above issues. Therefore he was suspended and remained suspended.

Throughout the next month numerous letters were sent from Rev. Buege, St. Paul's and St. John's to numerous synod officials. They wanted to appeal the suspension of their pastor. As the above quote from the Synod's constitution stated, "Any person who has been subjected to such discipline shall have the right to appeal to the Synod."⁸¹ In order to do this, a district meeting had to have been held where the matter was discussed. Then the appeal would be taken to the Synod Convention. If the special district meeting would not be held to discuss this issue the matter could not be settled until the next Synod Convention, two years later.

It seems that synod officials thought it would be wiser to have a private meeting with Pastor Buege instead of addressing the matter of appealing the suspension. The meeting was held. That week the newspaper on June 3, 1959 said,

No settlement was made between the Rev. Richard L. Buege . . . and [synod officials] in a six-hour session. . . The meeting broke up without a settlement . . . The Rev. Buege said he offered to terminate his fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran pastors and take voting power away from the women again if the suspension were lifted and the apology made⁸²

⁷⁹ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, letter dated "April 28, 1959."

⁸⁰ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper clippings, p. 6, B.

⁸¹ WLS Archives, Buege Case File, "Wisconsin Lutheran Synod President Defends the Action of District Officials," p. 2.

⁸² The article later says this apology is to be given to Rev. Buege's wife, for "conducting an investigation of [Rev. Buege's] character recently." Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 10, E.

Whether or not this type of “bargaining” really did go on, or if the newspapers were inaccurate we don’t know for sure. The men never did come to an agreement and he remained suspended. The real issue is that this means the end of the Wisconsin Synod at St. John’s in Arcadia and St. Paul’s in Whitehall. On June 21, 1959, St. Paul’s Lutheran church voted 50-21 to leave the synod and “become independent rather than fight the presidium’s action.”⁸³ “Buege told church members that saving the church is more important than fighting the synod . . . Rev. Buege said Friday night’s action probably would be followed by the Arcadia church’s withdrawal from the synod.”⁸⁴ He was right. On June 21, 1959, the members of St. John’s Lutheran church voted 11-1 to leave the synod “and operate independently as Pastor Buege recommended.”⁸⁵

The result of this new found doctrinal freedom for these two congregations meant a change in their constitution and a complete change in doctrine. A newspaper article states, “The new constitution gives equal rights to both male and female members of the congregation. It provides that all members of the church are eligible to vote after they have been confirmed. . . . A provision in the constitution states that membership shall not be denied to people who belong to lodges. The church lost membership when it denied membership to lodge members back in 1944.”⁸⁶ This was St. Paul’s constitution, but one can imagine that St. John’s constitution was very similar.

St. John’s departure from the Wisconsin Synod left a lot of anger, as is seen by St. John’s letter of removal. It states in its entirety,

Attention: Oscar Naumann

⁸³ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 9, B.

⁸⁴ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 9, C.

⁸⁵ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 9, B.

⁸⁶ Cf. Addenda, Newspaper Clippings, p. 3, A.

The members of St. John's Lutheran Church have voted to leave the Wisconsin Synod. It was necessary for St. John's to leave the Wisconsin Synod because district officials of the Wisconsin Synod suspended our Pastor without proving that he had done anything wrong. The members of St. John's were never even told why their Pastor was suspended.

It is quite evident that you did nothing to correct the mistakes of the district officials! We are shocked that you did nothing to help St. Paul's during the recent controversy!

It is obvious to us from all that has happened during the recent months that the leaders of the Wisconsin Synod are nothing but selfish and godless dictators. The ministers of the Wisconsin Synod have to be afraid to stand up for what is right, because if they do, then the officials put them out of the church! Officials of the district and the Synod have made a complete departure from the Bible! Officials of the Wisconsin Synod have made man-made rules to take the place of the Bible! District and Synod Officials are a disgrace to God!

The date of St. John's leaving the Wisconsin Synod is to be as of October 3, 1958. In this way everything that you have done to Pastor Buege is of no meaning, because you have done it to a minister who was not even serving a Wisconsin Synod church!

Our constant hope and prayer will be that others will soon discover the anti-Scriptural teachings and practices of the Wisconsin Synod!⁸⁷

The Synod officially stated at the district convention,

In these evil days of laxity in doctrine and practice your Presidium during the past biennium was called upon to stand for purity of doctrine and practice in the so-called "Buege Case." Primarily, because of his rank unionism, and, secondarily, because of his having introduced and having tolerated woman suffrage in his congregations, Mr. Buege was suspended from our fellowship. In retaliation he withdrew from membership in our District and synod, making his withdrawal retroactive and prior to the date of his suspension, which action on his part, he declared, nullified our suspension notice, inasmuch as he had not been a member of our constituency at the time of his suspension – if we follow such reasoning. Subsequently the two congregations served by him also cancelled their membership with us, sympathizing with his stand. Thus our District need not review the case in question as we had hoped it would.⁸⁸

The congregations decided they would be independent. The official name of the congregation in Arcadia was St. John's Independent Lutheran Church.⁸⁹ In the history booklet

⁸⁷ Fiftieth Anniversary of the Building of the Church and Dedication of St. John's Independent Lutheran Church, Arcadia Public Library, Church History Files, (author unknown), 1960.

⁸⁸ Proceedings from 22 Biennial Convention of W W District June 13-16, 1960, pp 12-13.

⁸⁹ In 1959, Rev. Buege took on an additional congregation. Evanger Lutheran Church, in rural Independence, was looking for a pastor after theirs retired. They were not affiliated with any congregation or

written at the anniversary of the building and dedication of St. John's, it states, "We sincerely hope and pray that many people will join our church and that many will return now that we are an Independent Lutheran Congregation."⁹⁰ Most importantly it continues, "We place our hope for the future in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."⁹¹ Through an amazing number of spiritual distractions the congregation regained its focus on Jesus.

The members in these two congregations obviously went through a great deal of emotional and, even worse, spiritual distress. Both congregations lost many members through this ordeal. Finally in 1962, the congregation decided to disband. Financially they could not keep the doors of the church open.⁹² On November 25, 1962, the property was deeded over to the American Lutheran Church in Arcadia.⁹³ St. Paul's congregation in Whitehall joined the Missouri Synod after Pastor Buege left the congregation. They are in the Missouri Synod to this day.

It can be said that the worst thing that happened through all this was that St. John's disbanded. It is this writer's opinion, however, that the most harmful damage was done in the public press. Newspaper, radio, and even television covered the situation going on in Arcadia and Whitehall. Throughout all the verbal abuse and accusations, only the Lord knows how many Wisconsin Synod members began to question the synod they loved because of the publicity of this event. Only the Lord knows how many people began to doubt the very scriptural doctrines

denomination. At the present they are Independent and alternate services with Lookout Lutheran Church in Lookout, WI. Rev. Buege served at Evanger until he left the area in 1962. (Interview with Ardell Schroeder, Jean Schroeder and Rachel Herman, Whitehall, Wisconsin, 16 July 2005).

⁹⁰ Fiftieth Anniversary of the Building of the Church and Dedication of St. John's Independent Lutheran Church, (author unknown), 1960.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Interview with Lee Wieland, , Phone Interview, 4 August 2005.

⁹³ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives, File: St. John Ev. Lutheran Church (1886-1959) Arcadia WI, "American Lutheran Church: 1875-1975." This church is the congregation in Arcadia formerly known as St. John's-Christ and presently known as Christ Lutheran. The inside front cover of the record books show this transaction. (Cf. addenda "Record of St. John's as a WELS congregation 1936-1960.) p. 1.

they had come to rely on. Only the Lord knows how many people in the area were turned off by Christianity and didn't want to have anything to do with it after seeing this "civil war" of Christians. And so was the focus taken off of Jesus?

There has never been a Christian congregation on this earth which did not have its share of struggles at one time or another. Christian congregations have endured arguments about everything from the color of carpet for the new church coat room, to the decision to build a new church. Members have left Christian congregations for reasons stretching from disagreements with the pastor to so called "boring" worship services. While all of these issues are items that need to be dealt with in their own way, nothing can ever take the primary focus of the congregation off of Jesus and the work of proclaiming the gospel. When gospel work is hindered because of these comparably unimportant issues, then the devil has accomplished his goal. He works to blur the focus of the congregation from Jesus until he is completely out of sight.

Is this what happened to St. John's? Did the devil come away with the victory? St. John's may have lost its focus from time to time throughout its history, just as any other Christian congregation might do when problems arrive, but that does not mean that the devil won the victory. Jesus won the victory 2000 years ago when he died on the cross and washed away the sins of this world. Jesus proved his victory when he rose from the dead on Easter morning. Just because the members of St. John's were no longer able to worship at the church they grew up in, does not mean they lost that focus as they continued in their lives after St. John's closed. They kept their eyes focused on Jesus even though their church building was no longer occupied as a place of worship. However many church buildings the devil may claim as his victim, the

church still remains in the hearts of God's people. So while St. John's Evangelical Lutheran congregation no longer remains, the focus and the message remain.

For the almost hundred years of the church's existence it served its purpose. The members and pastors proclaimed the gospel. Only the Lord knows how many people were touched by the powerful gospel message that was preached in the pulpit. Only the Lord knows how many children from St. John's shared the message of Jesus with their friends who never heard of Jesus. Only the Lord knows how many souls were saved throughout all the years of St. John's ministry. Pastor Buege wisely stated about this congregation, "While the church was around it served its purpose. The church accomplished what it should have in teaching God's Word."⁹⁴ While St. John's no longer exists, the message of Jesus Christ that predominated in the pastors and members of St. John's for so many years still exists in the hearts of people around the world.

⁹⁴ Interview with Richard Buege, Phone Interview, 26 July 2005.

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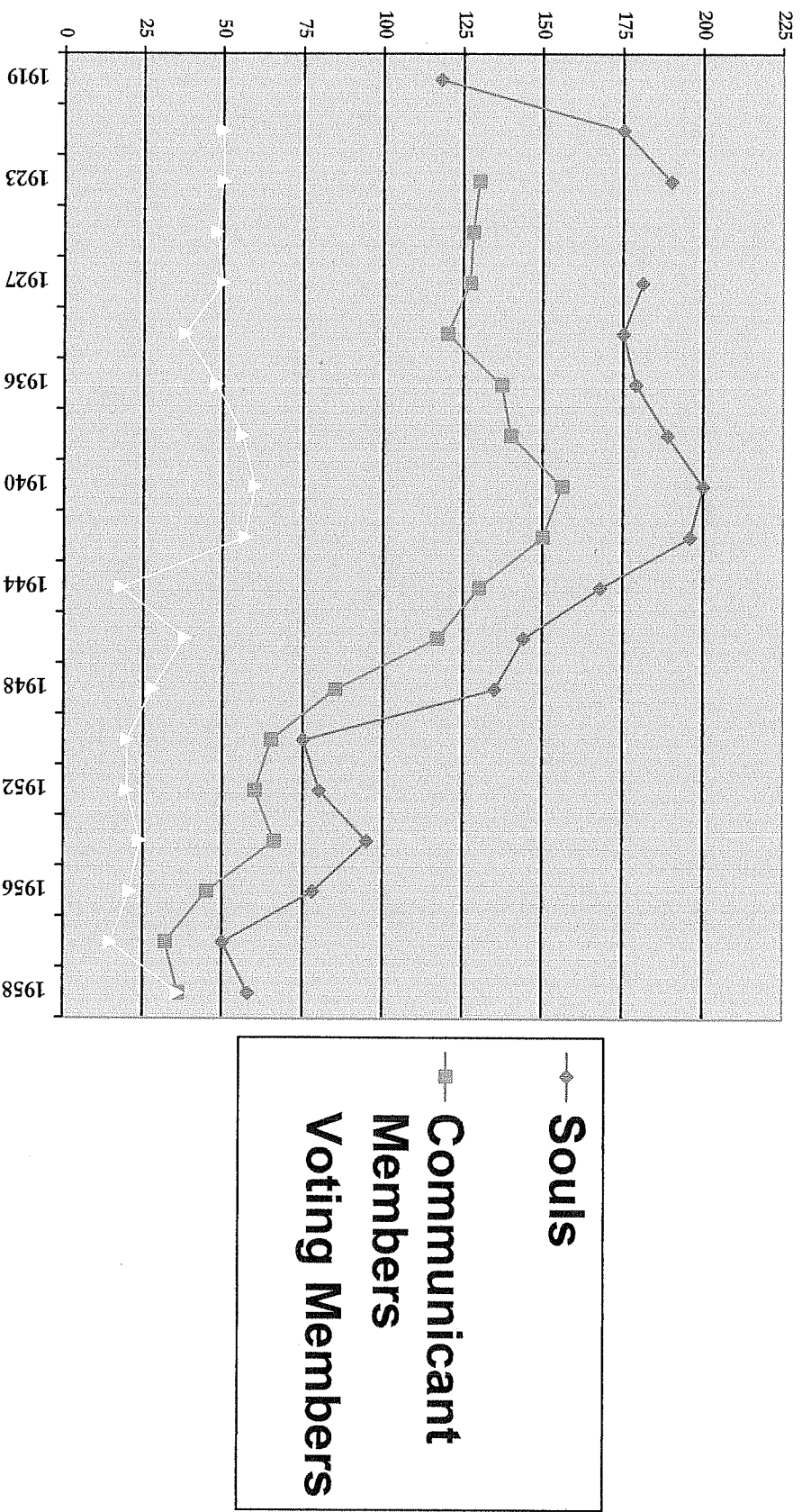
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- Statistics were taken from the "Parochial Reports of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States" from the years 1919-1958.
- Area where there is no line between years shows no information available.