ST. MATTHEW'S EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH, OCONOMOWOC, WI.:
"A Struggling and Blessed Congregation from the Start"

Senior Church History
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May 28, 1991 By John D. Roekle Wiscoasin Lutheran Seminary Library 11831 W. Seminary Drive. 65W Maguon, Wisconsin When reflecting on the past, we tend to remember the "good old days," or nothing at all. As time wears on, our minds tend to distort the fac_ts. The good we experienced tends to be glorified while the bad we experienced seems worse. There is no question that the first 10 years of St. Matthew's Ev. Lutheran Church in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, were turbulent. The very forming of St. Matthew's was the result of a congregational split. Several of those first 10 years were marked with troubles of some kind. Congregational meetings were often disorderly, errupting in arguments. The newly formed congregation saw its own members split as well. The called workers of St. Matthew's resigned from their positions. Because of these circumstances, it would be easy for a member of St. Matthew's to want to forget those trying years. After all, it seems like only bad memories were made during that decade.

It is wise when we dig into the past to learn from the mistakes that made that portion of history seem dim. Optimists however will tell you that the glass is half-full of water, that there is a positive side to history as well. Sometimes it may not be so obvious, but sometimes the bad memories tend to cover the good up, even though it is right in front of our faces. St. Matthew's first ten years seem all bad, but one does not have to dig very deep before he discovers that there is a positive side to the story. This author cannot deny that the first decade of Oconomowoc's St. Matthew's had its down side. This part of the story that we would rather forget will be stressed in the first part of this paper. The understanding of the negative side will help us see why the

positive side often takes a back seat. That positive side will then serve as the second part and the main emphasis of this paper. We will want to see how God has guided history in the many blessings he has bestowed on St. Matthew's which have served as a solid foundation for nearly 7 decades.

A NEW CONGREGATION

The families that formed St. Matthew's were originally a part of the first Lutheran church in Oconomowoc, St. Paul's, which today is a part of the Missouri Synod. Fifty two former St. Paul's members gathered at the residence of E.O.E. Ottopan on April 19th, 1922 to form a new church. At that first meeting they stated their reasoning for the split:

We separate for conscience' sake: That which binds our conscience, first and foremost the utterly Unchristian procedure against our Pastor and teachers in inferring and finally sustaining wholly unstable [charges], if not figmentary charges against them, to wit: "Proven willful unfaithfulness in the performance of his office" (In Pastor's case) and "Guilty of mishandling school moneys coming into his custody" (In teacher's case); in discharging them upon such grounds; and ultimately in affecting their removal by invoking the civil courts against them, and this against the conscientious objections of a large minority.

History cannot always make clear what really happened in certain situations. The controversy that caused the dismissal of the pastor and teachers does not seem as if it should have caused a split, but again we cannot account for all details as well as th feelings and actions of the parties involved. A brief history of St. Paul's congregation gives us a good summary of the facts, as well as what appears to have happened.

In 1921, 3 years after Rev. W.P. Hass was installed as the seventh pastor, a routine committee report at an annual meeting at St. Paul's triggered a storm that reached the Wisconsin Supreme Court. An audit showed financial discrepanceies.

Apparently a case of poor record keeping, the congregation accepted apologies of the parties involved and the incident was to be forgotten. However, the matter ignited dissension that had been simmering for some time.

While the particulars are now shrouded in the past (or graciously covered in silence) the Wisconsin Synod felt it necessary to call in an arbitration team. The Synod's team failed to bring peace and the congregation voted to releive Pastor Hass and Teacher Jaeger of their duties. Divisiveness reached the point where the group of families who relieved the pastor and teacher worshiped in the church proper while the opposition group worshiped on the front steps outside the church. The matter went to court where, in December, 1921, the court upheld the congregation's action. Early in 1922 the Wisconsin Supreme Court, acting on an appeal, decided to uphold the lower court's decision.

It was the teacher H.A. Jaeger, who had some of the duties as treasurer when a discrepancy of a relatively small sum of money was discovered. Pastor W.P. Hass sided with his teacher. Even though the dispute does not seem as if it should have gotten past the annual meeting at St. Paul's, the controversy was blown way out of proportion. Along with relieving Hass and Jaeger of their duties, the congregation voted to relieve Miss Edna Fritz (the other teacher at St. Paul's) of her duties.

You can imagine what effects a controversy like this one must have had. There were hard feelings on both sides of th fence, especially considering the fact that they went to the extent of having the courts settle this dispute.

THE PROTES'TANT CONTROVERSY

Time often helps heal or at least subdue hard feelings. St.

Matthew's was in existence for about 2 years when another controversy began to brew. This time the controversy began outside St. Matthew's and the young congregation became involved in it. The Western Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Synod was the starting place of what has been known as the Protes'tant Controversy.

This controversy was ignited by an incident at Northwestern College beginning on March 28, 1924. It was on that date that the tutors there discovered a thieving ring, that **co**nsisted of 27 boys. Three days later, the faculty discussed the situation all day, and finally settled on punishments for the boys. The punishments included expulsion for some.

The conflict began when President Kowalke of Northwestern informed the board of control of the actions they had taken. Parents of the boys had already appealed to the board, and to President Kowalke "it at once became apparent that the board would not support the faculty. It also became apparent that the faculty would not yield an inch."

The board did have the ultimate power in regard to expulsion, even though they hadn't used it in several years. After a few weeks of conflict, the board overruled the faculty. This moved two professors to submit their resignations. The two professors volunteered their services for the remainder of the year, but the board also overruled that decision. This added fuel to the fire, especially considering that one of the resigning professors had "a minimal tolerance for synodical officials." It is phrases like this that may help us better understand the Protes'tant uprising.

This incident was coupled together with another incident which took place relatively close to Watertown, in Fort Atkinson.

Two young lady teachers, Miss Gerda Koch and Miss Elizabeth Reuter, of St. Paul's school, Fort Atkinson, critisized the congregation and its pastor in such outspoken terms that they were disciplined by the church council. Their case in due time arrived on the desk of the District president, and soon after that the District took sides, the alignment being about the same as in the Watertown case. The "third party" defended the girls. 7

The two lady teachers had been accusing the congregation of sins that were actually adiaphora, and rebelled by not participating in church functions. It got to the point where they received calls to teach in Marshfield, but the congregation refused to give them an honorable dismissal. This moved the girls to appeal to the District, who would side with the congregation. There were several pastors who would side with the girls, because of the problem they called "officialdom."

When the District convention at Beaver Dam in 1926 approved the actions of its officials, fifteen pastors and two laymen protested. They admitted that the girls had sinned, but objected on complicated procedural grounds. The district officials, they said, had intervened in the case before the Fort Atkinson church had completed its discipline according to the Biblical injunctions of Matthew 18.

This controversy in Fort Atkinson coupled with the Watertown case helped build up the opposition known as the Protes'tants. But it has been said that without yet another incident, the Protes'tant Conference would probably not have been formed.

That incident was the giving of the Beitz Paper. William Beitz presented his paper entitled, "God's Message to Us in Galatians:

The Just Shall Love by Faith, at the Wisconsin River Valley conference at Schofield in September, 1926, and a second time at the mixed conference at Rusk in October."

The paper was controversial because of the heavy criticism it made against pastors and professors of the Synod.

A critique of the Beitz paper, known as the <u>Gutachten</u>, was prepared by the Seminary faculty. This however did not satisfy the supporters of the Beitz paper. At a Western Wisconsin District meeting in Watertown in 1927, Pastor Beitz attempted to defend

his paper, but failed. The District rejected the paper and resolved to suspend all supporters of the paper.

The answer of the dissidents was the "Elroy Declaration," signed by thirteen pastors and sixteen laymen. They refused categorically to appear before any committee, either of the Synod or the District because:

- 1) they had no further time for fruitless dealings;
- 2) the committee had all the necessary information or could easily procure it;
- 3) The District at its Beaver Dam and Watertown conventions had been guilty of "unheard of godlessness";
- 4) "Over against you we unreservedly take our stand on the Beitz paper and intend to persist in doing so."
 They added: "We shall by ready to deal only if the resolutions of Beaver Dam and Watertown are rescinded, all cases are reopened as new cases, and Synod thereby shows a new attitude which might give hope of profitable dealings." This virtually made the breach irreparable.

Unfortunately the gap between the Protes'tants and the Synod did widen. There were some fourty pastors and teachers, as well as a small number of congregations that sided with the Protes'tants. The gap grew, mainly because the Protes'tants "had themselves assumed a defiant, dismissive stance long before there was any threat of suspensions. They had also made no secret of their conviction that the Synod was under the judgment of God and in a state of obduracy."

A STRUGGLING CONGREGATION

By now, the reader who is unfamilar with St. Matthew's history may be wondering what significance the Protes'tant contoversy has at St. Matthew's. Members of the congregation along with Pastor Hass became involved eventually, taking the side of the Protes'tants.

The first that this matter was brought publicly to the congregation was at a special meeting on December 4th of 1927. The reason for the meeting was "for the purpose of discussing matters in regard to talk following out of a meeting held at Watertown by

the West Wisconsin District of Synod of Wisconsin and other States."

The Gemeindeblatt containing the report of the District meeting was read, and the congregation requested that Pastor Hass would ask

Pastor Beitz for several copies of his contoversial paper.

Hass himself relates to readers of <u>Faith-Life</u> (the Protes'tants official publication) that there was more to the December 4th meeting than the minutes reveal. He said that at the beginning of the meeting he gave them information conerning the Synod controversy. Hass also relates to his readers how the matter was brought up to the congregation.

As far as I am able to recollect, **I** had thus far never related anything about the Synod controversy to St. Matthew's directly and publicly, aside from a mere mention of some of the happenings at the last J.S.C. meeting in October, 1927, to the church council. Due to my attendance at this committee meeting I had inadvertently slipped up on one of our council meetings during those days and thus felt duty-bound to explain to the council regarding my whereabouts. And my impression then was that my short story was welcomed with interest and accepted in good faith." 14

On April 22nd of 1928 a regular quarterly meeting was held at which time an outburst by one of the members against Rev. Hass was witnessed. The congregation decided at this time to have a meeting with the Synod to explain matters. 15

By now it became evident that a division was forming within the congregation. A special congregational meeting held on June 3rd, revealed this fact. Rev. Hass read a notice from the North-western Lutheran concerning his suspension from the Synod. At this time a member made a motion that the **Co**ngregation decide whether to stay with the Synod or side with Rev. Hass. A long and heated discussion followed. It was revealed during the course of this meeting that several members of the church council held a secret

meeting at a member's home. Also present at that secret meeting were District officials, including District President Thurow. When this information was brought out, one of the more vocal members (at whose house the secret meeting was held) stood up and loudly asserted, "We ousted him [Hass] there at that meeting." After this occurred, it was discovered that there was yet another secret meeting at another member's home in January with Rev. Thurow and two other pastors.

On June 8th, just five days after the previous meeting, it became evident just how big of a division there was in the congregation. That day, 86 members signed a petition protesting several things. They claimed that their rights as members were denied, and that they had not given Synod officials a chance to help resolve this at a previous meeting. Their protest was also against those members who refused to vote on the motion whether to remain with Rev. Hass or the Synod. They also went as far as stating:

"we can no longer remain as members of said congregation as long as Rev. Hass functions as pastor of this congregation."

The group that did remain with Hass met on July 15, 1928.

Here the June 8th petition was read, and a committee was formed to deal with the signers of the petition.

But the gap between the two St. Matthew's groups grew. At a meeting on April 21st of 1929, it was brought to the attention of the voters that copies of a letter dated February 18th were sent to those members signing a petition. At that same meeting it was brought out that one of the petitioners had sent a complaint to the circuit court against Pastor Hass.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library 11831 M. Seminary Orive. 66W Mequon, Wisconsin In the meantime Rev. Hass had submitted his resignation. The congregation on November 10th, 1929 voted not to accept his resignation. In a meeting during the spring of 1930, the members of St. Matthew's finally accepted the resignation of Pastor Hass.

When Hass was summoned to appear in court (due to the compaint of one of the petitioners), he wrote a letter in defense of himself stating that he had not given in to false doctrine, but that his downfall was "not upholding the synodical machine, not joining in with, shout 'My Synod, right or wrong, but always my Synod.'"

This was the feeling of Hass and the other Protes'tants, that somehow the "government" of the Synod interfered too much with congregational affairs. Hass' bitterness against "the synodical machine" is evident in several other writings of his.

Within the congregation, a voter's assembly on July 6, 1930, determined that all ties with the Wisconsin Synod were to be severed. At the end of the next month, one of the petitioners asked the congregation if the "Community Hall group" (the name by which the petitioners became known) could worship at St. Matthew's chapel. Permission was denied by the congregation.

By July of the next year (1931), the congregation had voted to call a Protes'tant minister. They even extended a call to Pastor Hass for a time. 23

Another devastating blow to the young congregation took place on September 13, 1931. Teacher H.A. Jaeger's resignation was read, and the school was forced to shut down. 24 Things seemed bleak for St. Matthew's at this point!

THE TURN-AROUND

The picture painted to this point has not been pretty, but St. Matthew's would not sink any lower. A genuine turn-around would take place in a relatively short amount of time.

The call sent to Rev. Hass was rescinded in a November 15th meeting, and a motion passed in regard to re-joining the Wisconsin Synod. Another request by the "Community Hall group" to use the chapel was allowed this time. It was also decided at this meeting that their ministerial needs could temporarily be met "from Watertown or elsewhere."

At a congregational meeting in January (1932), they decided to have a meeting with Synod officials. This meeting took place on February 9, 1932. Representatives from both the Synod and the Protes'tant side were present, to give both sides of the controversy that had affected St. Matthew's for several years. This long and somewhat disorderly meeting seemed to produce nothing for the good of the congregation. ²⁶

Just under a month later on March 6th the congregation assembled again after the Church Council met to write up recommendations to the members. A motion was now made to accept the recommendation concerning the calling of a minister from the Wisconsin Synod. 27 Their motion and prayers were answered when Rev. Norbert Paustian began his work in September of 1932, fresh from the the Seminary.

THE CHURCH

The majority of what has been written to this point has been negative (except for the last section of paragraphs). There is however many positive things that came out of those first ten years.

One of those things was the physical aspect of the church.

The newly formed St. Matthew's did not sit stagnant and sulk in self pity. Instead they actively sought to find a home for themselves. At the very first congregational meeting on April 19, 1922, provisions were made for the newly elected trustees to go in search of suitable property. During the next meeting in early May, the trustees were again instructed to seek a proper site, and were also "empowered to rent a suitable home for the pastor." 28

The daughter of Teacher H.A. Jaeger, Elizabeth Jaeger Lind, recalls that the congregation held services at first at different places "such as the City Hall, upstairs at the what was then the First National Bank, above Welch's Hardware store, etc."

Then on July 9th, this is recorded in the minutes: "Mr. Shepherd of the Alexander Lumber Co. was present. He explained prices and construction of their portable chapel to the congregation." The voters then went on to empower the church council to purchase a chapel. 30 It appears that the chapel was purchased shortly after this meeting and was placed on the property where St. Matthew's is presently located. The next few years of congregational minutes, give witness to activity in improving the chapel. Chairs were purchased on a couple occassions. German and English Hymn books were also bought. A couple members donated a bell, and painting and decorating the walls were done. A new pipe organ was bought from Schaefer Organ Co. of Slinger. 31 It was dedicated on January 22, 1928. 32

Elizabeth Jaeger Lind gives us a taste of what that chapel was like.

It was a portable building acquired from camp McCoy where, I believe, it had also been used as a chapel. The seats in the chapel were not pews, they were like theatre seats... It had basement only under a portion where the altar was. That's where the furnace was. In the hot summer it became very, very hot in the chapel. Bill Dally told me that when he ushered he used to bring along a big bottle of water from the school to help revive anyone who fainted from the heat. There was no water piped to the church.... There was a little house on the property which the congregation rented out. It stood next to the chapel. At that time the church property extended to the lake. 33

In later years as the congregation grew, it became necessary to build a new church. The new building was dedicated in 1952.

The old chapel has since served the needs of Redemption in Milwaukee, and presently is the worship facility for Our Savior's in Grafton.

THE SCHOOL

It is very clear that having a school was of utmost importance to the congregation. A school board was elected at the first congregational meeting, and by July 9, 1922, the go-ahead to build a school was given. "Resolved to build a permanent two room school as drawn by the architect Mr. J.F. Dreger. The outside measurements to be 31' 10" by 68' 8"." 34

To get a taste of the original school we again turn to the recollections of Elizabeth Jaeger Lind.

The congregation was very "day-school minded." The first thing they did was erect a school or make plans for it so the children would be taken care of. Many members pitched in to help.... The school had 2 large classrooms and 1 small classroom— and 2 large basement rooms for recreation.... He [her father] also kept the furnace going in the winter, walking over to school in the morning to get the stoker going, then coming home for breakfast, and then going back again to teach.... The teachers and children did at least some of the janitor work— we were assigned to stay after school to clean blackboards and to sweep out classrooms.

The old 2-room school building was replaced in 1962 by a larger facility. Increased enrollment led to the addition of a second floor in 1972.

The school originally housed students in grades 1 to 9. Edna Fritz taught grades 1-4; H.A. Jaeger taught grades 5-8 and some 9th grade classes; and Pastor Hass taught the remaining 9th grade classes. During these forming years, an annual children's Christman program was established.

The attitude of the congregation as to the importance of Christian education reflected on the children. In 1931, when the school was closed for a year, Rev. Hass recalls: "The school was not opened on the set date. A small group of anxious children felt wounded in [the] heart."

The importance of Christian education has continued through the years with the members at St. Matthew's. The school grew from 22 students and 1 teacher in 1934 and peaked at 167 students and 7 teachers in 1973. The enrollment has since leveled off at 124 students and 8 teachers in 1990.

FOUNDED ON THE WORD

The biggest blessing during those first 10 years, was not the church building or the school building. The most important blessing to come through that decade, was the Word of God and its importance in the lives of the members.

The congregation set up a constitution at its second meeting in May of 1922. There were 3 Articles contained in that original constitution: I. Name; II. Articles of Faith; III. Membership.

The second article is of special significance to us here.

ARTICLE II-- Articles of Faith
This congregation accepts and confesses all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, and all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, as a correct presentation and true exposition of Christian doctrine, drawn from, and in full agreement with the Holy Scriptures; hence no doctrine is to be taught or tolerated in this

congregation which is in any degree at variance with the following symbols of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, viz:

1) The Three Ecumenical Creeds -- The Apostolic, Nicene, and the Athanasian; 2) The Unaltered Augsburg Confession; 3) The Apology of the same; 4) The Smalcald Articles; 5) Luther's Catechisms, the Large and Small; 6) The Formula of Concord. And we set forth that according to this norm of doctrine

And we set forth that according to this norm of doctrine and faith all controversies which may arise in this congregation are to be decided and adjusted. ³⁹

The wording has changed somewhat in today's constitution, but the content and meaning of this article has remained the same throughout the church's existence.

Within God's Word is the exhortation to preach the good news of salvation! Through the various writings concerning St. Matthew's, it has become evident to this writer that this has certainly been done. For one thing: "The congregation had a fairly large and very good choir." ⁴⁰ At several meetings new members were accepted. The congregation also showed feeling toward the great commission by establishing a Mission Festival in 1928.

The size of St. Matthew's has also increased greatly over the years. There were 52 members present at the initial meeting in 1922. The number of baptized souls in the 1934 Synod Statistical Report was 214. That number steadily and at times rapidly increased. By 1950 there were 520 souls in the congregation and 1002 by 1963. The total peaked at 1339 in 1977 and has leveled off to 1261 in 1990.

Numbers certainly can't tell the whole story, but what we can see from these numbers is that God has graciously blessed

St. Matthew's. The means behind those blessings is the Word that

St. Matthew's was founded on and is surrounded by.

The ministry of that Word was faithfully carried out by Pastor

Norbert Paustian from 1932 until his death in 1977. Pastor Kent Schroeder was his successor and is serving St. Matthew's to this day. Four vicars served under Pastor Schroeder until the congregation felt it necessary to add another full-time ordained minister. Early in 1990, Pastor David Hein became the associate pastor at St. Matthew's.

In Pastor Hass' history of St. Matthew's as he reflected on his years he served there and the years since, he wrote these words: "But it seems and all the more as time wears on, that the prophecy of the Master is again going into fulfillment with everincreasing momentum: 'The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.'" 43

Reflecting on the years that St. Matthew's has existed, we can only conclude that Hass' statement is far from the reality of the situation. Even through some very difficult times, God remained with St. Matthew's as he blessed them through that first decade and as he continues to bless them today!

ENDNOTES

- $^{
 m 1}$ Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p.1
- ²Ibid. p. 1-2.
- ³Short History of St. Paul's of Oconomowoc. "The Valley of the Shadow of Death". 1915-1940.
- Kiessling, E.C. The History of the Western Wisconsin District. p. 12.
- ⁵Ibid. p. 13.
- ⁶<u>Ibid</u>. p. 14-15.
- ⁷<u>Ibid</u>. p. 16.
- ⁸Ibid. p. 19.
- ⁹Ibid. p. 22.
- ¹⁰<u>Ibid</u>. p. 24.
- ¹¹<u>Ibid</u>. p. 25.
- 12 Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p. 66
- 13 <u>Ibid</u>. p. 66-67.
- ¹⁴W.P. Hass. Faith-Life Supplement. p. 9.
- Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p. 72-74.
- 16 <u>Ibid</u>. p. 75-78.
- 17 Petition Letter of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Members. June 8, 1928.
- Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p.79-80.
- ¹⁹Ibid. p. 91-92.
- ²⁰Ibid. p. 99, 108.
- W.P. Hass. "Defendant's Answer to Summons and Complaint of Gustav Timmel, Plantiff". April 27, 1930.
- Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p. 111-113.
- ²³<u>Ibid</u>. p. 124.
- 24 <u>Ibid</u>. p. 127.
- ²⁵<u>Ibid</u>. p. 132-135.

- ²⁶Ibid. p. 147-158.
- ²⁷Ibid. p. 158-164.
- ²⁸Ibid. p. 4,9.
- ²⁹ Elizabeth Jaeger Lind. "Personal Recollections". July 18, 1981.
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- 31 <u>Ibid</u>. p. 65.
- 32W.P. Hass. Faith- Life Supplement, p. 11.
- 33 Elizabeth Jaeger Lind.
- ³⁴Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p.13.
- 35 Elizabeth Jaeger Lind.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37W.P. Hass. Faith-Life Supplement, p. 18.
- 38 Statistical Reports of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod.
- Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p. 6-7.
- 40 Elizabeth Jaeger Lind.
- ⁴¹Minutes of St. Matthew's of Oconomowoc Congregational Meetings, p. 84.
- 42 Statistical Reports of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod.
- 43W.P. Hass. Faith-Life Supplement, p. 20.

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