

This is the Will of God:
The construction of St. John's Wauwatosa's second school building

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The Context

At the time when thoughts of a new school building were first forming, St. John's was already well experienced in Christian education.

St. John's Lutheran School began in 1882, the same year the congregation was organized and the first church building with school annex was constructed. By 1888, the school had outgrown the annex and a two-story, two-classroom building was constructed south of the church at a cost of \$3,000. A third classroom was added to the building in 1929 when the original church building was replaced with the present Gothic style building.¹

This school building served the congregation well for over sixty years. However, as St. John's drew near to the 1950s, problems with the building began to surface. The building was described as "dreary, dark and poorly ventilated."² Its construction lent to potential dangers, as well. When recalling the building years later upon the dedication of the succeeding school building, it was noted that "many thanked God for keeping fire from raging through that old building of dry wood and many coats of paint until a new building was ready for the children."³

As the congregation entered the 1950s, the need for a new building was growing. As the church looked to the questions regarding the future of Christian education at St. John's, they found a key answer in a location with a rich past.

The Fingado Purchase

This location was directly across the street from the church, 7751 Harwood Avenue. Originally, the lot belonged to one Charles Fingado, a key figure in the history of both St. John's and Wauwatosa.

¹ Information taken from "A Brief History of St. John's Lutheran School" written in June 2002 by Norbert M. Manthe.

² Quote from dedication program of St. John's second school, September 14, 1958.

³ Quote from "A Century with Christ – Our Heritage to Share", 1982.

Charles Fingado was born to a son of Italian nobility, Frederick Fingado, in 1841 in Lahr, Germany. In 1843 Charles' father ventured to America to find a new location for his family to settle. However, after reaching Missouri, his father contracted yellow fever and died before he could send for his wife and son.

In 1853 Charles' mother remarried and immigrated to New York. In the autumn of 1854, the family moved to Milwaukee. Two years later they relocated once again to a farm in the town of Wauwatosa.

When the Civil War broke out, Charles Fingado enlisted as a private in the 24th Infantry Regiment, Company E of the Wisconsin Volunteers. Fingado and Company were sent to Kentucky where they saw battlefield action, including a stint in the battle of Stone River, December 30, 1862 to January 2, 1863, under the command of General Philip Sheridan.

Following the battle, Fingado and the rest of General Rosecrans' army were held for 5-1/2 months at Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Exposure to the winter cold and wet spring produced disease in many of the troops, including Fingado. On March 26, 1863 he was honorably discharged by reason of a surgeon's certificate of disability.

Fingado returned home to Wauwatosa, got married, and decided to start a butcher shop. On March 27, 1867 he purchased a 3/4 acre lot on United States Road (now Harwood Avenue) for \$700. Originally, the land was part of a 160-acre tract obtained by Charles Hart under a territorial grant approved on August 5, 1839 by Governor Henry Dodge. On September 14, 1843 Hart gave two mortgages on the land and on a house on the property to Oliver P. Root. The house was included in Fingado's purchase in 1867, the basement of which was converted into a butcher shop.

Fingado would go on to influence both church and state. In 1868 he was elected treasurer of the Town of Wauwatosa. From 1867 to 1881 he was chairman of the town board of

supervisors. In 1882 he was elected to the Wisconsin Assembly from the eleventh district of Milwaukee County, and in 1896 he was the president of the Village of Wauwatosa. In regards to church, he was one of 24 charter members in 1882 that founded St. John's Lutheran Church across from his property.

After his death in 1901 from blood poisoning brought about by a leg injury, his son operated the butcher shop. In 1913 he sold the building to Adolph Becker who converted the store into a delicatessen. Over the course of the next 37 years, the building would be occupied by the Wauwatosa Beer Depot and later by Carl Heaviland Builders.

Though the use of the building changed over the years, the building itself and the land it was situated on remained in the hands of the Charles Fingado Estate. Such was the case in 1950 when St. John's purchased the land for \$20,000 from Fingado's remaining surviving heirs – his daughters Lydia Herwig and Alma Nickel as well as Bernice Dix, Leona Gatton, and Emma L. Shiells. The purchase gave St. John's the area to expand. The decision to build on that land, however, would prove to be a difficult issue for the congregation to wrestle with.

The Reports of the Building Plans Committee, April 1952

To aid the congregation in facing the challenges and opportunities in its immediate future, a motion was passed at the first-quarter congregational meeting in 1952 to form a committee to investigate future building projects for the congregation. The committee, as appointed by congregational president Theodore Kunz, consisted of John Wendorf, Roger Hoffman, William Knack, Walter Yeaeger, Carl Witschonke, and Robert Kuchler. In their own words, the committee “operated on the premise that it was charged with the responsibility of investigating all of the facts surrounding future plans that would insure the congregation of St.

John's Ev. Lutheran Church of having an adequate school, parsonage and teacherage, including a method by which the congregation can provide adequate quarters for the Junior Pastor."⁴

The committee held its first meeting on February 22, 1952, and proceeded to meet once a week for nine consecutive weeks. They summarized their duty in four steps: 1. To investigate the costs of a wide range of school construction types. 2. To perform numerous inspections of the school, parsonage, and teacherage to determine their condition. 3. To review reports by governmental agencies concerning improvements to be made to the school and recommendations for building a new school. 4. To send out a school census or survey to determine what inadequacies were present.

At the conclusion of their investigations in April 1952, the committee presented a report to the congregation of their findings. Besides recommending the purchase of a home for the Junior Pastor, the committee advised the congregation to "make immediate plans to build a new school."⁵ They presented the following list of deficiencies in the existing school building:

The present school building is lacking hot water in both the boys' and girls' washrooms. In addition, they need more wash stands and fairly extensive remodeling. Weather stripping of all doors and windows is necessary. The electrical wiring and lighting system needs to be completely renovated for safety and adequate lighting. It is also a necessity to install a fire exit door in the lower class room and to provide a good heating and ventilating system.⁶

The governmental agencies concurred in these findings. As the committee noted, "actually, the school will not be allowed to open again this fall unless extensive repairs are made or an extension can be acquired through demonstration to the authorities that steps are being taken to construct a new school."⁷ The committee also noted that repairs of the existing problems in the school would cost around \$11,500 and still leave the building ill equipped for

⁴ Quote taken from "Building Plans Committee Report", April 1952, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁶ Ibid., p. 2

⁷ Ibid., p. 2

education in the long run. A new school of minimum standard low-cost construction would cost around \$130,000, while a structure of high grade construction conforming to the architecture of the church would run \$240,000 and up. The committee proposed that the congregation perform minimum maintenance on the old school to keep it running for approximately three years, while appointing a committee to formulate and execute a program to raise half of the total funds needed for a new school by means of a three year special drive to commence that fall. The costs of either repair to the old building or the construction of a new building would be a serious challenge to the congregation.

A further challenge was uncovered in the school survey. Of the 46 surveys returned, fifty-four percent of the families were either not planning or unsure whether they would send their children to a Christian day school. Also, sixty-two percent of the families reported living two or more miles from the church. Though this distance might not sound great to the ears of one living in the mobile society of the 2000s, in 1952 this distance could pose a problem. The number of multiple car families was few, and transporting children back and forth from school with one's own vehicle could provide a significant challenge to families.

As a result, the committee recommended that the congregation "make further investigation of the possibility of a school bus service to ascertain the feasibility of working out a route that would serve a substantial number of the children in the congregation."⁸ The committee also noted that they were investigating the possibility of a consolidated school.

In the end, the April 1952 report frankly presented both the problems and challenges facing St. John's Congregation in regards to ongoing Christian education. It was still to be seen how the congregation would respond.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2

The Reports of the Building Plans Committee, July 28, 1952

In the Building Plans Committee's second report, the message was proclaimed even more clearly: the congregation must act now to preserve Christian education at St. John's. In the beginning of the report, the committee declared, "Drastic as it may sound, it is the opinion of this committee that the congregation of St. John's Church has little choice but to accept and act in the affirmative on these proposals . . . This conclusion is not the mere opinion of the committee, it is dictated by fact; fact which cannot be denied and fact which the congregation at St. John's must face."⁹

To help the congregation act on this fact, the committee presented six resolutions. The first was that St. John's go on record favoring a consolidated school and express its willingness to participate in any workable consolidated school program with four other churches in the area. However, the committee also noted that "there is little chance that consolidation will be possible with these congregations."¹⁰ This statement was the result of a meeting with these congregations in which it was found that their financial limitations prevented them from participation in such a program at the time.

A second resolution was that the school board be charged with the responsibility of providing some type of school bus service for the fall term of 1952 at the rate of fifty cents per week per child. The committee noted that thought had been given to purchasing a station wagon if the transportation needs for the fall were very small. On the other hand, they had also found a passenger bus at the rate of ten dollars a day, one-half the normal rate. This bus would serve St. John's after completing its daily run to Wauwatosa High School.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2

⁹ "Second Report, Committee on Building Plans". July 28, 1952, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 3

A third resolution was that St. John's undertake the construction of a new school for the fall term of 1955, and a fourth resolution that a new parsonage be built upon the school's completion. To aid in the process, the committee made a fifth resolution to appoint a building committee to make a thorough study and work with an architect to prepare plans for the school. This committee would consist of seven members appointed by the president of the congregation.

The sixth and final resolution was to use \$4,000 to recondition the present school so that the city would allow it to reopen in the fall term.¹¹

The committee's report was clear: the congregation needed to act immediately. As the committee aptly stated, "While the congregation has a choice in the specific details with which it wishes to approach these proposals, in essence they must be adopted if Christian education is to continue at St. John's."¹²

The Decree and Final Decision

While the congregation did make immediate repairs to the old school building so that it was allowed to reopen in the fall, the final stimulus for construction of a new school building came in 1954. On November 18 of that year, the Industrial Commission of the State of Wisconsin issued a certificate of inspection which required St. John's to pursue the construction of a new school if it wished to continue Christian education. The deadline for vacating the old school was set at the conclusion of the 1955-56 school year.

¹¹ Thirteen repairs were suggested: 1. Hot water should be put in both boys' and girls' wash rooms 2. Remodel wash rooms. Enclose the rooms and add more wash stands. 3. Repair doors and windows to cut down air infiltration. 4. Improve the wiring. 5. Install an adequate fire alarm system. 6. Recondition the outside doors. 7. Install emergency fire exits in the lower classroom and the annex. 8. Install new drinking fountain. 9. Paint the classrooms. 10. Construct a guard rail on the retaining wall. 11. Replace worn stair treads and do needed interior carpenter work. 12. Install a blower in the furnace to permit the removal of the oil stove in the annex. 13. If another classroom is necessary, the annex should be reconditioned for this purpose. Ibid., p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 1.

Those who supported the construction of a new school used this information as a further stimulus to encourage those who still had some doubts about the necessity of new construction. As a result, in 1955, five years after the purchase of land for the new school, the congregation made the final decision to build.

Campaign I – This is the Will of God

Though the final decision to build a new school was a long and deliberate process, the actual construction of the school warranted a rapid succession of events.

The congregation hired Steffen and Kemp Architects, a firm specializing in ecclesiastical architecture. The plans they drew up for the school made it state of the art for the time period. It would be a bi-level school with large windows dominating its front exterior. Inside would be room for seven classrooms, a kindergarten room, a dining room, kitchen, and gymnasium. The total cost: \$258,017.03.

Though finalizing the building plans was a major accomplishment, it soon became apparent that it would not be possible to meet the state's deadline of the fall term, 1956, for the completion of the new school. Therefore, on April 16, 1956 a letter of request was sent to the Industrial Commission of the State of Wisconsin asking for an extension of time. On April 23, 1956 the state responded and granted such an extension. They would allow the old school to be in use until the end of the 1957 spring session under the agreement that proper plans for the new school building would be submitted to them no later than July 1, 1956 and that the new school building would be ready for the fall term of 1957. Later, the Commission would extend this deadline further and allow the new school to open in the fall of 1958.

The congregation now had the time and the plans for a new school building, but one major obstacle remained: the funding. In an effort to spur on the congregation in Christian

stewardship, the leadership of the church planned its first campaign to raise funds. The campaign, known as Building Fund Campaign I and themed, “This is the Will of God”, began in July 1956 with, literally, a “bang”.

The congregation gathered in the church basement to learn more information about the campaign. Before they arrived, however, balloons were taped underneath the ends of each table. At the start of the meeting, men were assigned to pop the balloons at the ends of the tables with a pin, thus symbolizing the beginning of the campaign with a “bang”. The congregation was entertained and an enthusiasm was sparked which continued throughout the project.

The details of the campaign included assigning approximately 100 congregational members to each of the 9 church Council Men.¹³ Each of these Council Men was responsible for visiting these members and encouraging them to make 3-5 year monetary pledges toward the construction of the school. 5 couples were assigned to each councilman to aid him in making these visitations. The pledges made from these visits totaled almost \$100,000.

While the pledges from Campaign I provided a significant share of the funds for construction, the congregation still needed to borrow money to pay for the project. To do this, they contacted Aid Association for Lutherans in Appleton, Wisconsin and were approved for a loan of \$178,000. At a special meeting of the voting members on August 5th, 1957, the resolution was passed 28 to 0 to take this 15 year loan at 5% interest per annum and a \$1,407.67 monthly payment.

With the architect in place, the congregation in support, and the first phase of the funding accounted for, the congregation was able to celebrate two very special days. The first was the

¹³ With Ray Tiegs as general chairman, the 9 captains of the fund raising teams were: Paul Rossman, R. Audweder, William Knack, Henry Hughes, Joseph Meyers, Lawrence Tandler, Henry Walters, Fred Scheibe, Robert Johnson.

ground breaking for the new school, on July 28, 1957. The second was the laying of the cornerstone on November 10, 1957.

The excitement from these events continued to energize the congregation for the project. In anticipation of the opening of the new school in the fall, a bus was purchased to aid in transporting the children. Although a number of qualified bus drivers were not readily available, this did not stop the venture. St. John's faculty and members stepped forward and volunteered to help with the driving duties. In fact, even Pastor Karl Otto offered his services to help drive the bus when needed.

The construction of the new, state of the art school went along smoothly. On September 14, 1958, the congregation gathered to celebrate one of the most significant days in its history: the dedication of their new school building. The day began with worship services at 8:00 and 10:30am in English, conducted by Pastor Rudolf P. Otto, and at 9:15am in German, conducted by Professor Max Lehninger. At 12:00 and 1:00pm the Ladies Aid Society served a dinner. At 3:00pm a dedication service took place, led by Pastor W. W. Gieschen. Following the service the congregation was invited to the new school for the rite of dedication and the formal opening of the doors. An open house followed.

As members reflected on these events in later years, one emotion remained vivid from that day: an overwhelming sense of joy. From the initial purchase of the Charles Fingado estate in 1950 to the dedication of the building 8 years later, the congregation had gone through countless meetings, planning sessions, fund raising, worries, hopes, and prayers. With the structure to equip them to carry out Christian education for years to come finally in place, their sense of joy swelled in thanksgiving to God.

Campaign II

The Lord blessed the work of St. John's and as a result, the enrollment for the fall term in 1958 was 124, up from 58 in 1956 (which included 20 students from the Children's Home).¹⁴ Pastor Karl Otto recalls that the congregation as a whole was growing "like a house on fire . . . one could hardly catch his breath."¹⁵

With such tremendous growth, the congregation was challenged to continue its expansion of the school. Classrooms which were previously unfinished needed to be completed to accommodate the sudden growth. As a result, a second fund raising campaign, entitled Campaign II, was begun in 1959.

Similar to the first campaign, Campaign II sought further pledges from members for a 3 to 5 year period. The ~~Council~~^{ivv} Men again were assigned as captains of 9 teams of pledge seekers.¹⁶ These teams, each consisting of 6 couples or 12 workers, in turn visited the members of the congregation to solicit pledges for the campaign. The goal for the campaign was set at \$150,000.

Venture of Faith

On June 30, 1962 Campaign II came to an end. Total pledges received from both campaigns were almost \$150,000. The school featured six completed classrooms with a seventh to be completed for the 1962-63 school year. Library facilities, a gymnasium with one shower area, a dining area, kitchen, and a large fenced in playground area were all in place. It was a

¹⁴ Stat from "With the Lord begin this task", a 1959 brochure to encourage members to pledge funds for Campaign II.

¹⁵ Interview with Pastor Karl Otto, April 21, 2003.

¹⁶ The division leaders for Campaign II: Allen Arndt, Gilbert Schuelke, John Tebo, William Herwig, Lawrence Tendler, Bernhardt Naumann, Joseph Meyer, Earl Rossman, and Robert Kuchler.

golden time for the congregation. The enrollment of St. John's for 1962 was 171, while the congregational membership had grown to 1,250.

In an effort to encourage the congregation to give thanks for these blessings and finish the work of funding the school, in July 1962 a final fund drive of sorts was initiated. This final drive, "Venture of Faith", was to be an ongoing encouragement for the liquidation of the mortgage on the school and parsonage. Unlike campaigns I and II, which included organized teams to conduct every member visits for pledges, "Venture of Faith" was to be an ongoing emphasis and call to the congregation to complete the task of building payments.

Reflections

When one describes the work done by St. John's congregation from roughly 1952-1962, "astounding" may be an appropriate adjective. With a vision for the future of Christian education and heart for reaching out to the community with the gospel, St. John's took bold steps. With a school ^{enrollment} membership of only 66, it decided to build a school that would accommodate over 200 children. With moderate resources, it decided to build a state of the art facility and pursue excellence in Christian education. It did this at the same time when it was a primary contributor to the building of Wisconsin Lutheran High School, constructed in 1959.

The attitude and actions of St. John's congregation during this time period stand as an ongoing encouragement to Christians in the 2000s. In a time when God's people continue to wrestle with monetary challenges to ministry, the example of St. John's generous stewardship is encouraging. As Pastor Otto recalls when considering this time period, "we never knew exactly where we'd get the money, but it always came."¹⁷

¹⁷ Interview with Pastor Karl Otto, April 21, 2003.

In a time when God's people continue to wrestle with preserving Christian education in the church, the example of St. John's firm resolution to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord is also encouraging. Their bold venture of faith and sacrificial attitude to preserve Christian education is a beautiful example for God's people today.

In the end, the construction of St. John's second school building is a living example of the Lord's will accomplished through his humble servants. May the Lord continue to bless his church with such humble and dedicated servants who will prosper Christian education for generations to come.

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