

60 Years of God's Grace

St. Mark's Lutheran Church

Sutton, Nebraska

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“Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory because of your love and faithfulness.” Psalm 115:1

Introduction

For almost 60 years the people of Sutton, Nebraska, have been able to share a great blessing—the treasure of God's Word. In 1949 the congregation of St. Mark's Lutheran was started in Sutton. Since then, they have been served by 12 pastors and 2 vicars. As another anniversary nears, it is a good time to look back at their history. It is easy to see some of the great blessings from the hand of God. Many things have changed over the past sixty years—but one thing has remained constant, their focus on the beautiful truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This paper intends to look back at the history of St. Mark's and see how the Lord has blessed His people in Sutton.

St. Mark's is a very special place. The members are a close family of people sharing in the truths of God. Pastor Wayne Oblender speaks about how this close family grows in God's Word:

St. Mark's has existed, by God's grace, for almost 60 years and the blessings of His Spirit are evident. There are families that currently have 3 and even 4 generations that belong to St. Mark's. The maturity of their Christian faith is seen in their close bond with the Word and with each other. It is also seen in their regular attendance at worship and in their financial support of the Lord's work in Sutton and beyond -- at Nebraska Lutheran High School and synod missions.¹

¹ Oblender, Wayne. Interview. Dustin Bergene. 2007 6 December .

Before looking at the history of St. Mark's itself, it is good to take note of how the WELS was started in Nebraska.

The WELS in Nebraska

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod came to being in its present structure in 1917 through a merger of the Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota and Nebraska synods. But church history in Nebraska goes back further than that.

In 1866 a group of pioneers, "Old Lutherans" from the Watertown-Lebonon-Ixonia area in Wisconsin settled in the area of Norfolk, Nebraska. They did not make the trip to establish a Synod—one of their motives was to escape from synods and synod strife. In 1866 the Nebraska pioneers were seeking new and better frontiers. Their pastor was J.M. Hoeckendorf, who trained his son to be his successor. When his son died suddenly, they called Michael Pankow, a recent graduate of Springfield Seminary.

E.C. Fredrich speaks about how Pankow brought the people together:

"Pankow gradually eliminated the separatist thinking in his congregation and in its neighbors. Soon pastors were joining in conferences...a Nebraska Synod was formed in 1904 and joined the Michigan-Minnesota-Wisconsin federation. In 1917 it participated in the merger and became one of the six charter districts of the Wisconsin Synod. In 1919 there were 2998 communicants in 25 congregations and 4 preaching places served by 21 pastors."²

² Fredrich, E.C. *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation and Merger.* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 26.

The Lord has greatly blessed the Nebraska district, as the 2006 WELS statistical report showed the district having 92 congregations and 13,882 baptized members and 10,717 communicant members.³

Sutton, Nebraska

Sutton is a small town in central Nebraska, and the home of St. Mark's Lutheran Church. Sutton is a friendly community where it seems everyone knows everyone, and you can drive through town and people wave to you no matter who you are. The town is described as a "progressive and prosperous rural community of 1447 residents located in the South Central portion of Nebraska. The area economy is farm, commerce and industry based with employment primarily dependent upon these components. The population is middle class, homogeneous, stable and family oriented. A 'can do' spirit dominates the City's ethic, together with friendship, family and church"⁴

There is also a lot of history in the St. Mark's church building. The building was originally The First Congregational Church. It was the first church building in the town of Sutton and also Clay County. When it was originally built, it was 28 x 40 feet long with a 16 foot high ceiling. It was erected in the fall of 1875, and the cost of the building was \$1,500.⁵ Located at 301 S. Saunders in Sutton, the church was built upon a large sandstone foundation. The year 1879 is stamped

³ Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. "Congregational Statistics." 2007. WELS home page. 25 November 2007 <<http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2601&collectionID=827>>.

⁴ Sutton Chamber of Commerce. "City of Sutton web page." 2007. City of Sutton . 25 November 2007 <<http://www.cityofsutton.org/>>.

⁵ Sutton Chamber of Commerce. "Sutton's History." 2007. City of Sutton Web Page. 25 November 2007 <<http://www.cityofsutton.com/history.html>>.

on the church bell. In 1904, the main church was constructed, and the old church became the fellowship hall.

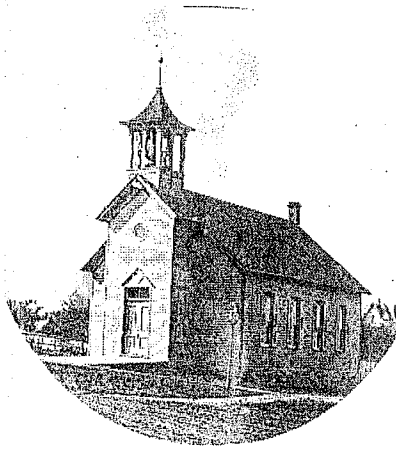


Figure 1- Congregational Church in the fall of 1874

St. Mark's Lutheran—The Beginning

The beginnings of St. Mark's Lutheran church go back to the suggestion of Pastor Milton Weishahn of Aurora, Pastor Albrecht B. Habben of Hastings, and Pastor Donald Grummert of Geneva. They proposed to start a congregation in Sutton which was daughtered by Trinity Lutheran Church in Grafton. Pastor Markus Koepsell received permission from Trinity Lutheran Church in Grafton at the annual meeting in January of 1949 to hold services in Sutton. There was an organizational meeting held on October 2, 1949.

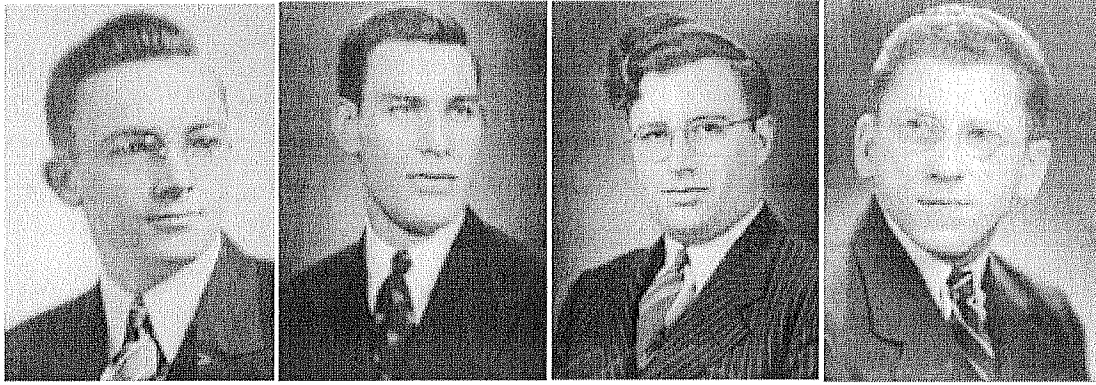


Figure 2- Pastors Weishahn, Habben, Grummert, and Koepsell

The first services were conducted by Pastor Markus Koepsell of the Grafton church in a small building rented from the United Brethren congregation. The building was in an out-of-the-way location in the west part of town, and proved unsatisfactory for the people worshipping there. A number of members from Trinity in Grafton transferred to the St. Mark's mission in Sutton for the purpose of acquiring a better place of worship, committing themselves to a share of Pastor Koepsell's salary, and other congregational things. The St. Mark's Lutheran Church History Book speaks of these members:

Seventeen communicants were included in the number that were upon their own request transferred from Trinity congregation of Grafton to St. Mark's Mission on October 2, 1949, with the understanding that they would organize as a congregation, be served together with Grafton by the same pastor, and feel welcome to return to the Grafton congregation in case the Sutton endeavor should fail. On October 12, 1949, the men of St. Mark's met at the home of Wm. Gratopp, adopted a Constitution and By-laws, and elected trustees; the trustees also were designated by the constitution to act as elders and officers. Edward Ulmer, Harold Traut and Leroy Mohnike constituted the first church officers.⁶

⁶ St. Mark's Lutheran Church. "Church History." Historical Record. 1949, 391.

The members which transferred from Trinity in Grafton were: Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Bauman and Karen; Mr. and Mrs. Michael Gehrke; Mr. and Mrs. William Gratopp and Lowell, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Mohnike, Robert and Diane; Mr. and Mrs. Victor Ochsner, Calvin, Theodore, and Ernest; Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Scheierman, Harlan and Sharon; Mr. and Mrs. Harold Traut; Mrs. Daniel Sorgenfrei, Mary, Sharon, Donna, Linda, and Daniel; Mr. and Mrs. Edward Ulmer, Dennis, Julie, and Carol⁷.

The 1950's

In January, 1950, Reverend Milton F. Weishahn of Aurora was called to be pastor at St. Marks⁸. Later in July the congregation applied for membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin. During the same year St. Mark's began their joint parish arrangement with the First Lutheran Church in Aurora, an arrangement that still exists today.

In September of 1951, with the help of a loan from the Church Extension Fund of the Wisconsin Synod, the congregation purchased the English Congregational Church. The price was \$4,000. The congregation was assisted also by a generous gift of \$1500 by a kind donor from another congregation. But there was work to be done. The building was condemned—the architectural structure was about to let loose. Craftsmen figured out a way to fix it—by putting steel plates at the heads where the cross beams came into the wall beams. Then there were one inch threaded rods and turnbuckles which were turned to

7 St. Mark's Lutheran Church. "50 Years of Jesus' Love." pamphlet. 1999. (St. Mark's Lutheran Church)
8 St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

pull the walls back.⁹ Also, the church itself which is currently St. Mark's fellowship room, sat at a ninety degree angle to where it is today. Members donated over 1,500 hours of labor to convert the church building to fit their needs. Zion Lutheran Church in Clatonia donated the chancel furniture, and the church building was officially dedicated on June 14, 1953.¹⁰

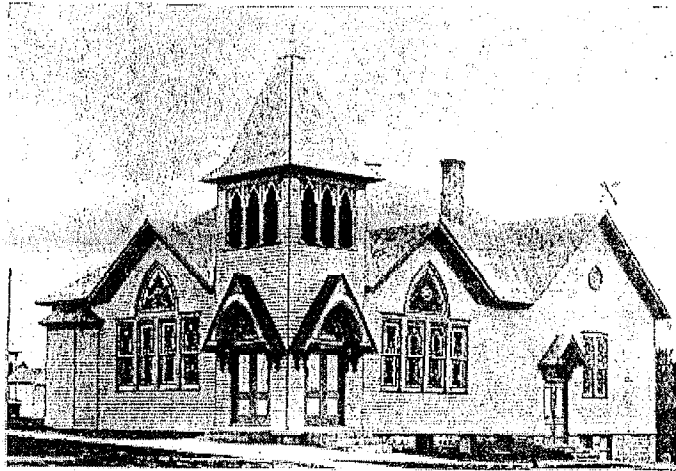


Figure 3- The Congregational Church built in 1904.

In January of 1954 Pastor Weishahn accepted the call to Lincoln Heights, Iowa. Reverend M. Burke of Hastings began to serve as vacancy pastor.¹¹ In March of 1954, Herbert Kruschel was installed as the second pastor at St. Mark's. The St. Mark's Ladies Aid was organized in 1956 and in 1957 a new Baldwin electric organ was purchased.¹² Pastor Kruschel accepted a call to Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin in 1959, and Reverend Herbert Lichtenberg of

⁹ Cepek, Gary. Interview. Dustin Bergene. 6 December 2007.

¹⁰ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 4-5.

¹¹ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

¹² St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 6.

Hastings served as the vacancy pastor.¹³ St. Mark's celebrated its Tenth Anniversary with an afternoon service on October 18, 1959.

The 1960's

Significant changes occurred in the 1960's. "By the end of June 1961 the congregation was free of all indebtedness. Upon the resignation of Pastor Fuerstenau of Grafton for reasons of health, the joint-parish of Trinity, Grafton and St. Mark's, Sutton voted to call their own pastor."¹⁴ In July of 1961 Ronald Tischer was ordained and installed as the third pastor at St. Mark's along with Trinity of Grafton.¹⁵ In 1963 a Young People's Society was formed with Trinity of Grafton. In May of 1966 Pastor Tischer accepted a call to Broken Bow, Nebraska. Pastor Gerhard Eckert of Hastings served as the vacancy pastor. During the summer of 1966 St. Mark's voted to become a joint parish with First Lutheran Church in Aurora, an arrangement that still exists today. In June, Julius Manteufel, pastor in Aurora, began service as St. Mark's fourth pastor.¹⁶

Later in August of 1966, Pastor Manteufel accepted another call, and Pastor Eckert was again the vacancy pastor. St. Mark's was blessed with another pastor as William C. Goehring was installed in July of 1967.¹⁷ In 1969 the Young People's Society was reorganized. Also in 1969, St. Mark's hosted the area Reformation Service.

¹³ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

¹⁴ "Church History", 392.

¹⁵ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

¹⁶ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

¹⁷ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 6.

The 1970's

The 1970's brought some changes to St. Mark's. In January of 1971 the large rooms in the back of the church were remodeled into a fellowship hall and kitchen through volunteer labor from the members. In 1973, the theater seats that were in the sanctuary were removed and new carpeting and pews were installed. These changes were very beneficial, as it was easier to serve meals in the fellowship hall than in the basement, and the pews were more convenient than theater seats (especially if there were young children around).¹⁸

Pastor Goehring accepted a call to Salt Lake City, Utah in January of 1974.¹⁹ Reverend Robert Otto was ordained and installed as St. Mark's sixth pastor in July 1974. Also in 1974, St. Mark's celebrated its silver anniversary, with a special service on November 17th. Pastor Weishahn was the guest speaker.²⁰ In 1976, St. Mark's hosted the Pastor-Teacher-Delegate Conference. In 1976, Pastor Otto accepted a call to teach in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Once again, Pastor Eckert served as the vacancy pastor. In July of 1977, Daniel Nitz was ordained and installed as the seventh pastor of St. Mark's. Also in 1977, St. Mark's hosted area Reformation Services and a Sunday School Workshop.

The 1980's

In the spring of 1980, Pastor Nitz accepted a call to serve in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. The Lord provided Pastor Eckert to serve the vacancy. In July of 1980, Thomas Lindloff was ordained and installed as the eighth pastor of

¹⁸ Mick, Deloris. Interview. Dustin Bergene. 25 November 2007.

¹⁹ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

²⁰ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 6.

St. Mark's.²¹ He accepted a call to teach in Lake Mills, Wisconsin in the spring of 1983. Pastor Stuart Zak of Geneva served as vacancy pastor.²² In December of 1983, Pastor David Schultz was installed as St Mark's ninth pastor. In 1985 the altar guild was organized. Delores Domeier and Laura Nunnenkamp were the coordinators. That year St. Mark's also hosted the LWMS fall rally.²³

In April of 1989, Pastor Schultz accepted the call to El Paso, Texas. Pastor Darrell Kenagy of Hastings served as the vacancy pastor. In July, Kristian Taves was ordained and installed as St. Mark's tenth pastor.²⁴

The 1990's

Late in 1993 Pastor Taves accepted a call to Janesville, Minnesota. Pastor Bruce Hannemann of Hastings served as the vacancy pastor. Gary Cepek was installed as St. Mark's eleventh pastor in February 1994. Pastor Cepek spoke about one of the significant events in the church being the switch to the new hymnal. "There was a concern on the part of some that they didn't want to disrespect the memories of those who had bequests on the copies of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. There was a love for TLH, but a willingness to go with the new. The compromise was a significant event.²⁵" In this compromise, St. Mark's regularly worships with *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, but during midweek and other special services, *The Lutheran Hymnal* is occasionally used. In the summer of 1994, the building and shingles suffered some damage due to a

²¹ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

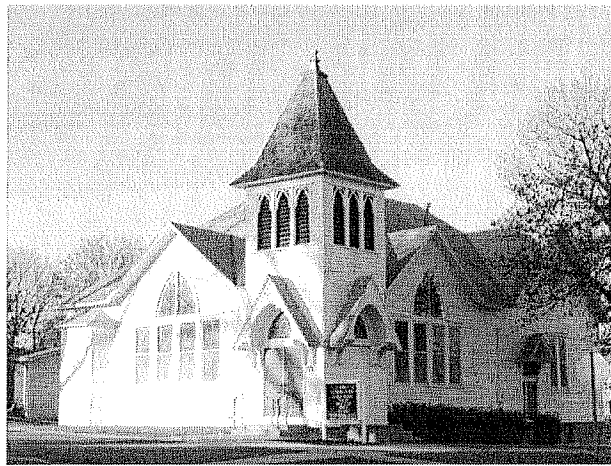
²² St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 7.

²³ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Pamphlet, 7.

²⁴ St. Mark's Lutheran Church, Report .

²⁵ (Cepek)

tornado that ripped through town.²⁶ St. Mark's celebrated their 50th anniversary on October 10, 1999. The guest speaker at the morning worship service was Rev. Jon Baumann, a son of the congregation who went on to be a pastor. They also had an afternoon song service, led by former St. Mark's Pastor Goehring. "While it may not seem like a long time for some bigger churches, our 50th anniversary was a big thing for us."²⁷ This also was a significant event in the history of St. Mark's Lutheran Church.



The 2000's

Pastor Cepek stayed in Sutton until 2004, and in early 2005, Wayne Oblender, former missionary to Russia, was installed as St. Mark's twelfth pastor.

The ministry at St. Mark's took a different turn in 2006. It had been speculated that there might be a shortage of vicar churches, but members were worried where the money might come from to support such an effort. It was then that an anonymous donor thought that the program might be good for the

²⁶ (Cepek)

²⁷ Heins, Roger and Ruth. Interview. Dustin Bergene. 6 November 2007.

members, and donated the money to fund the program. The vicar year program was seen as a good way to re-energize the people in digging in to God's Word, and a vicar was seen as a good tool for outreach and evangelism in the community.²⁸

Call day came and went without St. Mark's Church being assigned a vicar. But the Lord had other plans. A seminary student who was originally assigned to vicar in Minnesota was informed that, due to some unforeseen circumstances in the congregation he was about to serve, he would be re-assigned. The congregations in Sutton and Aurora were asked again in August if they would still accept a vicar. They did, and in August, 2006 Dustin Bergene began a year of service.

On the Sunday that Vicar Bergene was installed, a vacancy opened up in nearby Grand Island, Nebraska. It was then that the Lord's hand was clearly at work, as Vicar and Pastor Oblender worked together in serving the congregations in Sutton, Aurora, and Grand Island. The bigger church in Grand Island also presented more learning opportunities with a Christian Day School and Catechism classes. In July, 2007 the Grand Island vacancy was filled, and now the Vicar serves only in Sutton and Aurora. The vicar program is still in effect in Sutton and Aurora, as Kevin Schnake served from 2007-2008.

The Vicar program has been a great experience for seminary students, and also the congregation, which has become a "training tool" for future pastors. During vicar year, the members can see the development of young men, and it raised the appreciation of the called worker program. It also raised the

²⁸ (Heins)

awareness of the process of how important a called worker is for St. Marks²⁹.

Pastor Oblender spoke of some of the blessings:

I am thankful that we have had the opportunity to serve the Lord in this way, by helping in the training of future pastors. What a blessing it is to see how vicars mature in their faith, as they become more confident and more zealous to share the "one thing needful" with others! The experience is humbling for everyone involved, to see how the Lord works through us in bringing people to faith and in strengthening God's children in their faith through His mighty Word.³⁰

If the Lord wills it, St. Mark's hopes to continue to train young men from the ministry in the future.

Observations

It is wonderful to people growing in faith and love in this small community of Sutton. The Lord is definitely working through the members of St. Mark's. Being a small community, when there is a wedding or funeral, pretty much everyone comes to the event. One remark often made about St. Mark's congregation is that "In that congregation, the Law is preached clearly, and the Gospel is preached clearly."³¹ That is something that can bring great comfort to the members, showing the importance of the means of grace.

Pastor Oblender also spoke at length about the power of God's Word at work at St. Marks:

I've seen members faithfully attend worship and Bible class and I've seen people regularly and generously support the Lord's work with their offerings because of the power of God's Word. I've seen families bring their children to church to be baptized, to hear God's Word and to sing in choir for special occasions, because of the power of God's Word. I've

²⁹ (Cepek)

³⁰ (Oblender)

³¹ (Cepek)

seen husbands and wives grow closer together in the Lord, even as their children grow up and leave home, because of the power of God's Word. I've seen joy and peace on the faces of members and I've heard it in their voices after attending worship and receiving Holy Communion, because of the power of God's Word. I've seen people inviting their friends to attend worship and I've heard members talk about the confidence that they have in Christ, because of the power of God's Word. I've seen college-aged children return "home" to St. Mark's, because of the power of God's Word. I've seen the women of our LWMS and the men of our church council (together with the voters) make Gospel-motivated decisions, because of the power of God's Word. I've seen the joy of people as they greet one another on Sunday mornings and as they welcome visitors to worship, because of the power of God's Word.³²

Currently, the membership is a little smaller than it was in some previous years. When the church started, there were some families with a number of children, who grew up, and moved away.³³ The members might have been worried about closing the doors, but through faith, they took a different approach, seeing that the Lord still desired to keep their doors open. There have been many changes throughout the years, but the Lord has been with the members of St. Mark's every step of the way. "By God's grace, God's Word continues to be shared in its truth and purity. Members meet on Sunday mornings to worship their Lord and to thank Him for His mercy which never fails. They also call upon their Lord and read God's Word during the week to strengthen them in their faith."³⁴

³² (Oblender)

³³ (Mick)

³⁴ (Oblender)

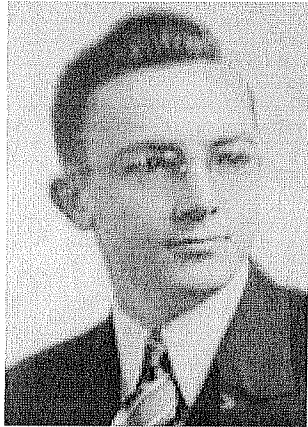
Conclusion

In looking back at the past, it is wonderful to see the Lord's hand at work in spreading the Gospel in Sutton, Nebraska. St. Mark's has been a place that has given a number of young pastors some valuable experience in the ministry.³⁵ Various members expressed feelings that it is a well rounded congregation. People don't hold grudges, but both the men and ladies work together well.³⁶ Just like David says in his psalm, it is a joy to come together in worship of our Lord, for we realize that He has united us as one family in Christ Jesus our Lord.³⁷ As St. Mark's looks forward to celebrating 60 years of service to the Lord, members are looking toward the future, filled with the same dedication and hope that brought them to this point.

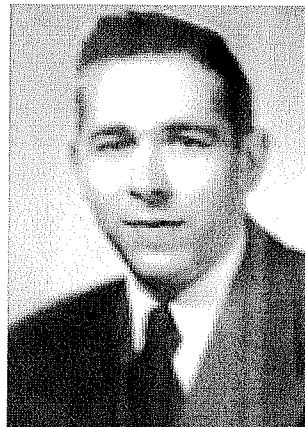
³⁵ (Mick)

³⁶ (Heins) (Cepek)

³⁷ (Oblender)



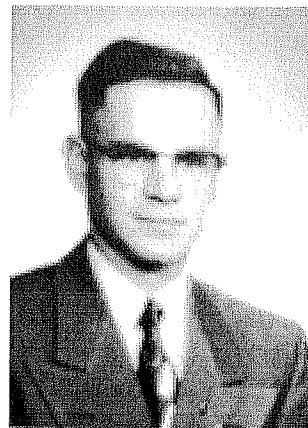
Milton Weishahn (1950-1954)



Herbert Kruschel (1954-1959)



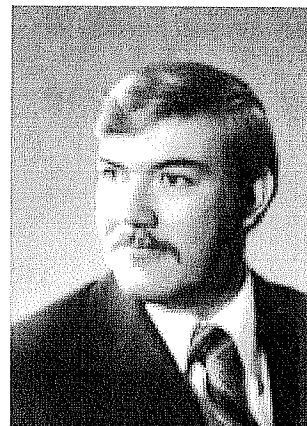
Ronald Tischer (1961-1966)



Julius Manteufel (1966)



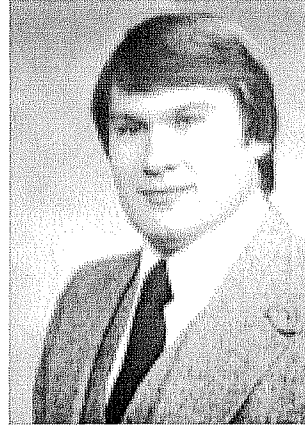
William Goehring (1967-1974)



Robert Otto (1974-1976)



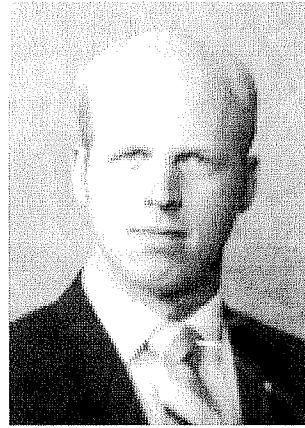
Daniel Nitz (1977-1981)



Thomas Lindloff (1981-1982)



David Schultz (1983-1989)



Kristian Taves (1989-1993)



Gary Cepek (1994-2004)



Wayne Oblender (2005-present)

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