

ST. MARCUS SCHOOL—A METAMORPHOSIS
(Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

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St. Marcus School--A Metamorphosis

St. Marcus school started in the same year that St. Marcus Church was organized; 1875. In that year, the founding members purchased a building on the corner of Island and Garfield avenues in Milwaukee which had previously belonged to St. John's, eighth and Vliet. (Island street has been renamed Palmer.) St. John's was using the building for an extension school, and agreed to sell the building with the proviso that St. Marcus join the Wisconsin Synod.

St. Marcus' school attendance grew rapidly in the early years, reaching nearly four hundred by the mid-1890's. It soon became apparent that the original building was not big enough, and plans were made for a new school building. The building was approved on May 6, 1894, the cornerstone being laid July 22, and the dedication being held November 4. The cost of the building was \$13,132. It still stands today and continues to serve as the school, church kitchen and fellowship hall.

From a high of nearly four hundred students in 1896, the attendance of St. Marcus has fallen at times drastically, and at other times steadily. The attendance hit bottom in 1980 with an enrollment of 56. At present there are about 75 students, and trends indicate a slow but steady increase in the future. The focus of this paper is examine the trends of enrollment and student teacher ratio and to suggest possible answers for the changes at St. Marcus. While some changes are peculiar to the environment of St. Marcus, some changes are typical of all schools throughout the years.

The Pre-WWI Years

Like most of the early Lutheran churches in Milwaukee, St. Marcus was distinctly German. In the church, German services were held exclusively until 1914. In the school, German continued to be the mode of teaching until the 20's. (The school board minutes are recorded in German until 1926.) To the German immigrants who were flowing steadily into the country at that time, St. Marcus provided an opportunity for them to give their children a German education. Loyalty to Germany ran very high among the first generation immigrants, so that it was considered a boon to have children who spoke German as their primary language. Many of the immigrants had visions of making their fortune in America and then returning to Germany.

The first decade of the twentieth century showed a drastic decline in attendance at St. Marcus School. Attendance hit a low of 160 in 1911, less than half the enrollment of a decade earlier. This was probably caused by the fact that the children of immigrants did not feel such an intense loyalty to Germany that they thought their children should be educated in German. Since their parents had only sent them to St. Marcus for language reasons and not for religious reasons, they felt no loyalty to the church or the school.

From 1910 until 1925, enrollment again rose dramatically to about 250. This probably reflected the real growth of St. Marcus congregation, whose membership grew to about 2000 around 1930. From that point until the present, the enrollment has reflected the total membership of the congregation.

WWI--WWII

The interwar years were years of stability as far as the teaching staff is concerned. In 1911, Miss Dorothy Gamm began teaching first grade. She added second grade in 1919 and continued to teach both until 1956. Her sister Lenora Gamm began teaching first grade in 1918 and began the kindergarten in 1924. She also taught until 1956. These sisters provided a needed stability during a period of turmoil.

Attendance at St. Marcus fluctuated in a wave-like pattern that coincides with major economic and political events in the United States. The first major drop occurs in 1929, the year of the Stock Market Crash. Attendance recovered slightly in the 30's, but then fell to a new alltime low in 1941, the year the United States entered World War II. By the end of the war, 1945, the enrollment had rebounded to 232, but this upswing was short-lived. The economic structure of the neighborhood was changing.

1945 to the Present

Before World War II, St. Marcus church was in one of the richest areas of Milwaukee. Most of its members were of the well-to-do class. After the war, the neighborhood began to be *filled by* the industrial working class. Most of the members of St. Marcus began moving ^{to} out the western edge of Milwaukee or to the suburbs. **S**ome of them continued their membership at St. Marcus, but most found other church homes in their area.

St. Marcus School was trying to reach out to the new, largely unchurched residents who moved into the area. This is evident from a report to the school board in 1956 that 31 percent of the

enrollment were children of unchurched families. However, the neighborhood continued in its downward economic trend, which meant a large turnover in the residents.

After the War, large numbers of blacks began moving from the southern states to the northern cities. In Milwaukee, they ran into a German work ethic which was foreign to them, and no doubt a large amount of prejudice. Most often relegated to the lower paying jobs, they became, as a class, the lower income class. Many could not find work at all and had to go on welfare.

Since the area around St. Marcus had begun to decline, and housing was cheaper, the blacks moved in. This process accelerated in the late 50's and 60's, so that by the late 60's the neighborhood was almost entirely black and at the poverty level. Most of the blacks, since they were from the South on a large scale, had their roots in the Baptist denomination. Many of them had lost touch with religion because their lives had been uprooted so many times.

The quickly changing neighborhood presented a dilemma to St. Marcus Congregation. Should they, like many other W.E.L.S. churches had done, sell the church and move to the suburbs? Or should they stay and try to reach out to a neighborhood whose background was foreign to Lutheranism and whose culture was so different from the German culture? A faithful nucleus decided to stay and try to overcome the difficult barriers, recognizing that much bigger than the differences was the need of all men for a savior from sin, which all men have in common. The school was to play a major role in this outreach effort.

St. Marcus School was ready to reach out to the neighborhood, but faced a delicate situation. Because the financial base had eroded as the richer members moved away, the school no longer had the resources to accept children of unchurched parents. Although it would help mission efforts among the poorer people, it was agreed that tuition should be charged children of unchurched parents in order to keep the school doors open. (Today, tuition is \$60 per month, first child.) While this has made it difficult for many to send their children to St. Marcus, it has helped to establish which parents are serious about education for their children. Those parents who care enough to pay the tuition are usually better prospects for the church.

In 1980, the school had hit a low of 56 students. If enrollment did not improve, the school was in danger. Also, the school was not doing as well as was hoped as a mission outreach. That year, under the leadership of Principle^{al} Dan Gartner, an ambitious summer outreach program was undertaken. A two-week Vacation Bible School was held in June. The week before, volunteers canvassed a large area of the neighborhood inviting people to send their children for a morning of fun and a chance to hear God's Word. The response has been almost overwhelming. The VBS enrollment has reached 140 on some days in the summers since then. St. Marcus School has begun to grow steadily again. And most importantly, the outreach has greatly increased awareness of St. Marcus Church in the community, and has been a major influence on the growth of St. Marcus Church. In 1982, St. Marcus Consolidated its VBS program with other inner city congregations.

Student Teacher Ratio

In 1883, St. Marcus School had 322 students and three teachers. Today, the four full-time teachers have about seventy students. In the hundred-plus years which intervened, the ratio has gradually declined. It seems ridiculous to us in modern times to have over 100 students in class, as the teachers did in 1883. We now think of twenty as a heavy load for a teacher of grade school, almost more than one can handle.

It is obvious that conditions in the classroom have changed immensely over the years. Before World War I, parents demanded strict discipline from their children. This, coupled with the fact that the curriculum then was basically reading, writing, and arithmetic, meant that a teacher could handle a large number of students with minimal supervision. After the first World War, requirements for students were raised to a level at or beyond what is required of students today. Since children were still very disciplined at home, the ratio of 45 or 50 to one was not impossible.

Since World War II, America has become much more of a mobile society. This has contributed to instability in children. Especially since the "permissive generation" of the sixties, children have received less and less discipline from parents, and the burden has fallen on teachers. Under these present circumstances, it is not hard to see why the student teacher ratio must be so low these days to be effective. The teacher practically has to be the parent for each child. It should not surprise us that so many teachers are burning out. We should be especially thankful for the present teachers at St. Marcus, who labor under the most acute of our modern problems of student-teacher relationships.