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ST. PAUL'S EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH

of

HOWARDS GROVE

"112 YEARS TO BUILD A CHRISTIAN DAY SCHOOL"

Senior Church History

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In the November 17, 1974 issue of the Northwestern Lutheran an article appeared in which the new Christian Day School at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Route 1, Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin was called the "Grandmother Of Them All." The reason for this title is that, after her long one hundred twelve year history, St. Paul's (better known as the church at Millersville) finally offered full-time Christian education to the children of the congregation. There are a number of reasons why this venture took so long. Interesting insight is given in the minutes of the congregational meetings. Sometimes the reasons for not starting the school are more than meets the eye. It is the purpose of this paper to follow the history of the congregation and examine the reasons why it took a founding Lutheran congregation 112 years to offer complete Christian education to its youth.

Though the year 1862 is regarded as the official date for the organization of the congregation, it is known that services were held earlier. Few records remain from these early years. The church was organized by Rev. J.Ph. Sprengling, resident pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Town Mosel, approximately five miles from the present St. Paul's structure. A 20 x 26 church building was erected in 1863. Rev. Sprengling also was initiative in organizing a Lutheran congregation in Hika, Wis. (the congregation is

now in Cleveland, Wis.) and another in Newtonburg, Wis.

Rev. Sprengling served St. Paul's until 1866. During the next ten years the congregation was served by three different pastors, Johann H. Brockmann, Junker (no first name is recorded), and August Kleinhans, who became the first resident pastor in 1870. The Christian education for adults and children was limited for this period of time, of course. But during the service of these first four men one hundred sixty members were confirmed and received as communicants. The number of confirmands per year ranged from two to thirty-three.

When Rev. Kleinhans began his work the congregation bought a large piece of land (the records call it a farm) on which they built a house. The first minutes of the congregation are dated January 3, 1873. Nothing noteworthy is mentioned in these minutes. However, in the January 18, 1874 meeting trustees were elected to supervise church matters and also take care of the "farm". A resolution was also passed to lay a new floor in the 1863 church structure. The congregation was happy to complete this task because the minutes say they were "pleased that they had made such diligent use of their church that the floor wore out."

Christian education was very minimal in the first seventy years of St. Paul's history. It consisted primarily of basic catechism study. In 1917 during the pastorate of L.B. Mielke a wooden school building was erected next to the present church building at a cost

of \$3,450.00. This building was used exclusively for Vacation Bible School, or as it was commonly known, "Sommer Schule". This summer session consisted mainly of memorizing and studying the catechism.

It is surprising that, even though this special building was built for the instruction of children, no Sunday School was conducted. The school building had been equipped with a woodburning stove (this is evident from later congregational minutes when the pastor complained about having to carry the wood and start the fire himself), so it could have been heated in the winter for Sunday School. (Probably the pastor didn't want any more chores to do.) But, since no reason is given for not having a Sunday School, I would surmise that it just wasn't the custom for the area.

A Sunday School was finally begun in April of 1931 under the pastorate of Rev. H.A. Kuether. Seventeen teachers volunteered to teach seventy children. It is interesting to note that thirty years later the Sunday School had approximately the same number of pupils taught by nine teachers.

Still no mention is made of starting a Christian Day School. I would guess that the biggest reason for not starting a school was the circumstances under which the members lived. Millersville was a town (it no longer exists by that name) which in the 30's and 40's had a population of about 250. The church was located one mile south of the town. Three quarters of a mile north of Millersville is Howards Grove. (Both towns are now

incorporated under the name of Howards Grove.) One mile north of Howards Grove is the Missouri Synod church. No other churches have ever grown in <sup>the</sup> vicinity. During the late 40's and early 50's the two congregations, St. Paul's (WELS) and Trinity (LC-MS) talked about forming a joint Christian Day School. But it was decided that, if all the members of both congregations would send their children to the school, it would radically affect the public school system in Howards Grove. Who would want a public school filled with a majority of Dutch Reformeds and a sprinkling of Catholics? Besides everyone was happy with the public system. The teachers were good Christians (the majority of them Lutherans and members of either St. Paul's or Trinity), and the school buildings were conveniently situated. The children in Howards Grove went to a two room school in the middle of the village and the children of Millersville attended a one room school in the "heart of downtown Millersville." For convenience sake, why make changes?

Then came the Missouri-Wisconsin split. A few years after the separation some (few) members at St. Paul's began talking in favor of a Christian Day School. My grandfather, Mr. Alfred Bitter, Sr. became the chairman <sup>of</sup> a CDS committee and remained the chairman until the school was started in 1974. He can tell about many a frustrating congregational meeting and much patient waiting. I'm grateful that he is still around to see the grade school functioning so well today in its formative years.

Rev. Henry G. Meyer (son of our sainted Professor Meyer) was the pastor of St. Paul's during the Synodical Conference split. It was in the following years that he started encouraging the congregation toward the day school project. Opposition was heavy. I can still remember how I talked with my friends from the congregation who were my classmates at Millersville public school about how our parents and we ourselves felt about the idea of a Christian Day School. It seemed like I was the only one in my class in favor of it. (And even I wasn't too keen about the idea of leaving my non-WELS friends and starting a new school.)

As a matter of fact, the opposition against a day school was so heavy, a number of congregational meetings in 1961 and 1962 became a bit heated. The entire congregation knew that Pastor Meyer was very much in favor of a school. It probably is not a coincidence that, in 1962, when Pastor Meyer received a call from our congregation in Fort Morgan, Colorado, the congregation voted that he accept it. This was very much disliked by those members who were praying for a school.

The tide began to turn a few years later, when the town began to change. As I mentioned earlier, in 1970 Howards Grove and Millersville became incorporated into one town. Both villages were growing into each other and the population between the two was slightly over one thousand. The distinction of WELS and LC-MS families was no longer as evident as in the

past.

In 1966 the congregation built a Christian Education Building next to the church. This was to be used for Sunday School, with the hopes that a day school would be formed in the future. In the next few years the subject of a school came up at meetings, however it was consistently voted down.

In 1973 the topic was again on the agenda of the annual meeting. The proposal was a bit different, however. Calvary Lutheran Church in Sheboygan was asking our congregation to form a joint school, each supplying one teacher and using St. Paul's education building as a facility. Once again it was voted against. The main reason given was lack of funds. It seems rather strange then, that only a few months later at a quarterly meeting the congregation decided to remodel the interior of the church, lowering the ceiling, paneling the walls and adding wall-to-wall carpeting. The opposition to the school was still in the majority.

Then a few incidents occurred which changed the wind. The Millersville school building was closed when the Howards Grove school district built a new grade school on the north end of town. At the beginning of the '73-'74 school year the students from Millersville had to go to school on the north end of town. Also, some interesting things happened to those who were opposed to the school. One man who was opposed suddenly had a severe heart attack. Another lost his wife. Another was in a serious automobile accident. It was surprising that, when the vote for a

school came up at the January, 1974 voter's meeting, the motion was passed and a resolution was made to begin school at the start of the '74-'75 school year. All three of those men who were strongly opposed voted for the school. In fact, they even sent their children in the fall.

The school opened with twenty-two students in grades Kindergarten - 5. In its fourth year it is growing, the congregation is growing and everyone is pleased with the resolution made at that January, '74 meeting.

St. Paul's congregation thanks God for the blessing He has given the congregation through the school. Why was it so long in coming? Maybe it was social and economic reasons. Maybe the time was never right until 1974. But finally the Holy Spirit moved the hearts of the people at St. Paul's to fulfill the long-awaited wishes of many of her members. The congregation has and will always thank Him for the patience He gave those members and the joy it has in the children He has given them to bring up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

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All resources <sup>were</sup> taken from the 50th and 100th Anniversary booklets, the congregational minutes, and interviews with various members of the congregation.