

The History of Jerusalem Evangelical
Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI.
1960-2000

Matt Brown
Senior Church History
Professor Brenner

This is the story of a congregation that has a long and vivid history. Jerusalem Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, has been in existence for one hundred and twelve years. It is still located on the same piece of property, and still uses the church it built in 1893. Its history is one of continued blessing from the Lord. This congregation has faced adversity and change over the years, but the preaching has remained the same. Its goal and purpose for existence has remained the same. Jerusalem was established to bring people God's Word, and although there have been many changes, that is still the purpose today.

The early history of this congregation has been well documented in an anniversary booklet, which the congregation published on the occasion of its 75th anniversary in 1963. This paper will focus mainly on what has happened since then. I will use that booklet for some of the background material of this paper, and then focus on the years from 1960 –2000. The sources that I will use for this paper are forty years of church council minutes, as well as forty years of congregational meeting minutes. I would also like to thank Mr. George Zimdars, Mr. Lu Baumann and Mr. & Mrs. Reuben and Marion Schneider for their personal memories of Jerusalem, which went into this paper. I would also like to thank Pastor Duane and JoEllen Erstad who assisted me in gathering materials, and especially Pastor Erstad, who has served this congregation for the last 22 years, and gave me some of his time for an interview.

Before I talk about the last forty years, it is necessary to take a brief look at the roots of this congregation. Jerusalem Evangelical Lutheran Church had its beginnings on a piece of farmland on the corner of Holton and Chambers Streets on the northeast side of Milwaukee. Professor Adolf Hoenecke from the Seminary who was also pastor at St.

Matthew's on 13th and Vine, bought the property, and on October 10th, 1888 twenty eight people met to found Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been worshipping in its current facility since 1893. A new school was built in 1954 and shortly thereafter the church building was covered with brick. That original building was so well built that it still stands as a beautiful worship facility today.

The church has had faithful pastors from its beginning. The first was J.F. Gustav Harders. He served the congregation for its first nineteen years. In 1907 he received and accepted a call to serve the Apaches in Arizona and is know for his service among them, as well as for a number of books which reflect Apache life. Before the next pastor arrived, Prof. August Pieper and Prof. J.P. Koehler served as substitute pastors. Next came "The Gieschen years". Henry Gieschen, Sr. served until 1926 when he died. His son, Henry Jr. served until 1936. And Henry JR's brother Walter also served at Jerusalem from 1926-1931. Pastor J.C. Dahlke was assigned to Jerusalem in 1935 and assisted Pastor Gieschen. In 1936 Pastor Henry Gieschen, Jr. took a call to Fort Atkinson and Pastor Dahlke served this large and growing congregation on his own until 1950.

Members have wonderful memories of Jerusalem in the 1920's and 1930's. George Zimdars, who is 90 years old, was baptized and confirmed at Jerusalem and is still an active member. He recalls a congregation of over 1,500 souls and remembers a congregation that was packed with German-speaking people on Sunday mornings. The children all sat in the balcony and filled it. The men and women sat separately downstairs.¹ Lu Baumann, who has been a member since he was in the third grade in 1926, also remembers sitting in the balcony as a child, and having to give an excuse on Monday in school if he missed church on Sunday. Mr. Baumann, who also is still an

active member, described the congregation as a family affair. Jerusalem was made up of families, all of whom were very active in the church.²

In 1950 Pastor L.M. Bleichwehl was called to serve as pastor and did until 1957. During these years the congregation went through a building and remodeling stage. The Old school building, which had been used since 1888, was razed in 1953; in 1954 the new school was completed at a cost of \$305,000. Three years later the congregation decided to remodel the church to match the new school. That was completed in 1956 at a cost of \$63,500. During this time the congregation continued to support the synod and its missions, as well as Wisconsin Lutheran High School. The 75th anniversary booklet describes this time.

During these years, God truly blessed our members with the Grace of Giving. All the monies raised and contributed by the membership were Offerings to God in every respect. Not one cent was gotten through any form of moneymaking schemes. And God showered his blessing on it all. The debt of the congregation, which in January of 1957 stood at \$105,000, was quickly reduced. Within six years it was down to \$18,500. Such was the work of the Lord in Jerusalem in this short period of time, even though membership of the congregation had sharply fallen off because more and more people were moving out of the neighborhood and the communicants now numbered less than eight hundred.³

In 1957, Pastor Bleichwehl resigned; Pastor Eldor Toepel accepted the call and was installed in November of 1957. At this time, the neighborhood in which the congregation was located was changing ethnically, and many of the members were moving out. In January of 1957 the number of souls in the congregation was 1,214. When Pastor Toepel retired in 1977, the number of souls was at 385. And today the number is 77. The 40 years covered in this paper saw many people leave the congregation. But the forty years of this paper also saw the continued preaching of the Gospel, and the continued dedication to education at Jerusalem's grade school, as well as continued

¹ Interview with George Zimdars, April 8, 2000

support of Wisconsin Lutheran High School. As we get into the main body of this paper we will see a congregation that endured change. We will see a congregation that did make some mistakes. But more than anything we will see a congregation that continued to proclaim the truth of God's Word and we will see a congregation that was showered with God's blessings.

The year 1960 saw a congregation that was thriving. Jerusalem was only a few years removed from the completion of their building years. Lu Baumann recalls how the building project had really brought the congregation together⁴. There were people moving out of the neighborhood, but there was a whole lot of work being done at Jerusalem. In 1960 there were 181 students in the school with 6 faculty members. In 1960 Pastor Toepel performed 40 baptisms. He had 34 confirmations and 17 weddings. There were 13 burials that year as well. The deficit of the congregation was just over \$1,800. And although people were leaving the congregation, new members were arriving at almost the same rate people were leaving, but that would change shortly.

Already in the early 1960's the congregation was seeing a great deal of change in its neighborhood. Many blacks were moving into the neighborhood, and many of the whites were moving out. This was that time that would determine the future of Jerusalem. It was at this time that an effort needed to be made to change with the community. But the congregation was not quick to change. Jerusalem was not unlike many of our churches located in the central city of Milwaukee. In the early part of the 1960's, crime in the neighborhood was increasing. There was a break-in that year, and the council was worried about "unauthorized" people in the building. In June of 1962 it was decided to

² Interview with Lu Baumann, April 8, 2000

³ Jerusalem Evangelical Lutheran Church; 75th Anniversary booklet and brief history of the congregation.

lock the doors of the school to prevent people from roaming the building during church and school.

While the congregation may not have made some changes, change was going to come. Pastor Toepel commented on the possibility of adding another English service to increase church attendance. There was talk of ending the German services completely, but they remained. As the years passed, Pastor Toepel made the suggestion, and the congregation agreed, to drop more and more German services, such as Thanksgiving, Christmas Day and New Years Day. Finally in October of 1963, German services were ended completely.

The early '60's show a congregation that was dedicated to spreading the Good News of the Gospel. The operating budget for the church in 1964 was \$44,059. The congregation also budgeted \$17,837 to missions, \$12,000 for the synod, \$5,400 for the high school, \$412 to institutional ministries and \$25 for radio ministry. Jerusalem took seriously the Great Commission. They were making disciples at home, and offering their support to make disciples abroad.

It was during these early years of the 1960's that membership really started to decline. In 1962 there were 1,060 souls. 1962 also saw 211 souls leave the congregation, while only 121 were added. By 1965 the number was down to 973 souls, with 717 communicants. Many people were leaving, and the people who were staying were getting older. The size of the congregation, and the need for visitation, put a strain on Pastor Toepel. In 1962, 613 pastoral visits were made to the sick, the shut-in and the dying. But the pastor also managed to make 67 outreach calls that year. In 1964 the pastor made 840 calls to the sick, shut-in and dying. In 1965 that number soared to 950. The pastor was

⁴ Baumann Interview

making an incredibly large number of pastoral calls to members, and being the only pastor, he displayed an indefatigable work ethic.

With all the attention that was needed with the current membership, Pastor Toepel and the congregation by no means ignored the community; they were still trying to reach out to the changing neighborhood. One way in which they sought to do this was through the school. It was determined that the first priority was to serve the members with the school, but reaching the un-churched was the next priority. They did not allow children from other denominations, but sought to serve those people who did not have a church home. The principal in 1964 was Mr. Leonard Engel. He brought to the attention of the congregation the problems that the school was having in reaching out to the community. He wrote an evaluation of the outreach efforts of the church and school. In this evaluation he makes the following statement after quoting the great commission, as well as Jesus words in Mark 16 where Jesus told his disciples to go and preach the Gospel to every creature,

Our pastor regularly points out the fact that this reaching out is the personal mission responsibility of every Christian, to be accomplished by personal witnessing as well as living the Christian life and inviting others, the un-churched, to join him in worship in his own church. This is as it should be.

In our school in the years I have been privileged to serve, we have not reached out. The opposite has been the case. It becomes my painful duty to turn prospects away because it is physically impossible to take in any more pupils and still carry on effective instruction, not to mention overloading the physical and emotional capacity of the teachers.⁵

Mr. Engel went on in that evaluation to ask some questions of the congregation. He asked about the commitment of the congregation to expanding their facilities. He asked whether or not the congregation was ready to step forward and help in the ministry to the members, as well as reach out to the community. And he called on the leaders of the church to get this started.

Pastor Toepel echoed Mr. Engel. He wrote a three-page statement concerning the ministry at Jerusalem, and talked about the opportunities for reaching out. Pastor Toepel made this observation,

As Christ's church, having the everlasting treasure of the Gospel of Peace, we must serve the community in which we are located. We cannot and dare not confine our interests to just a select few who meet our approval, The community in which we find ourselves is extremely large. Its people number many thousand. Add to that the fact that a home for senior citizens is to be constructed next year by the housing authority on Holton Street between Locust and Hadley Streets. This will enlarge the scope of our work as a congregation. Add to that also the fact that Divine Charity* has sold its property, will abandon the community and probably merge with Divinity congregation of Whitefish Bay. This will immediately, as soon as the leaving of this community by Divine Charity Congregation is completed, find twenty-five children coming to Jerusalem for the Gospel and another seven to be confirmed; it will also add a number of aged couples and individuals to our congregation. Above all, the selling out by Divine Charity and the possible dissolution by Ephrata leaves us, Jerusalem Congregation, all alone as an island in a vast sea of humanity: or put another way, we are left as the only place of refuge and source of Living Waters for thousands of dying souls.⁶

Pastor Toepel suggested a few steps the Congregation could take to better serve this changing community. He suggested calling two more teachers for the school. He suggested calling a vicar to assist the pastor with visitation to members, as well as outreach into the community. He also suggested using some of the classroom space that was available a mile south at St. Marcus. Pastor Toepel also made a plea for six men to assist him in his visitation, as well as four or six women to also make visits. Pastor Toepel and Mr. Engel were trying to get the congregation to see the needs of their congregation, as well as the tremendous opportunities that the Lord was placing before them.

The congregation did not place any of those suggested calls. It seems as though the finances of the congregation were holding them back. They were focused on the

⁵ Congregational meeting minutes, January, 1964

* Divine Charity is a congregation, currently located in Whitefish Bay, that had broken away from Jerusalem in the early 1900's. The people who started this congregation wanted to have English services, and Jerusalem refused to have them at that time. They moved just a few blocks west of Jerusalem.

⁶ Pastor Toepel's letter to the voters, January, 1964

current needs that they had as a congregation. As a church, Jerusalem did not follow the advice and encouragement of its pastor and principal. But Jerusalem did contact the district mission board to ask that a missionary be called to work out of the facilities of their congregation. There was a mission in their area to the black community, St. Philip's Lutheran Church, (which would play an important role in the later history of Jerusalem) but according to the pastor and the principal more help was needed. So they turned to the mission board for help.

While they were waiting for a reply from the mission board, some of the same problems that were hitting other churches in the City of Milwaukee were being seen at Jerusalem. We already touched on the loss of members, but now finances started to become an issue. In September of 1966 the treasurer noted that the contributions were not coming in on a regular basis. As members moved, the congregation lost givers. Also the school enrollment began to decline. In 1966 there were 158 in school, by 1969, that number had dropped to 118.

The leadership, as well as the members of Jerusalem, was all well aware of the opportunity they had in their community, but the needs of the congregation seemed to take their focus off outreach. By 1966 Jerusalem still had not heard from the mission board, and the idea of calling a missionary for their area seemed to be put aside. There was however, evangelism going on in the community. The Sunday School was being used as an outreach tool, and members were making evangelism calls. Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Schneider remember being a part of evangelism calls.⁷ And there were fruits. Jerusalem was attracting blacks to the congregation by means of Sunday school, the day school, and evangelism calls. But not all the members responded ^{favorably} to the changing face of

Jerusalem. George Zimdars remembers the discussions and disagreements surrounding a blended congregation. He states that there were members who would refuse to sit in the same pew with blacks. And therefore many of the blacks who came initially ended up at St. Philip's. Mr. Zimdars also remembers that there were many in the congregation who were determined that Jerusalem would change with the neighborhood.⁸ The Schneiders commented that it seemed as though many of the people who had grown up at Jerusalem wanted to see Jerusalem stay the same. There were some fears about losing the identity of their congregation.⁹

As the congregation continued to struggle with change, the needs of the congregation became more pressing. In 1968 it was decided to drop the synod subscription from \$9,000 to \$4,000 in order to be able to give a raise to the called workers. By the end of that year, the number of souls was 783, with 341 communicants. That year 139 people had left and the average attendance was at 341.

The last year of the decade of the 60's saw a great deal of change for the congregation. The principal, Mr. Engel accepted a call to Zion in South Milwaukee. The congregation sold their teacherage, as they had done with the parsonage in 1967. Both of these houses were in the neighborhood and this further removed the congregation from their community. It was also decided that the congregation would drop Advent services; Pastor Toepel classified the congregation as "old and dying."

But in spite of some negative changes, the work of the Gospel was still being done. In 1969, a seminary student volunteered to do evangelism work in the neighborhood. There being no word from the mission board, the congregation decided to

⁷ Interview with Rueben and Marion Schneider, April 11, 2000

⁸ Zimdars interview

start enlisting the help of seminary students, and eventually there was a part time vicar serving Jerusalem. This vicar program continued into the 1980's. The Seminary student also helped with the Sunday school, which had been in decline. Along with the evangelism that pastor Toepel was doing, many contacts were being made. But still the membership was declining. It seems there was a lack of follow-up on the prospects. This again can be attributed to the large number of sick and shut-in calls that needed to be made, a total of 777 in 1969. The school enrollment was at 118, and there were some problems collecting tuition from parents.

With the beginning of a new decade, the old problems remained. The membership went from 697 in 1970, to 383 by the end of the decade. Again, many people were leaving due to the changing neighborhood. The school enrollment reflected the loss in membership; by September 1970, the number of students was at 98. The school did not have a principal and in addition to his already full list of duties, Pastor Toepel was serving as acting principal. It looked like the school was beginning to drift. A number of churches in the inner city, such as North Trinity and Atonement, began talk of consolidating schools. Jerusalem attended some of these meetings, but no action was taken.

In the early '70's the congregation's financial struggles worsened. The church was starting to be in need of repair, and the money was not coming in to cover the expenses that they already had. As finances got tough, money became the focus. For the year of 1972 the congregation did not make any commitments to the synod or the high school. They wrote a letter to the synod in June of 1971 stating their reasons for this. They also asked the synod to pay for a teacher and full time missionary.

⁹ Schneider interview

Last month we had to decide whether to dismiss one or two men teachers and keep up our outside obligations, or keep our teachers and default on the others. We were forced to make the following decision: Recognizing our duty toward our called workers, it was resolved, 1) That we keep our present staff of teachers and continue our efforts to have a Christian Day School in our community; 2) This year to remit to outside purposes only such amounts as are not needed for local purposes; 3) For the year 1972 not to make any commitments to Wis. Lutheran High School, to the synod, the institutional ministry, or any outside purpose.

The time has come that Jerusalem Congregation needs help from outside its membership if the Gospel is to continue to be taught and preached on the corner of Holton and Chambers Streets, in a community of about 40,000 people where Jerusalem is the only non-Catholic church. Would the synod salary one teacher at Jerusalem and place a full-time missionary in Jerusalem to do evangelism and mission work in this large area?¹⁰

Jerusalem needed help. The financial situation was what they were focused on. There was ministry being done at Jerusalem, but the worries over money were distracting the leaders and the members of this congregation. The congregation even thought of asking the synod to grant them mission status. It is amazing that a congregation which only 10 years ago numbered 1,000, and had just paid off over \$100,000 in building expenses, was now searching and pleading for help.

But the help did not come. As Jerusalem met with the synod and other congregations in the area, they soon realized that the other congregations in the city were having the same problems, and many of the congregations were following the lead of Divine Charity and moving out. But many of the people at Jerusalem were determined to stay. Some may think it was simply to hold on to their dear congregation, and that may have been a part, but there was commitment to preaching the Gospel. The problem was who would do it. The pastor was busy making shut-in calls, and he was getting older. He had 51 shut-ins in 20 different postal zip codes. There was a vicar, but he was only part time. The members were leaving, and the ones that were left were getting older. By

¹⁰ Taken from a letter to Pastor Marcus Liesener, the visiting elder for the Milwaukee North Conference of the South Eastern Wisconsin district. Signed by Pastor Toepel and the President of the congregation.

September of 1973 the congregation was holding one service on Sunday. They still had 518 members, but many of them were delinquent.

A relationship between Jerusalem and St. Philip's Lutheran church began in 1974. That year the two congregations requested subsidy from the mission board for a kindergarten teacher at Jerusalem. Both churches would use the kindergarten. The mission board granted the request. An extensive study was done of the two congregations, which noted the declining membership of Jerusalem, while St. Philip's was growing. Of the 439 communicant members in April of 1974, 42 were under the age of 20, 84 were between the ages of 20 and 39, 103 were 40-59 years of age, and 210 were 60 and older. Another interesting part of that study showed that Jerusalem had 8 black families with a total of 30 souls on their membership list. It seemed as if things might be starting to change. Maybe starting this kindergarten was the push that Jerusalem needed to be more closely associated with its neighborhood.

But problems arose. The synod had attached some stipulations to the agreement. One was that after a year the synod subsidy would stop. The synod also stated that Jerusalem would have to reduce their staff by one, this would mean not replacing their principal who had just accepted a call. After much discussion in the voters' meeting, the members decided to back out of the agreement with the synod and St. Philip's, stating that they were now in a position to staff their school without help from the synod. They changed the call that was issued, and stated that they would operate independently of the synod. They also continued their "give as we are able" approach to areas outside of the congregation.

In the middle to late '70's the deficits became larger and larger. April 1975 showed that the congregation was \$4,000 short of the \$8,300 they needed for the month. Also this year there was concern over the salaries of the teachers. They had not received a raise in five years. This was a time of big inflation in our country. The make-up of the school also began to change. There were now 95 students in the school. Of those, only 31 were members; of the remaining 64, 35 were un-churched. The congregation was reaching out through the school, and they were confirming many of the un-churched students, but their parents did not follow. Pastor Toepel was also experiencing some health problems at this time. He was still faithfully carrying out his duties, but he stated the need for the congregation to have a full time pastor to do evangelism. This pastor could do the necessary work with the parents who were un-churched.

In 1976 Pastor Toepel recommended lowering the number of teachers from four and one half to three and one half, possibly two and one half. This did not go over well with the members. An unsigned letter was sent to the voters and made some accusations against the pastor. Pastor Toepel had sent a mailing to the congregation with some suggestions for the direction they needed to go with the school. It was not received well by some. This was a difficult time for the congregation. The school that they loved seemed to be slipping away. They wanted desperately to hold onto it and some emotions were running high. There was friction between the pastor and some of the members concerning the affairs of the school. At this time, in the spring of 1977, Pastor Toepel's health continued to deteriorate. And in the fall of that year he retired, ending 20 years of faithful service to the congregation.

It was a hard time for Jerusalem. By this time the membership had dipped to less than 400. The number in school was 58, and the people were without a pastor for the first time in 20 years. Thankfully the congregation was receiving support for Siebert Lutheran Foundation, to assist them in paying their called workers. During this time the congregation was held together by its president, Milton Frauendorfer.¹¹ He was a strong leader, and the members of the congregation trusted him and his leadership. The congregation issued four calls for a pastor, and on the fifth one, the person accepted. In May of 1978, Duane Erstad was installed as the eighth pastor of Jerusalem.

Pastor Erstad is still serving Jerusalem, and he has seen the congregation through some exciting and also trying times. Pastor Erstad commented that the very first memories he has of Jerusalem were funerals and shut-in visits.¹² This showed that the congregation was getting older. But with Pastor Erstad came a renewed emphasis on Bible study and fellowship. He had a number of Bible information classes and this continued throughout his years at Jerusalem. He brought something that seemed to be lacking during the years of Pastor Toepel. Marion Schneider commented on how Pastor Erstad was very focused on Bible Study and getting people into the Word.¹³ In his early years, he made use of a part-time vicar from the Seminary. There was a renewed emphasis on Sunday School and Vacation bible School. Pastor Erstad even started a youth program entitled J.O.Y.- Jerusalem Organization of Youth. This program did not last too long, but it was a demonstration of the commitment to ministry. With a renewed emphasis on Bible study and outreach, the membership losses seemed to be lessening.

¹¹ Interview with Pastor Duane Erstad, April 15, 2000

¹² Erstad interview

¹³ Schneider interview

Also plans were made for a membership drive; and Lenten services were reinstated and in November of 1979, Advent services were also brought back.

Pastor Erstad brought some life back to the congregation by refocusing them on the Word of God. But the problem of the school was still there. By October of 1979, there were only 47 students in the school. Something needed to be done. It was at this time, that negotiations began with St. Philip's about the possibility of merging the two schools. The athletic programs were already a joint effort and a complete merger seemed natural. St. Philip's had the students, but did not have adequate facilities. Jerusalem had the facilities, but did not have the students. The talks began and moved quickly.

In March of 1980, an agreement was reached between the two congregations. The building would remain the property of Jerusalem. They would share the costs of maintaining the school and calling teachers, 45% would be covered by St. Philip's, 55% by Jerusalem. The two proposals that were adopted by Jerusalem were as follows;

- I. that we consolidate Jerusalem and St. Philip's schools for a minimum of 2 years without any foreseeable problems, and during that period, or before if needed, we work toward reducing our contribution to the consolidated school.
- II. that the committee be given the authority to revoke our congregation's agreement should any problems arise which we feel are not in our best interests.¹⁴

The members of Jerusalem were supportive of this agreement. In May of 1980, both congregations signed the articles of agreement, and Beautiful Savior Lutheran School was formed. The total number of students in the fall of that year was 118. This consolidation would take the congregation from an annual deficit of \$10,000, to an annual surplus of \$10,000. With more money available, the other areas of ministry could be focused on, without the financial worries of the school. Lu Baumann also noted that as Jerusalem had more and more contact with St. Philip's, the color barrier started to come

down.¹⁵ Pastor Erstad recalls only one complaint about the merger. Someone commented on the changing of the name from Jerusalem to Beautiful Savior, but this came some time after the agreement had been reached.

At this time Pastor Erstad continued addressing the other areas of ministry in the congregation. One of those areas was the number of delinquent members. There were about 70, with the total membership at 378. The pastor and the elders were making visits on these members. That year also saw the beginning of training for evangelism. Six people started the classes, but after a while, that number was down to three. Pastor Erstad also was actively conducting B.I.C. classes with the un-churched parents of the school children. The Lord was blessing his work. Jerusalem was also in a better position financially, and was once again able to support the synod and the high school. In 1981 \$8,000 was given to W.L.H.S. During the early 1980's the part time vicar was actively doing evangelism, and also trying to revitalize the Sunday School. Plans were made to conduct a joint Vacation Bible School with St. Philip's. And a social club was organized at Jerusalem. The pastor and vicar were also working hard on delinquents and shut-ins.

From 1978 to 1984, the first six years for Pastor Erstad, the membership remained fairly consistent, with people coming in about the same rate they were leaving. In fact during those years, the membership only declined by 30, from 385 to 355. But the core members were growing older. By the end of 1985, however, the membership had dropped to 275 members. This was due in part to dealing with many of the delinquents. There were a number of releases and transfers. The congregation was committed to feeding their members with the Word and Sacraments, and they took it seriously when people

¹⁴ Proposal to the congregation from the consolidation committee, presented a special voters assembly, March 23, 1980.

showed no concern for being fed. Pastor Erstad, in his annual report for 1985, had this to say concerning a decrease in offerings and membership;

1985 however, was the second year that our "plate" offerings decreased. It was the first year for an even more serious event. Our weekly unified envelope offerings and mission offerings decreased compared to the previous year. This makes for a serious situation and surely deserves careful and wise scrutiny in the future.

That fact is as sobering as is our present, significantly decreased membership total. During the last year we have finally reached many of our delinquents. There has been a little visible success in this, but much more indifference or even hostility. Pray that as we continue this work the Gospel bears fruit for people who truly need to be reminded about their sin and their Savior. In the same time we also experienced several un-preventable losses in membership. More important is the loss of members where improved fellowship and use of the Gospel could have kept us stronger. Let us learn from that.¹⁶

Pastor Erstad showed his concern for souls and encouraged the congregation to take seriously the responsibility of watching out for their brothers and sisters.

In 1986, it is evident that the Gospel was working among the members. The members of Jerusalem had committed \$35,000 to the synod "Reaching Out" program, and of that commitment, \$33,500 had been submitted. Also during that year, the joint school board decided to implement a four year-old and three year-old kindergarten program. By the fall there were a total of 23 children in that program. That was just another example of the commitment to education that is so evident in the history of this congregation. Jerusalem was committed to Christian education.

As the decade of the '80's began to close, the congregation was continuing to do the Lord's work, but there were some challenges. The school and church were often in need of repair, and while Jerusalem was paying more than half of the school expenses, it was also paying for 100% of Capital expenses on the church and school. This again began to put a strain on their budget. The congregation also was having difficulty finding

¹⁵ Interview with Lu Baumann, April 8, 2000

¹⁶ Pastor's annual report to the congregation, January, 1986

men to serve on the council and, therefore, term limits were being waived.¹⁷ And by the end of the decade, the membership had gone under 200.

But even in the midst of these difficulties, the members under the leadership of Pastor Erstad, were carrying out the work of the Savior. The evangelism committee was still meeting and making calls on a regular basis, even though the number of people involved was shrinking. There were canvasses of the neighborhood, as well as mailings and phone calls. Consistently through these years, people were enrolled in the B.I.C. course. Pastor Erstad's emphasis on Bible study also showed in the fact that he had three Bible classes for members going on during the week, and the one on Sunday mornings would see as many as 40 people attending. With the size of the congregation, and the number of shut-ins, this was a good number in Bible class.

As the congregation entered the 1990's some of the same problems were there. The membership continued to decline. By 1992 the membership was down to 153. And again the burden of maintaining their facility was putting a strain financially on the congregation. But these hardships did not take away from the fact that Bible study was still being done, and the congregation was doing what it could as far as evangelism was concerned. During these years the congregation also showed its ability to change. They were using "The Sampler", and were ready to make the transition to the new hymnal. The only thing that would not change was the version of the Lord's Prayer.¹⁸ This would prepare them well for what was coming in the near future.

¹⁷ This is a problem that Jerusalem continues to struggle with today. Because of this, there is currently talk of how it might be possible to have women serve in a God-pleasing capacity at the congregation.

¹⁸ Erstad interview. Pastor Erstad also commented on the fact that when he came to Jerusalem in 1978, the congregation had already made the transition to the New International Version of the Bible.

During these years, St. Philip's was having difficulty meeting their commitments to the school. In the early part of 1992, talk of a merger of some sort started. St. Philip's had inquired about the possible merging of the two congregations. There was much discussion with the members of Jerusalem. Many were looking quite a bit at the financial end of this agreement. But during this time Pastor Erstad emphasized the need for this to be a spiritual decision, not a financial one.¹⁹ Many of the members were also very interested in maintaining the identity of Jerusalem. And there were some who wanted to maintain separate congregations, and work slowly toward closer relations. This entire discussion was moving fast. This was a time for the congregation, as well as individual members, to reflect on and consider the future of Jerusalem.

As the congregation moved into 1993, the talk of a merger grew more and more likely. The membership was down to 140 in January 1993; by the end of the year that number had fallen to 118. In October the year-to-date deficit was \$25,000. These were some of the factors that made the people open to a merger of some sort. In the beginning there were a few different ideas about what could be done. One was to merge the two congregations completely. Another thought was to sell the facilities to St. Philip's. Still another thought was to share the facilities with St. Philip's, but maintain separate identities. After much discussion, Pastor Erstad finally suggested just giving everything to St. Philip's. And in September of 1993, that is exactly what Jerusalem voted to do. The following motion was passed,

A motion was made and carried by the Voters' Assembly on September 19, 1993, that Jerusalem congregation give St. Philip's congregation complete ownership, including deeds, of Jerusalem's entire church and school property. Jerusalem will retain (1) the right to occupy and use any and all of these facilities, on a shared basis with St. Philip's, as long as Jerusalem congregation exists, and (2) equal representation and authority on an "operations committee" which will oversee the operation and maintenance of the church

¹⁹ Voters assembly minutes, September 20, 1992

property only. Jerusalem will pay to St. Philip's (1) one-half of all maintenance capital repair expenses for the church property only, for as long as it is able to do so, and (2) school tuition for Jerusalem member students according to a Jerusalem member-parent policy for as long as it is able to do so. Specific details for this arrangement will be developed to the mutual satisfaction of Jerusalem and St. Philip's congregations prior to executing any binding agreement and \ or transfer of property.²⁰

There were still a few details to work out, but Jerusalem voted to accept this proposal with only one voter dissenting. This agreement would save money for both congregations, but more importantly, this agreement would better equip both congregations for their service to their Savior. On October 24th of this same year, St. Philip's voted to accept this proposal. The official date for occupancy was set for March 1st 1994. The details of this agreement were that the two congregations would split church expenses and Jerusalem would pay 10 percent heat and utilities, but no capital expenses for the school.²¹ As St. Philip's began operating the facility, there was some concern about maintenance not being done in a timely manner, but the congregations continued to work together, showing Christian love and being patient with each other.

The two congregations still share this facility today. They have made efforts to get closer together. Joint services are occasionally held, on Thanksgiving, New Year's Day and on Christmas Day²². Both congregations gave up a great deal for this agreement. St. Philip's moved from their house of worship, and Jerusalem handed over their house of worship for free. But even with these changes, the members of Jerusalem and the members of St. Philip's continued about the Savior's work.

This agreement between the two congregations is a very unique one. There are many different feelings among members of both congregations, as well as from people

²⁰ Congregational resolution; Voters Assembly meeting, September 19, 1993

²¹ A few years down the road, the boiler in the school went out, and St. Philip's was burdened with a large repair bill. Some indirectly suggested that Jerusalem knew the boiler was going, but their meeting minutes show that the heating system had always required frequent, large expenditures.

outside of the congregations about the matter. Some people thought something like this should have happened much earlier. Others thought that the congregations should have merged completely. Personally, as the senior vicar at St. Philip's I must admit that I was a little unsure about what to make of the whole situation. But as I did the research for this paper, reading the minutes of the council and voter's meetings, and as I talked to some of the members, I understand better the thinking that went into this.

In the course of my interviews some statements were made that opened my eyes as to what the people of Jerusalem were feeling and thinking about this agreement. George Zimdars noted that many of the older people who had endured a great deal of change already were simply not in favor of merging the two churches and losing Jerusalem's identity.²³ The Schneiders, who are not lifelong members but for the past forty years, talked about the hurt feelings of the lifelong members who did not want to lose their church.²⁴ Lu Baumann noted that at first the members were hesitant to go forward, but after a while became very accepting of the agreement.²⁵ Pastor Erstad made an interesting observation. He said that only much later did it become apparent that the members of St. Philip's did not have a sense of ownership of the school after the two schools merged. He thought that this realization might have contributed to the members of Jerusalem wanting to give everything to St. Philip's.²⁶

For outsiders, who do not understand the whole situation, there may be a temptation to make judgements about these congregations, and especially concerning Jerusalem's wanting to maintain their identity, but as one talks to the people, an

²² In the fall of 1999, Jerusalem and St. Philip's held a joint service to celebrate the anniversaries of both congregations, as well as the anniversary of the synod.

²³ Zimdars interview

²⁴ Schneider interview

appreciation grows for what this congregation contributed to the mission work at Holton and Chambers Streets. And an appreciation grows for the legacy this church left by giving their facility so that ministry could continue into the future. Things could have been done differently, but what was done was God pleasing.

The last few years since the agreement with St. Philip's has seen Jerusalem continue to decline in membership. In 1994 there were 116 souls, and today that number stands at 77. But even as their numbers shrink, their commitment to God's Word continues to grow. They actively support the Synod and its work by meeting their annual commitments. Pastor Erstad continues to conduct Bible classes on a weekly basis for the members of the church. George Zimdars commented on how thankful he was that Pastor Erstad provided him with a speakerphone so he would be able to participate in Bible class, even though he could not make it to church.²⁷

Jerusalem also continues its interest in Beautiful Savior School, even though it has but four member children attending. Jerusalem also continues to send its support to Wisconsin Lutheran High School. Consistently throughout my interviews, the people stated that Christian education was one of the blessings that God had given to Jerusalem. Even though for many of the years the majority of the children in the school were not members of Jerusalem, the people still cared about making sure that the Gospel was preached.

Jerusalem today does not appear to be an active congregation. The members are old and dying. Their average attendance at worship is about 39. They have a problem finding men to serve in the church and are uncertain about how long they will be

²⁵ Baumann interview

²⁶ Erstad interview

around.²⁸ But looks can be deceiving and are in the case of this congregation. They still maintain their \$2,500 annual commitment to the synod, and their \$1,500 commitment to W.L.H.S. And one look at their weekly schedule of events shows the emphasis on getting people into the Word. The sermons heard on Sunday morning consistently focus the members on sin and grace. The Bible classes emphasize sin and grace. And there are people, in their '90's, still thirsting for the Word.

One of the last questions I asked the people I interviewed was "What will Jerusalem be remembered for?" Some thought that the church would be remembered for once being a thriving congregation, but one that died out slowly but surely because it failed to adapt to its neighborhood. Another thought that the church would most be remembered for its moveable pulpit, which is rolled to the center of the chancel for every sermon. Still another thought the congregation would be remembered for its determination to continue on in spite of declining membership.

But there was one theme that ran throughout the answers to that question. The people said that Jerusalem would be remembered for preaching the Gospel. The Gospel was brought to the people by faithful pastors. That Gospel was presented in the classrooms of the school. That Gospel was presented clearly and faithfully in sermons and in Bible classes. That Gospel was taken to the world by the support that was given to the synod to carry on mission work. And that Gospel is still the center of everything that Jerusalem does as a congregation. The history of this congregation is one filled with God's blessing. And this congregation continues to experience God's blessing as it continues about his work and worship.

²⁷ Zimdars interview

Only the Lord knows what will happen to this congregation in the next few years. But studying the history of Jerusalem shows a commitment to the message of God's Word. There were things that could have been done differently, and every congregation has things that could have been done differently. That in no way takes away from the fact that God blessed this church and the people of its community. Only in heaven will we know the true extent of the mission work that was done by Jerusalem. Humanly speaking, the seeds that were planted did not seem to bear much fruit. But those seeds were planted and that is what the Lord calls us to do.

In closing, I would like to share one somewhat personal note that testifies to the ministry that was done at Jerusalem. In my work at St. Philip's, I came into contact with a family from our neighborhood. This family was un-churched. I had the opportunity of taking the mother and father, who were not married but living together for 17 years, through an adult instruction class. These people were eventually married. Two of their children were baptized, and the family joined St. Philip's. It turns out that this family had some history with Jerusalem. The grandmother, as well as the great grandmother had both been members of Jerusalem years ago. Bible Information Classes had been conducted in their home. The seed had been planted, and I was privileged to water that seed, and the Lord made it grow. Thank God for his effective Word. Thank God for Congregations like Jerusalem that preach his Word.

²⁸ The members I interviewed thought that the congregation would probably be around for anywhere from three to five years.