

THE EARLY YEARS OF

SAINT JOHN'S
8th + Uliet, Milwaukee, WI.
by

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on

EIGHTH AND VLIET

Glowing reports were sent back to Germany by Deutschlanders visiting the state of Wisconsin. These reports roused the wanderlust of the folk in Lutherland and many began to emigrate to the New World. They headed for Wisconsin too, knowing that there they would find land and climate and people that most resembled the land, climate, and people they had left behind in Germany. This fact together with the unlimited opportunities which were open to them in the burgeoning state went a long way towards easing the heartache felt at leaving the homeland.

But it was not only the material benefits which helped to sooth the people. Their disciplined, diligent study of God's Word helped to comfort them during the move to the new country as well as add a stabilizing force to their lives once they arrived and began to settle in this state.

In 1847 a group of these transplanted Lutherans began meeting in various homes in the downtown area of Milwaukee. They had no pastor but that did not prevent them from holding a regular worship service complete with hymns and a sermon that was read from Luther's "Hauspestille." Eventually the group grew to a size that was too unweildy for the majority of the homes and started to gather regularly at the Zuehlsdorf home. This growth in the group's size led to a growth in their need for the complete services of a Seelsorge. But during 1847 there was none available, at least to provide for this flock on a regular, formal basis.

However, in 1848, a missionary of the Langenberg Mission Society, Pastor L. Dulitz, was visiting Milwaukee. The group got in touch with him and asked if he would be able to preach to them every so often. Pastor Dulitz consented to this although it was more an arrangement of convenience than anything like a formal call.

Why the group did not issue a formal call to Dulitz right away is not very clear, but in that same year Pastor Dulitz did receive a call from a more "liberal" congregation in the city. He accepted this call. However, for reasons unknown to me, he couldn't stay with it. Less than six months later he was compelled to resign the call and sever relations with the church altogether.

Perhaps the Zuehlsdorf group had suspected Dulitz of a compromising nature at first or maybe he exhibited liberal tendencies to some members of the group. So cutting himself loose from that liberal congregation might have indicated to them that he had had a change of heart. Whatever their reason for the lack of a formal call the first time around, they wasted no time in issuing a call to Pastor Dulitz as soon as they saw he was without a parish. Pastor Dulitz accepted their call to minister to the members of the Zuehlsdorf group. An organizational meeting was then held at the home of Wilhelm Schroeder. Those present other than the host himself were: Philipp Hamm, Heinrich Kiewit, Johann Bensemman, Friedr. Boese, Georg and Friedrich Kuetemeyer, Lindenschmidt, Westermann, Fr. Poehlmann and Heinrich Steinmann. The result of this meeting was the organization of the "Evangelical Lutheran St. Johannesgemeinde."

Since the congregation was composed completely of German immigrants, it was only natural that the work of the church was done entirely in the German language. Also many of the old country's customs were carried over into the new, such as "Christenlehre," which was held on Sunday afternoon.

The members got along well with Pastor Dulitz for the next six years, but 1856 brought an end to the honeymoon. For several years prior to 1856, Pastor Dulitz had been a member of the Missouri Synod. In 1856 he twice applied for St. John's to be admitted to that body. Two times the request was not granted. The reason for turning down the request seems to have been a pretty petty one. It was held by the Synod that St. John's was operating too close to another parish of the Missouri Synod, Trinity Lutheran, and granting St. John's membership status would be considered an encroachment

on Trinity's ministerial territory. If that happened the pastor of Trinity and its members might be offended. Not wishing to cause offense, the Synod denied St. John's request.

Pastor Dulitz was undaunted. He decided that if he could not get membership status for the congregation he'd join a congregation that already had membership in the Missouri Synod. To that end he began to make merger overtures to Trinity. Trinity was all for it. Such a merger would increase their church's membership roles as well as enlarge their status with the Synod. At St. John's there was another story. A minority of the members went along with Dulitz and were in favor of the merger. But the greater part of the congregation was not. There were some heated discussions on the subject at first, but on April 29, 1856, the congregation decided not to merge with Trinity.

Pastor Dulitz thought his good judgement was being questioned. He also knew that his effectiveness with those who had voted against the merger would now be minimal. So, for the second time in ten years, he resigned his call. Upon his resignation a number of members left the church. Although the argument over merger had been bitter and divisive, an amicable arrangement was made whereby the church and the school remained in the possession of the majority, which numbered 28 members at that time.

The church mentioned in the above paragraph had been offered for the use of St. John's congregation in 1849, bought on January 30, 1850 and dedicated on Septuagesima Sunday that same year. Originally Trinity Episcopal, it was located on Fourth and Prairie. Additions to this church building in 1858, 1863, and 1871, enlarged and, finally, replaced this church building.

In Autumn of 1856, the congregation extended a call to Pastor W. Streissguth. Streissguth was an able man, accomplished in preaching and experienced in witnessing. During the next twelve years St. John's grew tremendously from a membership of 28 voting members to 350 by 1868. During that same period, St. John's became a member of the ~~Missouri~~ Wisconsin Lutheran Synod.

The year of St. John's formal acceptance into the body of the Wisconsin Synod was 1858.

The Synodical affiliation was by no means St. John's first joint venture. In 1851, members of St. John's acquired a parcel of land and started the "St. Johannes Friedhof." For a few years St. John's lost its rights in this cemetery. Later however, members of Grace Church and St. John's purchased forty acres north of its site for a burial ground, which they named Union Cemetery. In 1867, the "Johannes Friedhof" and the Union Cemetery were united, and Trinity Church was taken into the corporation.

This concern for a church cemetery continued on through St. John's history. In 1912, the Board of the corporation bought a farm located at Hopkins and Mill Roads and opened Grace-Union Cemetery, the first ^{Burial} taking place, in September of 1914. The name of this cemetery, which now comprises about 140 acres, has been changed to Graceland Cemetery.

Just as concerned with the living as they are with the dead, St. John's opened and maintained its own Christian Day School from 1862 to 1961 when declining membership cause the church to regretfully discontinue its school. The first school building to be erected came long before a new church was ever even considered. It was a two storied affair erected in 1862. In 1871 a brick school house was built and in 1887 the dedication of another new school building took place.

The school served a dual purpose. In the first place it provided the thorough Christian indoctrination and training for the young which the adult members considered so vital for their children. Secondly, it did valuable mission work among children whose parents were not connected with the church.

Branch school were founded. One in the "fifth ward" eventually gathered enough adult interest around it to organize a church -St. Mark's Ev. Luth. Another branch school opened on St. Paul avenue in 1885 led to the organization of another congregation founded by people in the vicinity of the school. This congregation took the name Apostle Ev. Lutheran Church.

It seems a bit strange that the school led to the founding of two new congregations through two branch schools. Perhaps we are going about things the wrong way these days. We do encourage primary Christian education, but only after the congregation is well established. Perhaps establishing a school first, especially these days during the decline in the quality of public education, would be wiser and not placing the cart before the horse as much as we might tend to think.

Education for the very young eventually led to a ~~plan~~^{call} for education for everyone. Week-day evening Bible classes were begun in 1908 for the young people. Soon a Junior Bible class for the newly confirmed was started followed by a Senior Bible Class for adult members of the congregation.

As was mentioned earlier, there was a great increase in membership during Pastor Streissguth's ministry. But what was a sign of health for the congregation proved to be too much for the pastor. Pastor Streissguth, feeling that he was physically unable to do justice to so large a congregation, asked to be released to St. Peter's Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin.

Steps were taken immediately to fill the vacancy, and Pastor John Bading of Watertown, Wisconsin was chosen. He began his pastorate on October 4, 1868 and remained with St. John's for the rest of his full-time ministry, forty years worth, until 1908. The phenomenal growth of the congregation during his time of service is pointed up in the church records which list an annual average of 200 and more baptisms together with confirmation classes averaging 100 or more children. This growth appears all the more impressive when one realizes that Bading served as President of the Wisconsin Synod for 25[?] of the 40 years he was with St. John's. Of course, ¹⁸⁶⁸⁻¹⁸⁸⁸ _{21 years} he didn't do ALL the work by himself. In 1880, Professor E.A. Notz was called as an assistant to Bading. Pastor Bading resigned in 1908 due to his advanced age, but to his death, in 1913, he was always ready to assist whenever he could be of service to the congregation or give counsel and advice to Pastor Brenner who succeeded him in the pulpit.

It was during Pastor Bading's ministry that the "Wisconsin Synod Cathedral" was erected. In 1886 lots were purchased on 8th and Vliet where the new church, school, and parsonage were to be erected. By the time the church was dedicated on July 13, 1890, it had already won a reputation as a beautiful example of gothic architecture. It was also a great source of pride for St. John's and the Wisconsin Synod because it outclassed any of the structures which the Missouri Synod had erected in the city to that date. In the Lutheran Witness -Volume 9 -No. 12 on November 21, 1890, which gave comments on and some of the impressive statistics of "Rev. Bading's Church in Milwaukee, Wisc," we read:

Milwaukee has numerous strong German Lutheran congregations, and many large German Lutheran churches. Until this year the Missourians have borne away the palm with the stately Trinity Church, whose external appearance may be seen in Wolf's "Lutherans in America." -Within its walls some of the wealthiest German Christians in this city worship.

NOW the new St. John's, at the corner of Vliet and 8th, is externally and internally the finest German Lutheran Church I have ever seen, hardly excepting even the brownstone Zion Church on Franklin Square, Philadelphia. The dimensions are 65 feet on Vliet by 140 feet in depth on 8th. The Gothic style has been carried through consistently in every detail. Two massive steeples, the loftier 195 feet high, give character to the front, and the pure cream color of the celebrated Milwaukee brick and the lavish decoration carried up to the very cross on the summit add grace and beauty.

The auditorium is 55 by 90, with a nave, side aisles and transept. The sanctuary is 30 by 26 feet. A gallery extends around half of the church, that is, across the end and around to the transept. The whole seating capacity is about 1100.

Those who shrugged their shoulders at the copy of Thorwaldson's Christ found in Zion Church would be driven distracted by the vision of the sanctuary in this church. An enormous altar and reredos lifts its head aloft. Pictures, statuary and candles are found in profusion. On the altar are six candles and a crucifix. Above are statues of Peter and Paul, A PAINTING of Jesus in the manger, and a large figure of Christ on the cross. The pulpit is likewise gorgeous in gilt and is surrounded by a sounding-board in which Jesus appears as the preacher. The frescoing is elaborate and rich.

There was some liberal giving; and I may mention some of the names as they may prove familiar to the

businessmen among your readers. The organ cost \$3,500 and was given by Mr. Ferdinand Kieckhefer. The large stained glass windows, exhibiting the evangelists and the major prophets, cost their donor, Mr. Wm. Kieckhefer, \$2,000. These brothers are extensive manufacturers of tin ware. Mr. Christopher Starke, a tug owner and contractor, provided the pews. Mr. John Schroeder, head of an extensive lumber company, furnished the altar. Mr. Conrad Starke paid 700.00 for the pulpit.

The value of the property, on which the church, school house and parsonage stand, is \$150,000. There remain a debt of \$25,000 to be carried by a congregation numbering 2403.
.....It is about the strongest Lutheran Church in the Midwest.

When Bading retired in 1908, the call was extended to Pastor Brenner of Cudahy. He accepted the call and for the next fifty years remained the shepherd at St. John's. English services were begun under his impetus in 1908. Like Streissguth and Bading before him, Pastor Brenner also served as President of the Wisconsin Synod. This domination of the highest official office of the Synod by three pastors of the same congregation for the total number years they held it gave the church located on the corner of 8th and Vliet the nickname, "The Synod's Headquarters."

The cream-colored brick is now a dinghy grey and the 2403 members which once formulated the strongest Lutheran church in the Midwest have been reduced to a mere 30 or so. No longer does a president rule the roost from "the Synod Headquarters."

But though their numbers may have dwindled considerably, the faith of the members of St. John's is still going strong. In their hearts and minds the glory of the church which God gave them still shines. They pray that they may never see its doors closed to them during their lives. I pray that perhaps one day the "Wisconsin Synod Cathedral" will be opening its doors to some 2373 more members.