

THE 90 YEAR GRUDGE
OF
ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
TOWNSHIP OF GROVER
PESHTIGO, WISCONSIN

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In June, 1986, Rev. Kenneth Wenzel announced to the congregation of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Grover Township, Marinette County, Wisconsin, that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit he had decided to accept a call to become pastor at Wonnewoc, WI. This, of course, meant that St. John's would once again be without a shepherd. To many in the congregation this was viewed as a great disappointment. History had pointed out to them that whenever St. John's had a vacancy, it was probably going to be a long one. At least nine months and four or five returned calls seemed to be the average for this rather large country congregation before a new spiritual leader could be found. Surely this length of time isn't that much longer than the average church goes through before another pastor is led to them. However, the members of St. John's seem to have a deep, negative attitude ingrained in their minds that the congregation has a 'bad reputation' in the Synod. It may quite readily be true because of the church's size, location and history.

At present, the church lists 692 baptized members, 521 communicants, and a 250+ average Sunday attendance. It is located on a hill approximately five miles southwest of the town of Peshigo, two miles west of U.S. Highway 41. The bulk of the members are involved in agriculture or related occupations. Nearly all are of German descent. All of this is, again, not greatly different from many other churches in our Synod. But it's the history of the church and its relationship with the WELS that sets this congregation on edge when another vacancy occurs. From its inception back in the late 1860's, St. John's has been served by

Wisconsin Synod pastors, but it wasn't until 1963 that the congregation officially joined the Synod as a voting member. That's 90 years of benefits from being affiliated with the WELS before it became a part of Synod. Why did it take such a long time? What were the causes of their not joining back when the church got started? With those questions in mind, this paper will consider: THE 90 YEAR GRUDGE OF ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, TOWNSHIP OF GROVER, PESHTIGO, WISCONSIN.

Not much remains of the early history of the people who settled in southern Marinette County before the great fire of 1871. Many of the names and almost all of the written records had not survived that fateful night. But the memories are still around. Those who can trace their family trees beyond the 1870's tell of German Lutherans who had left their homeland for America in the 1850's and middle 1860's. The incessant wars ravaging across their lands prompted some to leave. Others felt the religious persecutions resulting from the almost forced institution of the Prussian Union and left the old country of Pomerania and Prussia to find the things which their hearts and consciences so earnestly desired.

It was into this rugged wilderness area of northeastern Wisconsin they came, family after family setting up a new life in the new world. The immediate needs of food and shelter were first to be met, but eventually their hearts longed for the inspiring churches of home and the beautiful church services with which they had become so familiar.

At the same time this was taking place, the Lutheran Synods

of the land were also active in seeking out the needs of these recent immigrants. Several itinerant preachers frequented this territory every two months or so meeting with the several Lutheran families in private homes. Their denominational affiliations are now all but forgotten, except one. That was the Rev. Carl Huebner from the Wisconsin Synod. He had been commissioned by that Synod in 1869 to serve the settlers of Marinette County. He preached, celebrated Lord's Supper and baptized children in the homes of Lutherans all throughout the area. Soon he realized that the time had come for all these little groups to start thinking about forming their own congregations and building their own churches.

Three distinct areas played a part in the formation of St. John's, Grover. First was the area called Lower Sugar Bush, now the township of Grover. The second was the area called Peshtigo Harbor, still known by that name, located south of the city of Peshtigo near the Lake. The third was that of Peshtigo Village, now located a mile upriver since the fire. For distance reasons, it was decided that the people of Lower Sugar Bush form their own congregation, and the people at Peshtigo Village and Harbor constitute another congregation. So the 'German Lutheran Congregation of Peshtigo and Surrounding Territory' was organized with the signing of the constitution on September 11, 1870. The Lutherans on Peshtigo Village and Peshtigo Harbor organized 'Zion Ev. Lutheran Congregation of Peshtigo' about that same time. Accordingly services were held at both churches.

St. John's (as the former would later be called) at the time

appeared to be the larger of the two congregations, numbering upwards to 200 total members. A small meeting place and parsonage were erected about two miles north of the present site. Rev. Huebner, who served both congregations as well as his traveling preacher position, used the country parsonage as his base of operations. Although no written records have survived, all indications seem to point to the fact that St. John's, under the guidance of Rev. Huebner, would have very quickly established closer connections with the Wisconsin Synod, as well as would have Zion in Peshtigo.

The fateful and eventful night of October 8, 1871 now intervened. On the morning of October 8th, Rev. Huebner held services in Grover. After dinner he walked the four miles to Peshtigo for evening services with Holy Communion.

Services were over that incredibly hot and dry Sunday evening when the terrible conflagration which devoured all of Peshtigo and surrounding territory took place. Words can not describe the horror of that night. The Peshtigo fire was the greatest fire that the country has ever experienced, far surpassing in loss of life and property the well known Chicago Fire. For in that night 1,152 people lost their lives and 1,280,000 acres of forest lands were destroyed. An area from about Green Bay to Shawano and well up into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was completely devastated. All this happened suddenly. The fire came without warning and in a few hours it was all over.

The little parsonage and meeting hall were gone. The homes and barns of the members were nothing but charred, smoking ruins.

Entire families were wiped out. Other members lost husband or wife and children. All belongings and livestock were gone. With the fire Rev. Huebner also disappears. What happened to him was formerly not known. Even the various church histories written to this time speculate that perhaps he met his death that night with hundreds of his fellow Lutherans. But recent evidence points to the fact that he did not die in the fire. It appears that with several hundred discouraged and disillusioned people he, too, moved to the south and began serving as pastor at a small congregation just south of Manitowoc in early 1872.

But not everyone moved out. With heavy hearts, yes, but also with new courage, many stayed and made a new start in their newly landscaped homeland. The idea of a church was set aside for the time being as they reconstructed their lives, but God was by no means forgotten. New settlers from Europe also began flooding into the area and they were building to stay. A little more than two years had passed since the giant fire ball rolled through the territory, but with the help of God a new congregation was organized on January 1, 1874.

Such were the trials and experiences of the founders of this congregation, the men and women who would not know defeat, that the Lord used as His instruments in building His Kingdom in Grover.

The first records of the church are the minutes of the Jan. 1, 1874 meeting. The first order of business was to elect the officers. With that complete, it was moved that the starting

of a Christian Day School be looked into for the Christian education of the children. It is interesting to note that this vision of the founding father's was not fully realized until 93 years later when a school was opened in 1967.

In the following meetings of that year a constitution was adopted, the name of the new congregation was chosen, "Ev. Luth. St. Johannes Gemeinde." It was also decided that a church building be constructed. The present site was donated and building was begun. That's all the church minutes have to say on the subject.

But that is not the complete story on the beginnings of St. John's. A fact that those early minutes leave out was something that was to 'plague' the congregation for the next 100 years. It is the basis for their '90 Year Grudge.'

Following the quarterly meeting of May 1874, after the decision was made to erect a church building, a number of members were given the responsibility of seeking out financing its construction. One of the avenues they sought was that of the Wisconsin Synod. No mention is made to the congregation, but a letter was sent to the Synod to which Rev. Huebner belonged for a loan to help rebuild this small country congregation in the still fire-scarred area of Peshtigo.

At the same time, Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in Peshtigo was also struggling back to its feet and were also interested in rebuilding. They, too, had sent in a loan request to the Wisconsin Synod for rebuilding.

Both requests were addressed by the Synod that year, but the financial situation Synod-wide was such that both requests

could not be honored. It is not known on what basis these loans, and the many others made by other churches in the area, were considered, but the answer returned that only the congregation in Peshtigo would receive the aid it requested. Looking at it objectively, both of these groups were within six miles of each other. The people in town were primarily involved in the booming lumber industry and as such were probably in a better situation to pay the loan off. The country congregation, on the other hand, were exclusively farmers who were still very much struggling. The church in Peshtigo had the chance to grow as the town grew, while the country church could only grow primarily along family lines. Blame can not be laid that one was chosen and the other not, because decisions had to be made.

But it was not a decision that sat well with the people of St. John's. It's as if they almost took personal offense at what the Synod had to do. It was something that would not soon be forgotten. It was something that would not soon be overcome. It was with great difficulty that over the years the pastors who served this church drew them closer to the Synod fold. Regardless, the people went ahead anyway and built their own church building over the course of two and one-half years and continued to worship their Lord, Jesus Christ.

During the years 1874 to 1881, the pastors who served the congregation walked the twelve miles from Oconto to the south. There is no longer seen a close association with the church in Peshtigo, because even though Zion received their first permanent pastor in 1879, St. John's did not request to share his

services. Rather, they hooked up with the very small congregation at Beaver Creek (no longer Wisconsin Synod). This dual pastorate lasted until 1918. A Rev. Leib served these two congregations from December 1874 to August 1875; then Pastor William Buering from October 1875 to 1879; and Rev. I.W. Albrecht from 1879 to 1881.

All during this time there had been a steady growth in the membership of St. John's. It was now up to the point where it had been before the fire. So the congregation felt it should have a pastor of its own, one who would live among them and thus be better able to serve their needs. Up to this time services had been held only once every three weeks. In order to realize this, however, the congregation needed a parsonage and in the April meeting, 1880, it was decided to clear the land north of the church and build a 384 square foot parsonage.

With that complete in 1881, the time came to call their own pastor. In calling a pastor, however, quite an issue developed. Three separate groups emerged within the church. One group wanted a pastor from anywhere but the Wisconsin Synod which had stepped on their toes seven years earlier. The second group wanted to call a 'free lance' pastor, that is, a pastor who was not connected with any church body or synod. This group was no doubt still influenced by their battles back in Germany over the 'union.' The third group took into consideration that it was through the missionary work of the Wisconsin Synod that the Gospel was first brought to Grover and it was that Synod whose pastors had served and advised the congregation in its early years.

Their desire eventually won ^{out} (over) and the congregation called as its first resident pastor, Anton Pieper. He was called as a student from the seminary and in September, 1881, was formally installed into office by his brother, Rev. August Pieper from Kewaunee, WI. Rev. Pieper served both St. John's and the church at Beaver Creek. Pastor Pieper was not married, so his mother also moved up to Grover with him and kept house for him.

After serving faithfully for seven years, Pieper followed a call to another field. Thereupon St. John's met up with its first vacancy. They ended up issuing several calls before Rev. Christian Gevers of Praire Du Chien accepted. This was the course St. John's would have to endure for many years to come. After their present pastor would leave, a goodly length of time would pass, at times almost three years, before another man would accept to be their shepherd.

One can see why several members, even to this day, feel that there is some reason for the number of declined calls between pastors. And surely there is, or at least was, a good reason for it. St. John's has had a reputation of being very hard on its pastors. Externally, this congregation has not always had the monetary wherewithall to provide its shepherds with all the necessary comforts of the parish life. Even today, the salary is barely over what the Synod has established as 'mission code.' But more importantly, St. John's has always had a problem internally with her pastors. At times it could even be considered very cruel. Part of this had to do with the 'issue' mentioned above when they called their first pastor. This animosity toward 'synods' and in particular, the Wisconsin Synod

can still be seen today in the congregation. In the minutes there becomes readily noticeable a greater concern for themselves, the home congregation, at the expense of God's Kingdom as a whole. What to do about the cemetery behind the church takes a far greater precedence to mission work and the work of preparing for the children in years to come. Very often the members would fight against the Biblical principles set down by the pastor so they could do things their own way. Church dues, 'on demand' excommunications, repeated accusations of false teaching, legalistic stewardship practices and the question of Christian education were fought tooth and nail every step of the way with the pastor.

But as strange as it may seem, the congregation remained affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod, the source of her pastors. One could try to rationalize and say that because of church's lack of monetary blessings, the congregation was justified in not wanting to tie in with Synod and be liable for its support. Yet as late as the 1950's, when certain Synodical projects were brought up, responses like, "What do we owe Synod for? They've never done anything for us!" were sure to be echoed.

The grudge against the Wisconsin Synod is still there in some of the members in some form. But for most, it was more of a tradition than anything to not be a part of Synod. Any fear of an 'organized church body' brought over by immigrants from Germany would surely have disappeared after a generation or so, but this tiff with the Wisconsin Synod did not die easily. In fact, it was 98 years and eleven pastors after the act occurred before

St. John's gave one son of the congregation back to the Synod as a pastor.

Undoubtedly it was the quality of the men the Wisconsin Synod produced as pastors which kept St. John's from abandoning the Synod altogether. Faithfully all of its ministers proclaimed the Word of God in its truth and purity and through the preaching of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit was active and souls were continually won for Christ. It was also these pastors who gradually softened St. John's grudge against the Synod and brought them into its membership.

Rev. Martin Kionka (1898-1907) abounded with untiring zeal to spread the Gospel throughout the pioneer sections of Marinette County. His active mission work started four congregations in Lena, Suring, Coleman and Crivitz which are now flourishing congregations in our Synod.

Following Rev. C.G Kleinlein (1907-1918), Rev. Carl Henning served St. John's. Under his pastorate (1918-1933) the congregation began contributing to the Wisconsin Synod's mission funds. Through his untiring patience and understanding, the church became involved in the Lake Superior Circuit of the now Northern Wisconsin District of Synod. It never formally joined, but continued its involvement as a non-voting member.

In 1935, Rev. G.W. Fischer (1935-41) began to serve as the spiritual leader of St. John's. He immediately set in motion a program of reorganization. While stressing a more adequate religious instruction of the children of the congregation, he also worked and prayed to establish a Christian Day School. Just as

his predecessor, he stressed an increased interest in missions and in Synod. Even though a vote never emerged to join the Synod during his stay, Rev. Fischer set the congregation on track to eventually become a part of Synod. What was lacking was an adequate reason.

While Rev. N. Schlavensky (1941-1951) was pastor, the congregation continued to grow, both externally and internally. A number of renovations took place during his stay. A first also took place while he was there, the church's first involvement in the Synod's building program of 1939, and also the debt retirement program of 1942. Both times the congregation reached its allotted quota.

In 1951, Rev. A.A. Hellmann accepted the call to serve St. John's. He continued to upgrade and renovate the church property. The chicken coop behind the parsonage was finally torn down in 1952. Rev. Hellmann also continued to increase the congregations activities with synod. Through his work, the stage was finally set for the congregation to break down and join.

Hellmann did this by taking a call in 1961. Thus began the longest period of vacancy in the church's history, almost a year and a half. During this vacancy, a committee was formed to gather information on the cost of operating a day school. The question was raised on whether or not the church could call a teacher to its school from the Wisconsin Synod while it was not a member of the Synod itself. That became reason number one. The second reason, and probably more influential in the minds of the members, was that seven calls were made before the next pastor

accepted their call.

Reflecting on these reasons, they are not very sound reasons at all for joining the Synod. But sometimes that's all it takes. At the time of the discussions on joining Synod it was never mentioned the original reasons for not joining. Perhaps it wasn't even remembered. Or perhaps they didn't even care about it any more. But certain attitudes still flourish, certain grudges are still held even after the cause has long passed.

Anyway, the grudge did not surface at any of the meetings, and on January 20, 1963, the big step was made and the congregation voted to join Synod, the Wisconsin Synod which had so faithfully provided her with pastors for 90 years. The constitution was adjusted and presented to Synod for approval in July. And on October 6, 1963, almost 92 years after the first congregation was prevented from joining the Synod, St. John's was formally accepted into the Wisconsin Synod.

It is difficult to imagine that a grudge which developed at least four generations earlier would still have effect on a congregation, but it did. It must be remembered that these are German people, proud Germans, stubborn Germans. They often do things without asking why and without thinking until they are forced to change. What started out as a grudge against the Synod, quickly turned to apathy, and eventually to fear. Why does it happen? Only God knows. But God saw fit to stay with this congregation, to bless this congregation, to test this congregation, and to keep this congregation in his Word through the faithful ministers of the Wisconsin Synod.