

A WELS Anomaly in its Worldwide  
Mission Field:

St. John's Lutheran School in Antigua

David Meyer  
Church History 3031  
December 17, 2004

God's grace is an amazing and wonderful thing to observe throughout history. As one surveys the mission scene in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), they find God's grace displayed in numerous ways over the expanse of numerous countries. One of these countries that the WELS has been blessed to serve is located in the beautiful Caribbean region. Antigua, surrounded by blue waters and filled with loving people, is an island nation that is receiving the gospel message simply, and yet miraculously, because of God's grace.

However, Antigua is different from most of the WELS missions outside of the United States. The congregation in Antigua, St. John's, possesses a special tool in its ministry of delivering God's saving message. It has a school. Maybe overlooked or taken for granted by many people, St. John's, located in St. John's, Antigua, has had its school for nearly its entire history. This paper aims to look at the fascinating beginning that St. John's School had. It will compare the school's genesis to its current status. This paper also will attempt to answer the question: Why is the congregation in Antigua one of the few missions in our WELS world that has a school?

### **St. John's Lutheran School - Beginning**

In the 1950's, William O'Donoghue, a West Indian layperson, began getting in contact with Lutheranism. He started to form a small group that would gather together occasionally to study and worship. He was also the teacher of a school, which was Lutheran. In need of more support, he contacted the Federation of Authentic Lutheranism (FAL), an offshoot of about a dozen churches from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. After finding common confessions of faith, the FAL decided to support the mission field in Antigua.

O'Donoghue received some pastoral assistance in the form of Rev. Donald Burch, who arrived in January of 1973. Sunday services began shortly thereafter. Some of the other ministry work included Sunday school and showing general concern for people in the neighboring villages. Rev. Burch would meet with them and try to assist in whatever manner possible, even setting up transportation for those in need of it.<sup>1</sup>

However, Burch and others knew that they could do more for the Antiguans upon seeing their needs. The education system in Antigua was pathetic. School buildings and facilities were in poor shape. The classes and teaching was not any better. So very early on this statement was made: "It is certainly clear that any program which involves our long range commitment to Antiguans must provide for Christian education for the children in the environment of a Christian Day School."<sup>2</sup> The FAL immediately saw a dire need arise for its young mission: education, especially of the youth. Certainly God's Word was to be communicated to these impressionable minds, but they also saw a need to give a solid secular education to the youth of the island. From this educational void arose St. John's Lutheran School.

As with any school, teachers were needed. However, with the FAL being so small (only about twelve congregations), they found it difficult to get teachers from their own church body. So they looked in the United States for another Lutheran church body that held common confessional beliefs to theirs. Since the FAL had declared fellowship with the WELS in 1972, they found the WELS to match that description.

Burch knew of a young teacher in Westland, Michigan, that was capable of filling the position. Back in the fall of 1972, while awaiting departure for Antigua, Burch enrolled his children in the WELS grade school in Westland. As he was asked to think of a capable teacher

---

<sup>1</sup> "Our Lutheran Ministry in Antigua," p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Report of T. Thiele, FAL Foreign Mission Treasurer, February 17, 1973, quoted in "Our Lutheran Ministry in Antigua," p. 2.

to start the school in Antigua, Burch recalled one teacher at St. John's, Westland, with whom he had conversed on numerous occasions. Burch advised the FAL to call him. In 1974 Henry Meyer, married with two children, received the call to serve as teacher in the new school in Antigua. After accepting the call, Burch asked Meyer to locate another teacher that could fill the classroom for the lower grades. Meyer simply went through the WELS annual in search of a young, single, adventurous woman. He found Helen Kuehl, who was called by the FAL and accepted the position.<sup>3</sup>

Upon arrival, Meyer and Kuehl found the teaching conditions to be poor going by American standards; but ripe according to their mission field. The Antiguan government schools were in bad shape in a number of ways. The facilities were not clean. It was not uncommon to find feces lying around in the bathrooms. As evidence to its uncleanliness, later on, when St. John's got into its new building, Meyer would find students relieving themselves in bushes. They did this because the bathrooms were clean, and they did not want to get them dirty. Also, the schools did not have good classroom equipment. Chalkboards did not exist. Other common amenities that American classrooms took for granted, the Antiguan simply did not have.

School itself was not taken too seriously. Many students and *teachers* would simply leave for lunch and not come back. The perception of teachers in Antigua was not good either. A philosophy of many was: "If you could not polish shoes or drive a taxi, then you would become a teacher."<sup>4</sup>

St. John's also had to run their curriculum and schooling by Antigua's Minister of Education. Meyer recalls sitting down for that meeting in the office of the education minister. He looked down at his chair and found a metal plate that was being used to suppress the chair

---

<sup>3</sup> Henry Meyer

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

springs. This chair was a good picture demonstrating the lack of funds and apathy that Antigua had toward education. Meyer was there, among other things, to show the minister the books that St. John's would be using in their school. Meyer was able to get some American textbooks from St. Mark's, Watertown, Wisconsin. They were books that St. Mark's was no longer using. The minister placed the books on his shelf for his committee and him to browse at a later date.

Weeks passed. Meyer checked in with the minister to see if their textbooks had been accepted. The minister told him that they were still getting at that. Weeks later, Meyer visited again and found the books unmoved from his first visit. However, the minister approved of them this time. "They probably never looked at them or knew what they were looking for because they had no books in their schools."<sup>5</sup> St. John's used those books and a primer on Caribbean history that Meyer located.

Meanwhile, St. John's needed to acquire other school supplies before they began. They did not have chalk, erasers, or a copier to make worksheets. They were originally going to get desks from an FAL congregation in Indianapolis, but due to the moving costs, Meyer decided to have them built in Antigua. He designed them and then hired a wood-worker to build them.

The school opened on October 7, 1974. The building had three rooms and opened for grades kindergarten through sixth grade. To get a better idea of the size of the St. John's church and school here are a few statistics. The first number denotes when the school began (October, 1974) and the second set is what they were by the time Meyer left (July, 1975):<sup>6</sup>

<i>Sunday attendance</i>	110	160	
<i>Sunday school</i>	80	130	
<i>Primary school</i>	37	57	with a waiting list of 53 students
<i>Teachers</i>	2	3	

---

<sup>5</sup> Meyer

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Due to the fact that the Antiguan government schools were poor, Meyer and Kuehl tested the students that came into St. John's to see what grade level they were. As a result, St. John's had some 16 year-olds in third grade, and some 15 year-olds in second grade. "It was like having a few special ed [education] rooms."<sup>7</sup>

Adjusting to this new school was not only for the teachers, but also for the students. The Antiguan students were used to sitting on benches and moving around at their own free will in the government schools. At St. John's they were required to sit in desks. The students were often tired because they were also working at home. Also, as mentioned previously, the students had to become accustomed to the new, clean bathrooms. Also, after attending for free at government schools, the families had to pay a small tuition rate for attending St. John's. "It was about 15 EC\$ per child per term (three terms per year) for members, with a higher rate for non-members (it may have been 30 EC\$)."<sup>8</sup>

However, Meyer recalls that the students were hard-working. They appreciated the teachers because "they knew that you were equipping them for a successful life."<sup>9</sup> They would listen when disciplined because they knew that their parents (or usually just their mom) were supporting them. Discipline was enforced with a board. When Meyer first began he disciplined his own way. Then an older member (Ruth Brown) told him that he was going easy on them and gave him a board to use instead. The students instantly responded better once they started receiving "licks".

---

<sup>7</sup> Meyer

<sup>8</sup> Dennis Needham

<sup>9</sup> Meyer

These were the kinds of conditions in which St. John's Lutheran School was beginning. These were some of the reasons that St. John's school "was always considered a mission arm."<sup>10</sup> The congregation, but especially Rev. Burch, saw some needs on the island. He saw the lack of respect and teaching going on at the government schools. He wanted to provide a good education for the children of Antigua. More importantly, St. John's also saw a spiritual need in the people of Antigua. That motivated them to open a school that would hopefully open the hearts of the children and people upon hearing the gospel of the Lord.

### **St. John's Lutheran School – Today**

When the FAL disbanded in 1975, the WELS decided at the synod convention that year to pick up support of the Antiguan mission. Today the mission stands at a crossroads, as it looks to become increasingly self-sufficient, and less subsidized by synod.

Here are some more current statistics concerning the church and school at St. John's:<sup>11</sup>

<i>Sunday attendance</i>	348
<i>Sunday school</i>	100
<i>Primary school</i>	114
<i>Preschool</i>	50+
<i>Teachers</i>	9

You may have noticed quite a leap compared to the statistics in 1974 and 1975. As the church membership and school enrollment has grown, so the building structure of St. John's has had to grow right along with it. In 1984 St. John's completed their addition of four more classrooms to accommodate the increasing enrollment and the start of a preschool in 1985. In addition to the two single classrooms and one double classroom that they had, they added on one single classroom and one triple classroom (three classrooms with two folding walls). One of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Pastor Mark Henrich

<sup>11</sup> all figures according to the 2003 WELS Statistical Report except for the preschool (Needham)

other classrooms was converted into an office for the pastor. In 2004 two more rooms were added on to the building.

In the 1980's a change was made in the tuition payments. Members and non-members began paying equal amounts to send their children to St. John's. Tuition is currently close to \$1000 per year.<sup>12</sup> Other private schools on the island charge a similar amount even though the government schools are still relatively free. The government has helped out recently with a uniform voucher program that gives aid to parents in purchasing uniforms for their children, attire that is required at St. John's.

St. John's began with a K-6 grade system, went to K-8 for a few years for the benefit of those going to the United States for high school, then switched back to the K-6 grades. The reason for this was that the government schools also have the same grades. Then at the end of sixth grade, all students take a test that determines whether or not they are competent to continue schooling at the secondary school. The secondary school runs for five years before graduation. Students must attend school in Antigua from the ages of 5-16. If a student does not pass the test, they transfer to another school that offers the grades 7-9 curriculum. They then take another test upon finishing that, and if they pass it, can then be integrated into the secondary school.<sup>13</sup> So St. John's returned to the K-6 format to fit in better with the educational system of Antigua.

Therefore, people in Antigua look favorably on the schools that produce students who perform well on their primary exams because they enter secondary school. Basically, one's life is determined at the sixth grade when they take their test.<sup>14</sup> Those who want to get the better jobs in Antigua need to get to secondary school. Failing the test leaves a tougher road in getting

---

<sup>12</sup> Henrich

<sup>13</sup> Needham

<sup>14</sup> Henrich



there. St. John's is looked upon favorably because their students have performed well on the test. Their test results speak volumes for the school and give it good press on the island.

Similar to the primary exams, people judge the schools by their uniforms.<sup>15</sup> Another reason St. John's is well-liked is because of their uniforms. They just began wearing new ones in the past couple years and have received good reviews. These were not the first uniforms St. John's had worn, nor were they the first ones to generate positive reviews. St. John's has recently received new uniforms because the company that made them was running out of the fabric and color that St. John's had been using. Also, the uniforms that St. John's had worn previously were similar to other schools; the new uniforms now set them apart from the other schools.

Two main reasons govern the curriculum at St. John's. One is the fact that students will continue in the Antiguan secondary school system when they leave St. John's. The second reason is that students are tested on that information as they take the primary exams at the end of sixth grade.<sup>16</sup>

So St. John's uses two series in their curriculum. They take an American math, spelling, English, and reading series and then integrate it with local, Antiguan texts. A few years ago the government in Antigua freely loaned out texts for all students in Antigua and Barbuda. In that way, St. John's uses the same texts as the other schools on the island. This curriculum is paying off as nearly 100% of St. John's students are able to pass the primary exam every year.<sup>17</sup>

As far as extra-curricular activities go, St. John's does offer a few opportunities. King's Kids is the children's choir that has sung for worship and other activities since 1990. Beginning in 1998, students have formed groups for playing the steel pan. St. John's has been very

---

<sup>15</sup> Henrich

<sup>16</sup> Needham

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

successful in math, spelling, and mini-tennis competitions played interscholastically.<sup>18</sup> Soccer is another sport that one day may be played with other schools. Right now, students mostly participate with club sports on the island. Tennis and swimming are big club sports. At recess, the children enjoy playing rounders, cricket, and dodgeball.<sup>19</sup>

St. John's Lutheran School is clearly different in 2004 than it was in 1974. Thirty years brought about many changes. The school enrollment greatly increased, the staff has gone up, and the perception of St. John's has remained good in the community and on the island as a whole.

### **St. John's Lutheran School – Challenges**

In operating a school in a foreign land, challenges will certainly arise. Using American teachers to begin with and continuing to today (one expatriate teacher in 2004), has been a challenge. However, it was also seen as a positive. Some islanders were drawn in by the Americans while others considered the school to be "too Americanized."<sup>20</sup> As St. John's reputation grown, this challenge seemingly has disappeared.

In connection with that, another challenge was to integrate a local teaching staff and yet to use the school as a mission arm. Other private schools in Antigua seem to be disconnected from their churches and are only seen as an institution.<sup>21</sup> It was important for St. John's to be different and use home-grown teachers to strengthen their mission and remain connected to the church. These teachers can gain an education degree from the government, and then receive their religious training from St. John's itself. With the fallout of 9/11, they are not always

---

<sup>18</sup> Needham

<sup>19</sup> Anatole Wiik

<sup>20</sup> Needham

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

guaranteed a visa to the United States. Also to aid in implementing home-grown teachers is the Caribbean Christian Training Institute (CCTI).<sup>22</sup> The CCTI attempts to develop leaders and teachers within the congregation so that they can use their skills in the future for either the church or school.

This institute would be important because it would bring more leaders in the church in can in turn then teach Biblical truths to prospects. St. John's has such an influx of prospects through the school, canvassing, and friendship evangelism that it has proven difficult to keep on top of them all in educating them before they drift off again.

An additional benefit to using native teachers is that WELS subsidy for expatriate teachers has dropped drastically. Before 1991 St. John's was not responsible to pay expatriate teachers anything; synod covered all of it. By 1998 that figure had risen to \$27,000. To put it another way, "The overall 'price' of one expatriate called worker (salary, travel and benefits – without counting housing) is equal to three local salaries."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, another challenge lies in the diversity of the people of Antigua.

Our present membership is a mixture of upper, middle class and poor . . . old and young . . . from Antiguans with African roots to those coming from Syria, India, Brazil, Colombia, Sweden, Austria, Finland, England, Canada, Guyana, Trinidad and other Caribbean islands like St. Vincent, Dominica and Dominican Republic – a definitely "multi-cultural" blend of people.<sup>24</sup>

Reaching out to these various peoples with different languages has proven to be quite a task.

Classes for English as a Second Language have begun and have proven to be effective.

---

<sup>22</sup> Henrich

<sup>23</sup> "Our Lutheran Ministry in Antigua," p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

### **St. John's Lutheran School – Opportunities**

Opportunities abound for the Lutheran school on this beautiful island. After experiencing great economic prosperity in the 1980's, the Antiguan economy has dropped off somewhat. Right now business is good, but not as strong as it was in the past. Antigua faces some indebtedness that their new government is trying to overcome and fix. However, the tourist industry is still doing relatively well. Tourism brings many people to this tiny island, and this attraction has led to an influx of workers coming from other islands. That in turn leads to more doors being opened for St. John's Lutheran School.

Other positives for the school and mission are being a place of solidarity and comfort to the families of Antigua. Many families are one-parent homes with little or no structure. They struggle on their own and are eager to find love and support by a local group of Christians.

Locals looking for a solid education and the support of a family-like atmosphere have been attracted to St. John's. 40% of the pupils in the preschool from 1990-2001 were mission prospects. In the primary department that figure was at 33% during the same time period.<sup>25</sup> Over the years many children and adults have been brought to faith and become members through relationships with the school.

One reason for this was that parents of students attending St. John's school were required to attend Bible information classes. As a result, many parents whose intentions were to give their children a good education ended up giving one to themselves. The school truly has been a mission arm for the church.

Antigua may be a fairly small island, but it contains numerous church bodies. The major denominations are represented: Anglican, Methodist, Moravian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Wesleyan Holiness, Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, and various Pentecostal groups.

---

<sup>25</sup> Needham

Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Rastafarians, and Bahai are all present as well. Antigua has more than one hundred churches. This religious variety is seen as an opportunity as well. St. John's staff and members hope that those of these other religious groups see the differences between their own beliefs and those of St. John's. The school is a terrific tool in carrying this out. One of St. John's former teachers summed up this religious diversity that surrounds St. John's in this way:

Antigua is a "religious" island. I hope that we could be considered something like the desalination plant which provides clear and pure water for the island's population: water is everywhere around us . . . it is not always in its pure form . . . Hopefully, we will continue to make the effort and take pride in that effort of presenting a clear and pure water of life for the people of Antigua (adults and children).<sup>26</sup>

#### **St. John's Lutheran School – A former student's perspective**

As I went about researching for this paper, I happened to run into someone who I had known in high school. His name is Anatole Wiik. His nickname in high was "Snowy" because of his brilliant white hair. When he was a freshman attending Luther Preparatory School, I was a senior. He was the manager on our varsity basketball team. He was about five feet tall and maybe eighty or ninety pounds surrounded by a team full of guys over six feet tall. I had not seen him since I graduated until I was looking into this paper. Well, I now look up to him. He is about 6' 6" and 230 pounds. Little "Snowy" has turned into a big snowman.

One reason I was so excited to see him again was the fact that Anatole had lived in Antigua for many years and attended St. John's Lutheran School there. He said he would gladly reflect back on his days at St. John's and try to recall what it was like. What follows in italics is

---

<sup>26</sup> Needham

what Anatole wrote to me verbatim about his experiences as a student at St. John's Lutheran School in St. John's, Antigua.

*Firstly let me say that my name is Anatole Wiik, born June 24, 1981, in Finland. I however quickly moved to Antigua in November of that year and continued to live there ever since, except my year in high school in Watertown 95-99 and college 00- present.*

*First let me begin my grade school experience has to be the best ones one can ever have, Antigua is like a little kids paradise. I first started to attend St. Johns Lutheran when I was 8, first grade. I remember I was the only Caucasian other than a girl. This was not a problem since Antigua is far from being racist. It was an every day occurrence. My best friends up to this day are black in Antigua, there is no racial border.*

*Anyway the facilities at St. Johns Lutheran is better than most schools in Antigua, we have functioning bathrooms, where most public grade schools do not. We all wear uniforms in Antigua, different schools had different uniforms. Ours were checkered blue and white collared shirts and khaki shorts or pants. We had maybe a 200 book library at that time.*

*We all took a variety of classes throughout the grades. One teacher would most of the time teach all your classes. We would learn about, science, English, mathematics, religion and social studies. We were taught with a mixture of American/British textbooks because most kids went on to British high schools in Antigua. We would begin school at 8 and go until 3, where public schools went from 9 to 1:30. However they had no breaks where we had two breaks.*

*Our school throughout my time was a little less than 90 students, including preschool-8th grade. On Fridays we would have chapel. The highlight of the day would have to be recess since there were lots of activities. We do not have basketball, football or any organized sports there, however we would play things like rounders, cricket and dodgeball.*

*During school time, teachers were very strict since most kids in Antigua are very rude. Punishment included spankings and so on, it sounds harsh, but it was the only means that worked, trust me I experienced it. We also lose our recesses and stay after class if continued to be rude. We were perceived like any other school in Antigua.*

*See Antigua is much different than the states. People do not hate each other, we get along, it's that Caribbean thing. Things like independence would bring all schools together in one recreation ground and make us sing the national anthem and so on. This would bring people together and create peace. I guess the only thing different that the states would be that we do not have all the resources. However, we have willing souls that want to teach us both academically and spiritually.<sup>27</sup>*

---

<sup>27</sup> Wiik

### **St. John's Lutheran School, Antigua – A near anomaly**

So why is the congregation in Antigua one of the few missions in our WELS world that has a school? Other than Japan, Hong Kong, and the Apache mission, no other WELS world mission has something similar to an elementary school. Even though Antigua is considered a home mission, it is located outside the continental United States. However, the Antiguan mission more closely resembles that of a world mission than that of a home mission. Also it is important to remember is that Antigua was started by the FAL, not WELS. Rev. Burch saw a need and addressed it. The WELS took over one year later never with the intention of closing the school or mission.

Anatole Wiik, former student there, answered this question with only a few words. “We have willing souls that want to teach us both academically and spiritually.”<sup>28</sup> From early on those associated with St. John's have always agreed with him. They saw a desperate need in the eyes of the Antiguans. They not only needed a better education, but they needed to hear about their Savior. The people of St. John's have always wanted to share that saving message to an island full of people that would be stranded eternally if they never heard it. They have always seen their school as an important asset and mission arm of their church.

Finally, it is God's indescribable grace that established and sustains both St. John's Lutheran Church and School. He is the one who had the wisdom to initiate and sustain it despite the stormy seas of challenges that have crashed against it. As one of their long-time teachers so aptly put it, “Antigua has a school because of the blessings of a very important Father who knows how to guide events.”<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Wiik

<sup>29</sup> Needham

### **Bibliography**

- - , "Our Lutheran Ministry in Antigua," January 6, 1998.
- - , Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Statistical Report, 2003.

### **Interviews**

- Henrich, Rev. Mark, on November 30, 2004. Pastor Henrich served as pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church, St. John's, Antigua, from 1987-2003. He is currently serving as pastor at Atonement Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- Meyer, Henry, on November 27, 2004. Mr. Meyer served as upper-grade teacher at St. John's Lutheran School, St. John's, Antigua, from 1974-1975. He is currently serving as eighth-grade teacher and principal at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- Needham, Dennis, on December 10, 2004. Mr. Needham served as teacher and principal from 1976-2001 and as Development Director from 2001-2003 at St. John's Lutheran School, St. John's, Antigua. He is currently teaching English in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in People's Republic of China.
- Wiik, Anatole on December 11, 2004. Mr. Wiik attended St. John's Lutheran School, St. John's, Antigua, from 1989-1995. He is currently a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.





This is one of the buildings used before the mission built its own.  
It was used before the school began in 1974.



This was the view looking from the church and school down to the harbor.  
The cross was always lit and could be seen from cruise ships that came into the harbor.



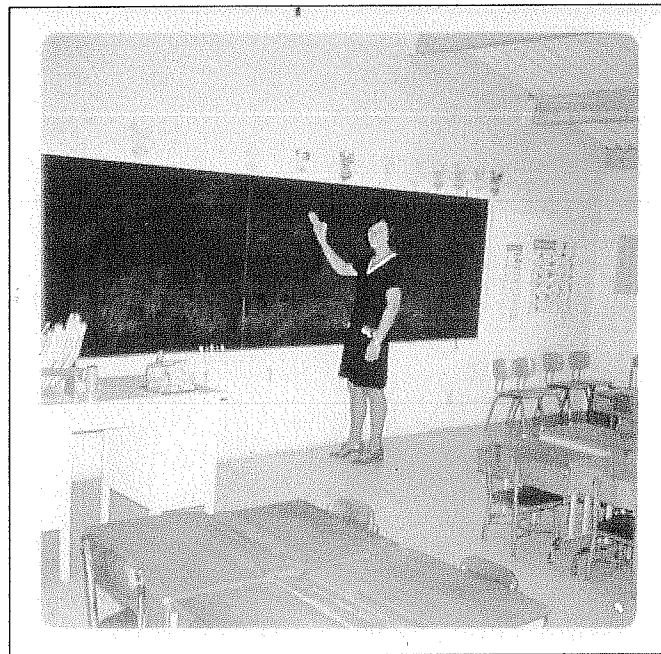
St. John's Lutheran Church in 1974.  
The school was in the section on the left.



The two end rooms were the school at its start.



Upper grade teacher Henry Meyer



Lower grade teacher Helen Kuehl



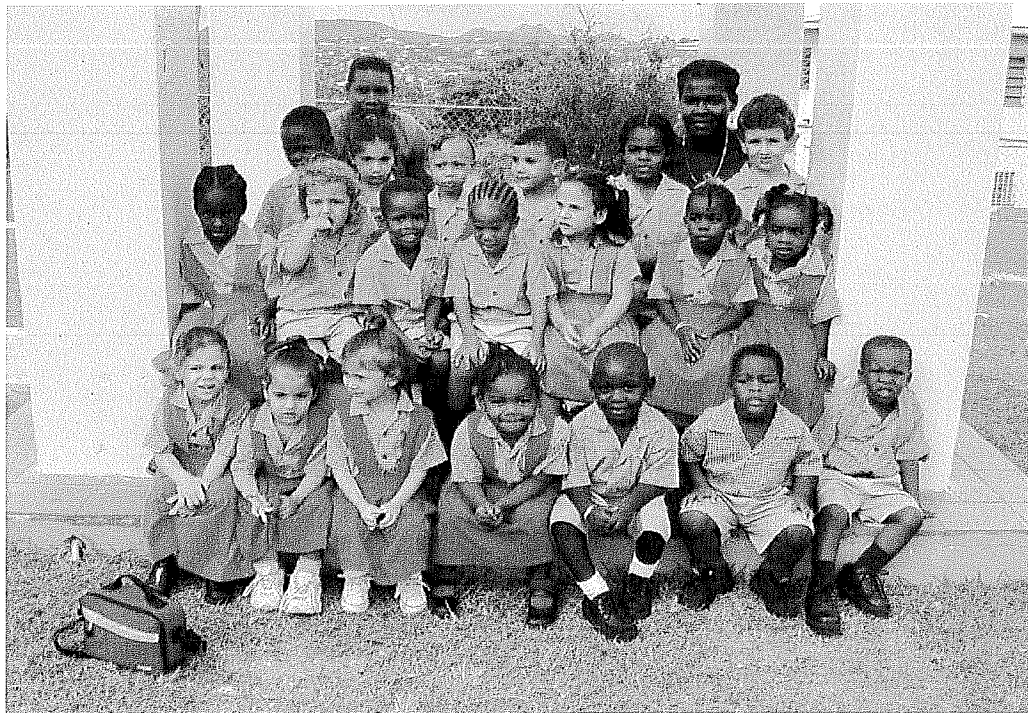
St. John's church, flag, and tower seen in this view from the front yard. The school is off to the left and not visible in this picture. The tower was erected for the 25th anniversary in 1998. The church was dedicated in June of 1976.



Four happy Antiguans are in this picture with the school in background.



Here are students participating in culture day which was held in alternating years at the time of Independence Day. Many cultures are represented on Antigua and in the school.



Sitting under the bell tower is the preschool (3 year-old group).



St. John's school pan group. At least two groups of students play steel pan for various occasions, including Sunday mornings.