

ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF JEFFERSON, WISCONSIN:
BRINGING THE LORD'S MESSAGE OF SALVATION THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

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About the time that the State of Wisconsin officially joined the Union of the United States of America on May 29, 1848, a number of people from the staunch Lutheran areas of Bavaria and the Northern part of Germany, especially Pomerania, were moving into the Jefferson County vicinity just east of the City.

Getting to Wisconsin from the Atlantic Coast posed a major problem as there were no paved highways, only unmarked trails, if they were fortunate to find even that much to give them a direction. However, carving out a home in the wilderness and eking out a living for their families was not far behind in the constant fight for survival.

Naturally when they arrived, they found no church waiting for them here. In spite of neverending work, they still followed the Lord's example of rest and remembered the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy. Thus they attempted to fill their spiritual void and need by gathering in the various homes on Sunday, when one would read a sermon from the collections brought from their homelands.

Needless to say, this left a great deal to be desired, so with the same courage that brought them here, and in spite of their poverty, they resolutely set out to have a church, a house of worship. In the spring of 1851, 64 families joined together in organizing "THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF SAINT JOHN". Of these original charter members, fifteen of the family names still appear on the membership list today.

That same year on two acres of land donated by Nic. Bayreuther and Carl Mayritz, who incidentally are not listed as charter members, a church was built. This small building was called the "Christberg," and is still called by that name to

this day.

The congregation now had a church but no pastor, and needless to say the devil and his false prophets made altogether too many inroads into the fold and robbed it. It bore out the Savior's observation, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few." They were unable to have their own Shepherd for a period of about seven years, and had to be content with occasional visits from neighboring pastors, and such names as Mayer, Biel and Zink of Helenville and Sand of Watertown are mentioned in the records.

In 1858, E. Ruppnow consented to take charge of the young congregation. He was known to the members, as he had on occasion read sermons. He, however, was not a pastor, but rather a teacher by profession. Whatever he lacked in formal ministerial training, he made up in missionary zeal, and many sheep were gathered into the fold during his service, so that it became obvious that a larger church was needed, and very soon.

The center of population had now moved westward, leaving the old church toward the east of many of its members, and it must be borne in mind that there were only two ways to get to church, namely walk or by horse and buggy. About this time steps were being taken to obtain land in the City of Jefferson, the property that is the present church site. The foresight of the founders must be admired, because their move proved to be correct. The far-seeing men prevailed upon their brethren to make the move to that place, when the new edifice would be built. Much of the early record of St. John's history is unavailable, but that which is available bears out the fact that the gracious Lord was

indeed present with these people.

Although as early as 1857, steps were taken to obtain land in the city of Jefferson, before St. John's had their own pastor, it was not until 1860 that the first edifice was built on the present site of the church. The building was dedicated to the service of God on April 1, 1861. With the advent of the new church home in the city, it appeared that there might now be two congregations instead of only one. Some members insisted that services be held at the Christberg, so to avoid internal strife in the yet infant organization, for a few years services were held at the two sites on alternate Sundays.

The pastor was engaged from year to year just like any common laborer on a job. Rev. Ruppnow began his service with St. John's in the year 1858, and he was again "hired" to work in the Kingdom of God for another year. The membership was not firmly grounded in the true faith as we have come to know it. Many people had a very hazy idea of the real principles of Lutheranism and many had an antagonistic attitude toward it. The right to be a member was extended to anyone who professed to be a Protestant, led an outwardly moral life, and agreed to assume his financial obligations. During Rev. Ruppnow's tenure in office in St. John's the membership grew to number over one hundred families. After the move to the present site, it was decided to keep the Christberg as a memorial chapel. The building was veneered with brick to prevent deterioration. The Christberg has also become synonymous with cemetery, where many of the members have been carried to their final resting place. On June 15, 1913, lightning struck the building and destroyed it. Immediately the

building process was begun and on November 9th of that same year, the memorial chapel was dedicated.

In 1863, Pastor C. Goldammer accepted the Call to Jefferson, after the membership acquiesced to his insistence that his Call be permanent. This was an indication as to his attitudes concerning true Lutheran doctrine. Under his direction and advice a new constitution was drafted which made it very plain that sound Lutheran doctrine and practice would prevail here. This document was signed by 181 members, which indicates that the membership had almost tripled in less than twenty year. It was not only a growing congregation; it was also an acting congregation. A parsonage was purchased as well as a house and lot west of the church, which was acquired for school purposes. Other minor changes were also accomplished in the church building.

In 1870, when the Rev. Goldammer moved to Green Bay, the Rev. Ungrodt succeeded him. That same year, 1870, Christian training and instruction of the children became an established institution. Mr. Oberstorsten was the man selected as the first principal of the new Christian Day School. This was a giant step forward and the records indicate that this was not easy for the yet young church. In 1871, a parsonage was built at a cost of \$1200. This home is now occupied by the present school principal.

The Rev. Ungrodt proved to be grounded firmly in God's Word and when the question of secret societies arose, he took a firm stand. In 1874 the constitution was revised with a paragraph clearly defining his stand on the matter. How much impetus secret societies had gained is shown by the fact that only slightly over 100 members affixed their names to the new document.

This shows the strong defection from St. John's Lutheran, or rather from God's Word, as the Constitution had been previously signed by 181 members. Under the Rev. Ungrodt's spiritual guidance the congregation grew by leaps and bounds, proving that God does not forsake His own. After a two-year leave of absence, Rev. Ungrodt was forced to resign in 1881 because of a serious throat problem.

The Rev. Vogel followed him as shepherd of the flock. His pastorate had the longest duration of anyone, lasting twenty-nine years. This, of course, had to leave an indelible mark on the fold, and he was long remembered in the hearts of the members. His mild manner and exceptional abilities as a sermonizer, under God's blessings, no doubt contributed to the steady and healthy growth of the flock. Thus the building erected in 1860, even though remodeled somewhat, now did not have enough room for services. In December, 1895, a new church was dedicated to the Lord. That is the church which is used for services today. Exactly 29 years to the day that he started serving St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, the Rev. Vogel was carried out to his final resting place.

Prof. H. K. Moussa, a Wisconsin Synod man, became the next pastor and his 14 years of dedicated service to the church and school contributed to the growth of both of them. It became necessary to enlarge the school in 1912 by adding a second story and the teaching staff was increased to three in a few years. In 1917, the present parsonage was purchased for the sum of \$4500, made possible by liberal contributions as large as \$2000. At this time the old parsonage was remodeled to be used from then

on as the home of the school principal. During Moussa's tenure, the double service was introduced for Sundays. This of course increased the work load, and to relieve it somewhat, the congregation elected Rev. H. Jungkuntz as assistant pastor, a duty he filled for a number of years. Much of the credit for the church and school must be given to Pastor Moussa, and others like him, who strove to maintain it and cause it to grow against overwhelming odds. In 1924, Rev. Moussa accepted a call to Fond du Lac.

From the personal recollections of this writer's grandfather, O. W. Jungkuntz, who was then principal, it seems as though some people, including the congregation's president, George Kispert, resented the fact that Pastor Moussa accepted the call to Fond du Lac. These people felt reluctant to call another Wisconsin Synod man. But they later relented, and a call was extended to O. Kuhlow, who was from the Wisconsin Synod. Rev. Kuhlow was installed in August of 1924. As is true of every faithful servant of the Lord, and Pastor Kuhlow was most certainly one of them, his untiring service was blessed in ample measure. In the 24 years he served St. John's, he accomplished many things. His guidance is evidenced in the resolutions passed in the annual meeting of 1925, to wit: to join the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, install a new roof on the church, change the wiring system and light fixtures, redecorate the church interior and woodwork, retire the existing church debt, enlarge the balcony and choir loft, install a new three-manual organ, and celebrate the diamond jubilee on May 30th and 31st of 1926.

By 1944, Pastor Kuhlow's health was declining. As a result a call was sent to the Rev. Delmar Brick to assist him as well

as to teach a full time class in the school. He fulfilled this dual duty for the school year of 1944-45 after which he accepted a call to full time work in the preaching ministry. In 1945 a group of members asked for permission to form a society known as the Christian Education Society (CES). Its sole function was to create interest, as well as raise funds for a new school building. Thus under Pastor Kuhlow's guidance the first step was taken to alleviate the crowded conditions in the school. During the last few years of his service his impaired health made it more difficult to carry out his many duties in the way his conscience dictated. He therefore regretfully resigned as the shepherd in May of 1948 and in November of 1949 the Savior called him to his eternal rest, and his body was laid away on the "Christberg" where he had committed many members.

In 1949, Pastor R. Mueller accepted the Call to be the spiritual leader and was installed in his office on October 10, of that year. His Call stressed the fact that a new school was sorely needed, and under his untiring leadership, the congregation voted in the 1949 annual meeting to build one to be dedicated in the 100th anniversary year of 1951. This timetable was met and the school was dedicated on December 2, 1951. The CES turned over about \$40,000 in funds gathered by 1949, and it officially disbanded in 1952 with mission accomplished. In April 1956, a resolution was passed eliminating services in the German language except for the first service on the first Sunday of January, April, July, and October and to celebrate Holy Communion in German on those dates. In the October meeting of the same year it was agreed to have English Communion services on the

first Sunday of each month except the afore mentioned dates.

Already as early as 1955, some members of St. John's Ev. Lutheran belonged to the Lutheran High School Association. This group was formed to generate interest in a Lutheran School on the secondary level. This movement gradually gained momentum so that in the fall of 1958, the first Lutheran High School of that area was opened in the now vacant school of St. Paul's Lutheran in Fort Atkinson. Pastor Lloyd Huebner was the first principal of the school which began with the ninth grade and then added a class each year so that the students might continue their Christian Education through the twelfth grade. In June of 1960, St. John's voted to participate in a fund-raising drive for the new High School to be built at Lake Mills, Wisconsin. When the new Lakeside High School was built, a federation was formed in order to borrow funds for its construction. St. John's joined this federation in April of 1964. Since that time support for Lakeside has grown at St. John's.

An interesting note from the annual congregational meeting of 1960 was the report of the treasurer of the school finance committee indicating that the school debt now totaled \$48.00. At this point in the meeting, action was postponed while a collection was taken from the members present. As a result the treasurer amended his report stating that there was now a cash balance of \$14.36 after the school debt was paid.

Late in the year 1963, Pastor Mueller suffered a heart attack and for a period of time was unable to perform all his duties as the pastor. The Vicar at that time, Mr. Joel Ehlert, agreed to postpone his final year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

and aided St. John's for an additional period of time during Mueller's recuperation. As the years passed, the mental anguish as well as the physical load became more and more difficult for Pastor Mueller. As a result in the April 29, 1968 meeting of the congregation, he requested that he be allowed to retire as a full time servant and that he assume the duties heretofore performed by a Vicar. This action was to be effective upon the installation of a new pastor of St. John's. The congregation granted his request with heavy heart. By this time the congregation of St. John's had grown in numbers to over 1800 souls, almost 1200 communicants and about 700 families. The work load was becoming more and more difficult, if not impossible, to perform adequately. Mueller's service as assistant pastor continued until Sept. 6, 1969, when on a Saturday while in church preparing for Sunday's services, he was called to his eternal reward, after serving his Savior at St. John's almost 21 years.

On October 20, 1968, the congregation called as Pastor, the Rev. Richard Lauersdorf of Ontario, Wisconsin. He was installed in that office on January 5, 1969, and is serving in that capacity at the time of this writing. Under his leadership and guidance, and with the Lord's gracious blessings resting on his work, St. John's Lutheran Congregation has continued to prosper and grow.

From a humble beginning of 64 families at the Christberg in the year 1851, the congregation at St. John's Lutheran Church now numbers over 1900 souls, with about 1500 communicants, and 850 families. These statistics show that the Holy Spirit certainly has been working in the Message that the faithful workers of St. John's have been called to preach; namely, the Lord's message of

salvation through Jesus Christ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The information and materials used in writing this paper were gleaned from old anniversary booklets, church records, and the personal recollections of the essayist's grandfather, O. W. Jungkuntz.

Mr. Jungkuntz served in his office of principal for a total of 43 years, making his the longest record of service at St. John's in the teaching or preaching ministry. At present time he is still serving as congregational secretary on a part-time basis.