

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Princeton, WI.
1864-1997

Church History Thesis
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God's mercy and love can be seen in many ways and at various times throughout our lives. We would do well to daily thank God, using the words of Martin Luther in his explanation to the First Article, for all that he does for us.

I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, cattle and all I own, and all that I need to keep my body and life, and by defending me against all danger and guarding and protecting me from all evil. All this God does because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. For this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey him. (Kuske 139).

Martin Luther penned these words hundreds of years ago, but the people of St. John's Lutheran Church in Princeton, Wisconsin, are thanking God for the same reasons today. Our Lord has blessed them with 133 years of his loving care. He has preserved his people through many difficult times in our county's history and in our synod's history. The Lord has given them faithful leaders who proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one message all need to hear.

The 1860's were a very exciting time in the history of Lutheranism in America. The Wisconsin Synod was entering its second decade as a synod while the Michigan and Minnesota Synods were just beginning. In 1863, just one year before the founding of St. John's, the seminary in Watertown, WI, began its work. Edward Moldehnke, the first professor at the seminary in Watertown, and Pastor Deihlman, the preacher that first served St. John's families before the calling of their first pastor, had something in common. They were both Reisprediger's, traveling preachers.

The Beginning of St. John's

The Evangelische Lutherische St. Johannis Gemeinde, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, has been in Princeton almost as long as Princeton has been in existence. Princeton was founded in 1848. Nine years later families of the Montello, Mecan, and Newton areas called Pastor Deihlman to serve them as pastor. Pastor Deihlman served families of the Princeton area as well for records show that Emma Elnora Lueck of Princeton was baptized by Pastor Deihlman on January 10, 1861. He also served Lutheran families in the area of Dayton from 1855 to 1857. He was not able to preach to them every week but served their needs to the best of his ability.

Pastor J. J. Kern

In 1864 the sixteen Lutheran families in the Princeton area realized that they needed a full time pastor to serve their needs. They called Pastor J. J. Kern, of Fond du Lac, WI, to serve them as pastor. He accepted and was installed on June 1, 1864. A few weeks later the men who had called Pastor Kern gathered together to officially establish the congregation. Carl Lemke, Gottlieb Jahnke, Aug. Thiel, Julius Sommerfeldt, Fred Schwarz, F. T. Yahr, Aug. Swanke, Aug. Weist, Reich, Aug. Siegler, Fred Dargatz. W. Lueck, Siegismund Luethe, Maulick, Persage and Weckworth met at the August Thiel Store, in downtown Princeton, to draw up a constitution and file papers of incorporation. "Evangelische Lutherische St. Johannis Gemeinde", St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded. This young congregation then decided it was time to purchase land. They purchased a plot of land north of what is known as the "old parsonage" on the corner of South Clinton and Wisconsin streets.

Pastor J. P. Lucas

Pastor Kern left St. John's in the spring of 1865 for Iowa. The work being done on plans for a church were consequently delayed for a short time. Pastor J.P. Lucas was called in November of 1865 and accepted the opportunity to serve St. John's as their pastor. Apparently he was sent to America by a missionary society in Germany. This was just 3 years before the Wisconsin Synod would resolve in convention in Racine to break fellowship with the missionary societies in Germany. Pastor J. P. Lucas was installed on the third Sunday in Advent.

As can sometimes, unfortunately, happen Pastor Lucas and the congregation had problems cooperating. For some reason or another the congregation could never seem to get enough men to gather together for congregational meetings in the first year Pastor Lucas was at St. John's. Many meetings were scheduled, but none were held due to a lack of a quorum. One year and one month after his installation there were finally enough men present to hold a meeting. On December 26, 1866 the voters decided to build a stone church right next door to the old parsonage. There was to be a schoolroom in the basement.

A few months later in February of 1867 another congregational meeting was held. Some changes were made to the plans for the first church. It would not be built of stone, but rather, of wood. It would not be built next door to the old parsonage, but on the land the church purchased when it was first organized. The wooden church would be 46 feet long, 28 feet wide and 18 feet high. Its foundation would be 4 feet above ground. This first church was built

and dedicated in 1867. However, shortly after the dedication Pastor Lucas decided to leave the Princeton congregation. He didn't feel well received or accepted by the entire congregation. He took a call to Franklin.

Pastor John Hoyer

In August of 1869 Pastor John August Hoyer received and accepted the call to serve St. John's. He and his family lived in Eldorado, WI. Members from Princeton moved Pastor Hoyer and his family from Eldorado to Princeton by ox cart. This was the beginning of a long relationship with the congregation and the Hoyer family that was truly a blessing from God. With God's help this family would be a part of St. John's public ministry for the next sixty-six years.

God blessed Pastor Hoyer's work with the congregation. The church grew spiritually and physically. School was held in the parsonage. The congregation also had a very good relationship with Mrs. Hoyer. "She always had a friendly word for young and old alike. When she passed away in 1876, it was said that Princeton had never seen such a large funeral" (125th 3). Pastor John Hoyer didn't only serve in Princeton. He also faithfully taught God's word to families in the communities of Mecan, Dayton and Montello. "All in all, he cared for perhaps 500 communicant members, scattered throughout the area around Princeton" (125th 4). It is truly amazing to think about how those early pastors in America served many congregations across many miles without modern transportation. They had neither the quality of roads nor the use of automobiles. Truly, the Lord blessed his church with faithful men willing to give much time and energy to the ministry of the gospel. It is good that present

pastors and congregational members always keep in mind the many blessings, such as good transportation, that the Lord has blessed us with today when we go into all the world to spread the gospel message.

When Pastor Hoyer moved to Princeton in 1869 one member of his family who moved with him was his 11 year old son, Adolph. In 1880, when he was 22 years old, he was called to assist his father in serving the four communities for which he was then responsible. With the growth of the congregations, the work had become too much for the aged pastor. Pastor Adolph Hoyer served the Mekan and Montello congregations while his father continued to serve Princeton and Dayton. This arrangement continued for four years. The congregation in Princeton had special cause for rejoicing when, in May of 1881, Pastor Adolph Hoyer married Clara Thiel, a daughter of that congregation.

By 1884 a change was necessary in Princeton. The Synod saw how large the congregation was becoming and so officially Montello and Mekan congregations were separated from Princeton and Dayton thereby forming two parishes. Because of the increase in members Princeton needed a new church building. They had outgrown the existing church. It was decided to build a new church using as much of the old church as possible. The new church would be made of wood and in the shape of a cross. This church stood on the lot where the Christian Day School now stands. The other significant change in 1884 was that Pastor John Hoyer decided to retire. Pastor Adolph Hoyer was called to assume full-time the ministry at St. John's which he accepted. In the fall of 1884

he was installed as pastor. Shortly after that on the fourth Sunday of Advent the new church building was completed and dedicated.

Pastor Adolph Hoyer

Pastor Adolph Hoyer began his work in Princeton in 1884. His ministry would take the congregation through the turning of the century and W.W.I. He served until 1935. One organization that began during his ministry was the Ladies Aid or the "Frauen Verein" as it was called in the early years. The Ladies Aid became quite active in serving the congregation.

By the time Pastor Adolph Hoyer had been in Princeton 25 years it was decided that the congregation needed another new church building. The Lord had caused the congregation to prosper so wonderfully that they had outgrown their present building again. This time it was decided to build a completely new church. This church would be built of stone, again in the shape of a cross. The congregation pledged \$14,000 so they decided to build a church at the cost of \$25,000. They purchased the land across the street from the old church for \$2,000. The new church was 104 feet long, 72 feet high and 54 feet wide. The cornerstone was laid on Oct. 18, 1908. Special festival services were held that day. The guest preachers were Professor August Pieper from the Seminary and Rev. C. Dowidat, of Oshkosh.

The new church was truly a sight to behold. Members and organizations of the church were very generous with their donations. "The Ladies Aid supplied the electric lighting fixtures and later furnished rooms in the basement. The young people donated the funds to beautify the altar and pulpit.

Individuals donated the colored windows, lights for the altar, and new altar and pulpit books. A new and larger organ with 670 speaking pipes and 16 stops was installed for \$2,000" (125th 5).

A little over a year after the cornerstone was laid the dedication service for the new church was held. Guest pastors for the occasion on the fourth Sunday of Advent in 1909 were Pastor E. Hoyer of West Bend, Professor August Pieper and Professor J. P. Koehler of the Seminary. Everyone rejoiced over the wonderful and gracious blessing of a new church that the Lord had enabled them to build for the glory of his name.

October of 1914 brought the next milestone for this congregation: the 50th Jubilee of St. John's. Because of the long history with the congregations in Mecan, Montello, and Dayton they were invited to help celebrate. The Ladies Aid served around 1500 people dinner and supper for this occasion.

The Lord, in his grace, would continue to use Pastor Adolph Hoyer for a number of years. The Lord blessed his faithful preaching and teaching of the word. In September of 1930 Pastor Adolph Hoyer celebrated his 50th year in the ministry which was also his 50th year at St. John's. The celebration services were attended by the entire congregation, many friends, fellow pastors, and Synod officials. Guest speakers were Prof. August Pieper and Rev. August Zich of Green Bay.

In 1931 this beloved pastor and his wife celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. Again, many friends and relatives were present to celebrate. The Lord called home Mrs. Adolph Hoyer on Palm Sunday in 1934. In 1935 Pastor

Adolph Hoyer's health began to fail. He asked for an assistant. Rev. Harold Warnke of Platte, So. Dakota was called as an assistant. February 2, 1936 Rev. Adolph Hoyer preached his farewell sermon after serving 56 years at St. John's. On October 26, 1937 the Lord called him home to heaven. German and English sermons were preached at the funeral. The congregation mourned their loss, but rejoiced in God's love and certain promise of the resurrection to eternal life with God in heaven. On a personal note, I give special thanks to God for this pastor because he baptized and later confirmed my grandfather, Arden Golz.

Pastor Harold Warnke

Pastor Harold F. Warnke was installed on February 16, 1936 as pastor of St. John's. Present day members of St. John's remember him as a kind and faithful pastor. While at St. John's, Pastor Warnke was blessed by God to get married and have a son. Pastor Warnke and his wife, Anna, and their son, Richard, lived in Princeton and served the congregation from 1936 - 1949.

Under Pastor Warnke St. John's established a Sunday School program in April of 1936. Sunday School is very important to the life and spiritual growth of a congregation. Prov. 22:6 says "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." The training of young children is vital to their lives as Christians. To this very day the Sunday School program has continued at St. John's. As is customary to this point, the children of the Lutheran Elementary school are not encouraged to attend because they hear the Bible lessons in school. There have been many volunteers who have faithfully

given their time and talents over the years to help in the Christian education of the children. May God bless them all and their efforts.

There were several milestones during his ministry at St. John's. One was the Diamond Jubilee on June 18, 1939. Services were held with guest speakers Rev. Walter Pankow of New London, president of the Northern Wisconsin District; Prof. Walter Schumann of Northwestern College, Watertown; and Rev. Paul Bergman of Menasha. Secondly, in 1941 a congregational library was begun, which would later be incorporated into the school library. Thirdly, a Spiritual Welfare Committee was organized to maintain contact with the men serving in World War II. Fourthly, a School Building fund was established to collect money for the building of a new school. In 1949 this fund had reached \$20,000.

In 1949 Pastor Harold Warnke received a call to Dale, WI which he accepted. The congregation granted his release. Again, on a personal note, I thank God for this pastor's work at St. John's for he married my grandmother, Luella Golz, to her first husband, Norman Semro in 1940. He also baptized my father, Ronald Semro, in 1942.

Pastor Walter L. Strohschein

Pastor Strohschein was called in the fall of 1949 from his Dundee and Campbellsport congregations. He accepted and was installed in Princeton on December 4, 1949.

The plans for a new school begun under Pastor Warnke were eagerly continued under Pastor Strohschein. The cornerstone was laid on July 16, 1950,

and the school was dedicated a little less than a year later on June 10, 1951. The school was completed at a cost of \$70,000. The new school was the finest building in the city. It was regarded as so sound, it was designated as the place of refuge in the event of a tornado. Its stone and steel construction was and remains absolutely solid. It is still a fine looking building, even though it is now nearing 50 years old. Quite appropriately, Pastor Harold Warnke returned from Dale, WI, to be the guest preacher for the dedication of the school.

A member described Pastor Strohschein to me as "a real mover". He was eager to do ministry in the congregation. There were many things to be done. Not to mention all his regular duties as pastor of St. John's, Pastor Strohschein served as president of the Northern Wisconsin District from 1950-1952, and as vice-president from 1952-1954. He was also the visiting elder of the Winnebago Pastoral Conference for 23 years and Circuit Visitor for 4 years. He served on the Synod's Board of Trustees as well.

When Pastor Strohschein served as District President he was highly regarded by his fellow pastors. His strong personality, of course, could invite head to head encounters. Once, when some of the pastors of a couple of even larger churches than Princeton were going on about how much their congregations had given for missions, he felt compelled to demonstrate to them that, in actuality, no one was ahead of St. John's in this area. Although the dollar amount of others might have been greater, the per person giving was the highest from St. John's. Interestingly, this was accomplished without any constant mention of the need for giving to missions and, almost the opposite, with very

little mention about our work as a Synod. The key was that the congregation at that time, under his guidance, assigned one-third of all giving to missions. There were no special envelopes and no special compartments, just a straight 33% off the top.

source of this information?

A pastor who fondly remembers Pastor Strohschein's work for Synod also remembers his feelings on full time Synod officials. He could see no reason to have "full time" offices in the Synod being held by pastors, who should be shepherding the flock. Grudgingly, he accepted the full time presidency of O. J. Naumann, perhaps even because of the wonderful personality of Pastor Naumann, but in no way did he think the WELS needed a full time treasurer from the ranks of the pastoral ministry, or executive secretaries for this area and that area of the Synod. He was often heard saying, "If there's that much work to be done, then get one or two other guys to share the load." As the WELS has grown we certainly can see the need for full time administrators, but we do well, as a Synod, to heed the subtle warning in Pastor Strohschein's statement. Administrators should be pastors first, and administrators second. In other words, do your work as administrators with a pastoral heart. Our first and foremost task is always the spreading of the precious gospel message.

source?

Many improvements were done on the church between 1949 and 1977. In 1957 a new Wicks electric pipe organ was installed. The steeples were painted, a communion rail was installed, restrooms added, and the electric wiring updated. This was truly a busy time for the congregation. It was important especially because of the 100th anniversary of the church in 1964. The

Centennial Celebration was held on May 30 and June 6 1965. The guest preacher for the May 30th services was Pastor Harold Warnke, who was at that time principal of Fox Valley Lutheran High School. The guest preacher for the June 6th services Pastor Oscar Naumann, president of the Wisconsin Synod. Ronald Semro, now a pastor in Saginaw, MI, presided at the liturgy for both the May 30th and June 6th services. Pastor Strohschein retired from the ministry in 1977. For many years after though he assisted whenever needed.

Again on a personal note, I thank God for Pastor Strohschein's compassionate ministry to my father and grandmother at the early death of their father and husband. A few years later he had the joy of marrying my grandparents, Arden and Luella Golz. He was also very instrumental in encouraging my father to enter the ministry.

On July 13, 1977 Pastor Robert Pless was called to be the 7th pastor of St. John's. He accepted and was installed on August 28, 1977.

Pastor Robert Pless

Pastor Robert Pless graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, WI, in 1972. He was assigned to Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bismark, North Dakota. He moved there with his wife, Sharon, and was ordained and installed on July 9, 1972. The years spent there were very good years for Pastor Pless. He and his wife were surrounded with warm and caring people. While celebrating his 32nd birthday on July 13, 1977 Pastor Pless received the call to serve St. John's in Princeton. After consideration he decided to accept the call. On August 28, 1977 he was installed at St. John's. This year,

1997, marks the 20th Anniversary for Pastor Pless in Princeton and his 25th Anniversary in the ministry. He thanks God for allowing him to serve the church for many years and especially for his many wonderful years among the faithful and caring members of St. John's. He has had many calls in his 20 years at St. John's: Waukesha, Wisconsin; Europe; Lafayette, Indiana; Round Lake Park, Illinois; Lutheran Church in Central Africa, all of which he has returned. The Lord has led him to continue serving St. John's.

Pastor Pless shared with me some of his special memories and experiences at St. John's. On July 25, 1980, shortly after midnight, he was startled by the loudest cracking noise he had ever heard. He heard the fire whistle blowing. Then there was a knock at his door. "Pastor, the church is on fire!" His heart sank. The steeple had been hit by lightning. The Princeton fire department was able to keep the fire from spreading while the Ripon fire department was called in with its aerial ladder to finish putting out the fire. A couple of weeks later the steeple was hit a second time. Unbelievably, that wasn't the final strike. The third strike happened a few days later. When the steeple was hit for the third time it sent slate shingles flying across the street through windows into the classrooms of the school. Thankfully, in all these strikes, no one was hurt. In time, the steeple has been repaired.

The next special memory would be the 125th Anniversary in 1989. The extensive remodeling done in the church was a huge project. In fact, for a while the congregation was unable to meet for services in the church due to all the painting, refinishing, and adding new lights. But the time and slight

inconvenience was well worth it. The finished product is truly wonderful. Although he admits he is probably a little biased, Pastor Pless feels that this church is one of the most beautiful he has ever seen. God has certainly blessed this congregation.

Pastor Pless had some very interesting thoughts on the overall ministry of St. John's. Many congregations today have the problem that families move away from the church during their 20's and 30's, and don't come back until their 40's or 50's. As is typical for small town congregations St. John's has that problem to a degree too. Many of the young families move away from Princeton for bigger cities with more opportunities. Pastor Pless feels that, of course, it is a disappointment when members move away, but he thanks the Lord for the church's ministry to those in the community without dwelling on those who have moved away.

Pastor Pless sees St. John's role this way. St. John's faithfully preaches and teaches the word of God to those who remain. Young families who do remain in Princeton are actively encouraged to remain faithful to their Lord and Savior during those very busy years of their 20's to 40's. St. John's offers a fine Lutheran Elementary School for the children of the congregation. This year there are 85 enrolled with 11 in the 8th grade. Pastor encourages those that are moving away from Princeton to become faithful members in another WELS church.

When people do move into the community, usually to retire, the congregation can again serve them with the word of God at that time in their

lives. In general, the congregation does its best with God's help to faithfully proclaim the word of God, to nurture Christians for service perhaps in other congregations, but, naturally, always willing to serve them again when they return to the quiet and peaceful town of Princeton later in life.

God has blessed St. John's to this very day. The congregation has souls that need to hear the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to help serve the members with the word of God and also to help train young pastors for service, St. John's has been active these past two years in the vicar program of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. During the 1995-1996 school year, Mark Walters was assigned to serve as St. John's first vicar. Mark is presently awaiting call day at the Seminary when, God willing, he will be assigned to serve a congregation. The present vicar is Scott Mund. Both Scott and Mark have been faithful in their tasks as vicars at St. John's.

Scott shared some special memories with me about his vicar year to this point. Pastor keeps him busy with hospital calls, teaching confirmation classes and Bible class. The vicar preaches every other week. On Tuesdays, after he preaches at church, he preaches at the retirement home and nursing home. He very much enjoys his time with the youth group. He wishes the youth group could meet more often. Scott shares the concerns of many vicars when he wishes there were more continuity from year to year. When the vicar leaves and the new vicar arrives he has a lot of catching up to do which is always difficult. He also enjoys helping out his elderly neighbors. The generosity of the members continues to amaze him. He thanks God for such kind and caring people who

take time to encourage and help out the vicar. The vicar program is a wonderful opportunity to learn so much about the day to day life, the practical aspects, of being a pastor.

Pastor Pless is very excited about the most recent task the church has undertaken. In 1991 the recommendation was put before the voters for the building of an elevator. The many steps leading up to the church were a problem for many people, especially in the winter. Sadly, a few people have slipped and fallen quite seriously on the steps. By 1995 the elevator fund became a reality, but it was no longer just an elevator. The members had decided to add on an addition that would include a beautiful new entryway into the church. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held between the services on Sunday May 26, 1996. The project is now in the final stages of completion. There is enough room inside the church for the members to gather before and after for fellowship. New offices and meeting rooms and additional parking spaces have also been completed. This is truly a wonderful addition that will benefit the congregation in many ways. Dedication is scheduled for May 4, 1997. Pastor Ronald Semro will serve as guest preacher for the festival service.

God has also blessed St. John's Lutheran Church with many organizations to aid in the life of the congregation: Ladies Aid, Christian Education Society, Men's Club, Gleaners, and the Youth Group. These groups, along with the church secretary, custodian, volunteers on Work Day Projects, Faculty and volunteers at the Lutheran Elementary School, Boy and Girl Pioneers, and anyone I may have missed, all work together in loving service to their Lord. We

give thanks and praise to God for St. John's and pray that he continually keep
this flock in his loving arms.

God the Father, Son and Spirit,
Ever blessed Trinity.
Humbly now our thanks we offer,
All unworthy though we be.
Freely you have showered blessings
Countless as the ocean's sands,
Blessings rich and overflowing
On the labors of our hands.

Grant that we your Word may cherish
And its purity retain.
Lord, unless you are the builder,
All our labor is in vain.
Keep us from all pride and boasting,
Vanity and foolish trust,
Knowing that our work without you
Soon will crumble into dust.

God of grace and love and blessing,
Yours alone shall be the praise.
Give us hearts to trust you truly,
Hands to serve you all our days.
Lord, bestow your future blessing
Till we join the heav'nly host,
There to praise and serve you ever,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

-- CW 623, Stanzas 1,3, and 4.

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