

34

"HOW ARE THE MIGHTY FALLEN!"

St. John's, Eighth and Vliet,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Senior Church History - C.H. 373:

Lutheranism in America

Prof. Edward C. Fredrich

Jonathan H. Rupprecht

April 4, 1978

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	Page 1
"MIGHTY"	
Beginnings	Page 1
Membership growth	Page 2
Building.	Page 3
Daughter congregations	Page 4
Role in Synod	Page 5
Synodical Conference	Page 6
Church attendance	Page 7
Finances	Page 7
Christian Day School	Page 8
"FALLEN"	
Present conditions	Page 9
Changing neighborhood	Page 10
Change in school	Page 11
School closing	Page 12
Almoner fund	Page 12
Members leaving	Page 13
ANALYSIS	
Leadership	Page 14
Lack of organizations	Page 15
Charges against St. John's	Page 17
Historical perspective	Page 18
Racism	Page 18
Other neighborhood efforts	Page 19
Concluding comparisons	Page 19
Future	Page 20
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE	Page 22
PICTURES	Page 23 & 24

In considering the story of St. John's congregation, the familiar, thrice-spoken refrain of David in his lament at the death of Saul and Jonathan echoes incessantly in the background: "How are the mighty fallen!" Not that there is any valid semblance between Saul and Jonathan and St. John's congregation, or even a similarity in the circumstances of their respective demises, but the bare words so poignantly encapsulize the fading epic, and almost shout at the observer passing the imposing physical vestiges of this once thriving assembly, shout from their unseen yet very present etching in the brick and stone.

Why this epitaph? Can we indeed speak of an epitaph, or is that being prematurely, morbidly presumptuous? In what sense was St. John's mighty? To what degree has it fallen? Why did it fall? What will happen when the fall is completed? These are some of the questions that will be examined in this glimpse at what was once one of the most inspiring examples of visible Christendom in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: St. John's Lutheran Church, Eighth and Vliet Streets, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

If we are to examine how "the mighty are fallen", we will need first to establish that St. John's was indeed "mighty" at one time. St. John's is not a typical or "average" Wisconsin Synod congregation. It predates the Wisconsin Synod to start with, having been organized in the year 1848. A group of around a dozen men had been gathering for about a year in the home of a Mr. Zuehlsdorf on Sunday evenings for readings of sermons from Luther's "Hauspostille". When they heard that Pastor L. Dulitz, a missionary from the Langenberg Mission Society in Germany, was in town on a visit, they invited him to preach for them, and he consented. Dulitz soon moved to Milwaukee and served a rather liberal church group for a short

time. When he severed his relations with this group, the Zuehlsdorf men asked him to serve them on a permanent basis. His acceptance of their offer led to the organization of the Evangelische Lutherische St. Johannesgemeinde.

When Pastor Dulitz joined the Missouri Synod, St. John's also applied for admission to that body. Various factors prevented this affiliation from transpiring, and after a certain amount of discord, a Wisconsin Synod man, Pastor W. Streissguth, was called, and began serving St. John in 1856. Two years later, when the Wisconsin Synod was in its eighth year, St. John's congregation became a member of the Wisconsin Synod.

But to our point. How are we justified in calling St. John's "mighty"? When referring to a group of Christians as "mighty", the primary reference should normally be to their life of faith, their walking in the footsteps of their Savior. There is nothing in past records to indicate that St. John's was not indeed mighty in this respect, to the extent that such a judgment can be made. But historical records tend to give a clearer picture of external might, of outward, visible strength, which, while not necessarily verifying the true inward strength of a Christian congregation, certainly do not annul it, and can easily corroborate this strength. This being a historical survey, and records being what they are, we will have to be content with such an outward examination of the "mighty" of St. John's congregation.

A number of areas of investigation bear this out. Membership growth is a helpful starting point. Between 1856 and 1868 the number of voting members increased from 28 to 350, indisputably an impressive twelve-year growth. And this was only the beginning. Mem-

bership growth during the 1880's and 1890's is described as "phenomenal". 1890 statistics show 2403 members, and while it is not clear whether this refers to souls or communicants, in either case it makes St. John's a mighty voice among Lutheran congregations in the Midwest at that time.

Admittedly farther removed from indicating inner strength, but probably a greater factor in demonstrating the might of a congregation to the world, is its building. The edifice at 8th and Vliet was and still is a beautiful, elegant, majestic testimony to the glory of God, to the worship that takes place within its walls, and to the high regard the members of this church had for their God and Savior and for their worship of Him. Such a sermon in brick and stone and glass and wood could hardly escape wider notice. In the Lutheran Witness of November 21, 1890 the following article appeared:

REV. BADING'S CHURCH IN MILWAUKEE, WIS.

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

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

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

Those who shrugged their shoulders at the copy of Thorwaldson's Christ found in Zion Church would be driven distracted by the vision of the sanctuary in this church. An enormous altar and reredos lifts its head aloft. Pictures, statuary, and candles are found in profusion. On the altar are six candles and a crucifix. Above are statues of Peter and Paul, a

painting of Jesus in the manger, and a large figure of Christ on the cross. The pulpit is likewise gorgeous in gilt and is surrounded by a sounding-board in which Jesus appears as the preacher. The frescoing is elaborate and rich.

There was some very liberal giving; and I may mention some of the names as they may prove familiar to the businessmen among your readers. The organ cost \$3,500 and was given by Mr. Ferdinand Kieckhefer. The large stained glass windows, exhibiting the evangelists and the major prophets, cost their donor, Mr. Wm. Kieckhefer, \$2,000. These brothers are extensive manufacturers of tin ware. Mr. Christopher Starke, a tug owner and contractor, provided the pews. Mr. John Schroeder, head of an extensive lumber company, furnished the altar. Mr. Conrad Starke spent \$700.00 for the pulpit. The value of the whole property, on which stand church, school house, and parsonage, is \$150,000. There remains a debt of \$25,000. The congregation . . . is about the strongest Lutheran Church in the Northwest.

Mention might also be made of the elaborate brass lectern, in the shape of an eagle with wings spread, upon which the books can rest, reputedly bought for \$1,000 from Tiffany's of New York. The baptismal font is solid marble. The three large bells have a deep, rich resonance reminiscent of European cathedral bells, and their sound can still be heard in the vicinity of 8th and Vliet every Sunday morning. The organ was a fine instrument, attracting a number of recitalists.* The church was dedicated on July 13, 1890, in the same year that the parsonage was completed, which is still standing today, bordering the church on the west.

Older inner city churches often gave birth to daughter congregations. St. John's is no exception. At least two present WELS congregations in the Milwaukee area were spawned by St. John's, in

both cases beginning with a "branch school". In 1873 a branch school was begun in the fifth ward, which later became St. Marcus congregation, still located at Palmer and Garfield Streets. In 1885 another branch school was opened which eventually led to the formation of Apostles Lutheran Church, 38th and St. Paul, now Apostles of Christ, 112th and Wisconsin Avenue. This type of development added to the patriarchal characteristics of St. John's among Milwaukee area churches, in the heart of the Wisconsin Synod.

This brings up the role of St. John's in the church at large, a rather significant role indeed. Though not a charter member of the Wisconsin Synod, and existing for ten years outside of its borders, St. John's was very much on the scene in the course of Wisconsin Synod history. Its third pastor, serving 40 years, from 1868 to 1908, was John Bading. In addition to serving this large congregation (Prof. A. Notz was called as his assistant in 1880, but he also served as professor at our seminary at the same time), Pastor Bading was the second president of the Wisconsin Synod, serving, with a brief interruption for a fund-raising trip to Germany, from 1860 to 1889. He was the man largely responsible for leading our Synod away from its early liberal tendencies toward its present soundly orthodox position. No doubt the members of St. John's were strengthened to as great an extent through the labors of this faithful servant as was the synod as a whole, and they no doubt felt a strong sense of identity with the growing church body. Pastor Bading was succeeded by Pastor John Brenner, who served St. John's for fifty years, from 1908 to 1958. Thus in its first 110 years of existence St. John's was served by only four pastors, and only two for the last 90 of these 110 years. The continuity of strong leadership during these years was certainly a determining factor in shaping the character of the congregation.

A new pastor did not mean a withdrawal from the heart of the synodical scene, though, because from 1933-1953 Pastor Brenner, like his predecessor, was president of the Wisconsin Synod, again carrying the double load of leading a synod and shepherding a large congregation. -- The size of St. John's membership was diminishing by this time, but more on that later. -- Far from complaining about their pastor's synodical work competing with his work in their own midst, the members of St. John's were for the most ^aprt proud of the fact that their pastor was also president of their church body. There was quite naturally a heightened awareness and appreciation of synodical affairs. Pastor Brenner kept his congregation informed about these matters in his sermons, his Bible classes, and in congregational meetings. Contributions toward the work of Synod that were above the synodical average reflected the healthy attitude toward Synod among St. John's members.

St. John's role in the church at large extended even beyond the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Bading, as president of the Synod, became involved in talks aimed at fellowship and cooperation with other synods. The establishment of full altar and pulpit fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1868 paved the way for the founding of the Synodical Conference, composed initially of the synods of Illinois, Ohio, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, and the Norwegian Synod. After a preliminary meeting in Chicago in January 1871, the first regular convention of the Synodical Conference was held at St. John's church on July 10-16, 1872. Thus St. John's was the site of an occasion of noteworthy significance: the beginning of the most outstanding example of union among truly orthodox Lutherans in North American history.

How did congregational life reflect the "might" of St. John's? Since the earlier years of St. John's were a period of less frenetic

and multi-faceted activities and outreaches in the church at large than it is experiencing today, an examination that fails to take this into account might lead to less than impressive conclusions. But in the context of its times, St. John's did have a healthy congregational life. Certainly the church attendance gave little or no cause for concern. Even in the early 1920's, when decline had already set in, the 1100-capacity church was packed full for the German services, although the English services still averaged out to an attendance below 100. This reflects a shortcoming throughout Synod, not merely at St. John's, in failing to adapt to the language of the society in which it lived.

Finances do not appear to be a problem in the early years, although whether or not there was good stewardship throughout the membership as a whole is^s not conclusive. While St. John's did not quite share the reputation for wealth that its neighbor Trinity did, referred to in the article quoted earlier, there were quite a few wealthy members, even a few millionaires, as is hinted at in the list of donations cited in that same article. These members shared their wealth quite freely with their church, and as they died, many of them left endowments for St. John's. Quite a few bequests were in the \$1,000 to \$2,000 range, but there were also a number of larger ones. However, in the case of many of these larger endowments, the stipulation was made that only the interest could be used.

The method of financial recording and reporting beclouds the picture somewhat. All financial matters were handled by an "auditing committee", which, as a rather startling fact, did not issue any regular financial reports. The financial condition of the congregation was "always very vague", one long-time member reports. For example, bonds and securities (such as a vague reference to "oil

stocks¹¹) came into possession of the congregation over the years, and a check was made into their current condition for the annual report, but their actual amount was never reported. And even today there is very little knowledge of the exact financial condition of the congregation, though it is known to be quite bleak. Another practice was not to publicize the endowments, for fear of giving a picture of financial security which would be used as an excuse by many members for keeping their own contributions to a minimum, thus practicing poor stewardship. This rather dubious practice is reported to have achieved its desired effect.

A related policy was that of not issuing annual reports on individual contributions, a rather common practice among other Wisconsin Synod congregations at that time. As a result, when members began moving to more distant parts of the city, some of them would retain their membership at St. John's simply because they felt less "pressure" on giving there, due to the absence of these reports. Whether this was the best thinking on Christian stewardship, and whether these people continued to be good contributors, is open to question.

St. John's also had a rather active almoner fund for a number of years, but this belongs to a later discussion.

The strength of congregational life is reflected, last but definitely not least, in the Christian Day School. In its earliest years St. John's began its own grade school, erecting the first building in 1862. Enrollment passed the 200 mark during its best years, but in keeping with the custom of large classroom sizes in those days, there were never more than four teachers. It wasn't long before St. John's school began serving as a mission arm of the congregation, much as many WELS schools do today, especially as the neighborhood around the

church began experiencing a changeover in residents. This and other aspects of the school will be treated in greater detail later.

Thus until decline began to eat away at the outward strength of the congregation, St. John's was, in the words of the 115th Anniversary bulletin, "privileged to stand in the front ranks of our Synod's congregations which have generously supported mission work, Lutheran charities, and the Lutheran High School." St. John's was indeed a strong congregation, a leading congregation in size, spirit, history, and reputation in the Wisconsin Synod. But the title of this paper is "How Are The Mighty Fallen!" St. John's was mighty. But the situation today is a different story. No one can deny that St. John's has fallen, at least outwardly, from its previous position of prominence. Today the membership stands at approximately 120, many of whom are no longer able to attend worship services at Eighth and Vliet ~~any more~~. The school has been closed since 1961. Vast stretches of empty pews greet pastor and worshippers on Sunday mornings. The organ is only barely operable. Even the much-needed painting of the trim on the church cannot be done because the \$24,000 estimate given four years ago (on a church building this size, it is no mean task!) is well out of reach of the membership. Normal maintenance of church and parsonage is a real financial burden, and any major repairs that might crop up could threaten the very continuance of the congregation's existence. There are no youth in the church, there is no choir, only a bare minimum of meetings, and these are held at a different church in a safer neighborhood. The congregation is still alive, but quite apparently dying.

What happened? To a large extent the decline of St. John's is mirrored in the decline of many other inner city congregations in

Milwaukee and in the Wisconsin Synod, and in other cities and other church bodies. The changing neighborhood is no doubt the critical factor. During the prime years of St. John's ascendancy, Eighth and Vliet was a location surrounded by a fine residential neighborhood of solid middle and upper class citizens, among whom were some wealthy leading citizens who belonged to St. John's, as we have seen. By 1921 (a point of reference used by necessity in this paper due to the information available) decline had already set in. This was the period during which the palatial residences on Lake Drive were being built, and some of the owners of these homes, including a few St. John's members, had formerly lived in the St. John's neighborhood, during which time they had made their fortunes. When St. John's members first began moving out of the area, they retained their membership at St. John's, and continued attending there. These were faithful members with strong ties to St. John's, loathe to sever their connections with their beloved church. But a trend like this can be bucked for only so long; the rate of membership attrition began to pick up.

The new wave of residents in the neighborhood did not have quite the pride in their second-hand homes that the original owners had, as is rather predictable. Also, more and more homes were rented rather than owned by their residents. The houses became less attractive, the neighborhood likewise, and homes were available for a lower price. Add to this the relaxed immigration laws following World War I, and we find that the neighborhood became composed to an increasing extent of poorer, lower class residents, with a smaller percentage of people having German Lutheran background and inclinations. Following this development through, the number of homes began to decrease as they were torn down and not replaced. In the late

1950's, the City of Milwaukee tore down more homes near the church and built the Hillside Housing Development immediately to the east of the church. Today this is practically the only significant housing left in the neighborhood, inhabited almost completely by the poor and minority groups.

How was St. John's affected by this change? Perhaps the developments in the school paint the clearest picture. While enrollment had peaked over the 200 mark, by 1921 it was down to 175. But more significant than the decline in numbers was the change in composition of the enrollment. It has already been mentioned that the school became a mission arm of the congregation as the composition of the neighborhood changed. Already in the 1920's half of the children in the school were from non-member families. The school was a veritable melting-pot, with up to eleven different nationalities represented: Negroes, Yugoslavs, Slovaks, Greeks, English, Norwegians, Swiss, Italians, German-Russians, Indians, and Mexicans; hardly typical of the average German-dominated Wisconsin Synod Christian Day school of that period.

It should be pointed out that most of these people sent their children to St. John's school of their own accord; there was little if any recruitment. They came because they liked the firm discipline, apparently a big improvement over that in the public schools. They came because it was conveniently located. A Greek Orthodox priest sent his children to St. John's school because he disliked his more logical alternative, the Roman Catholic schools. (He was also a good contributor to St. John's, and both parties enjoyed good relations.) Many of these reasons sound remarkably contemporary.

While it was heartening to have people flocking in to where the Word of God was taught in its truth and purity, the end result was

not what was very likely hoped for. When these mission children reached eighth grade and completed their catechismal instruction, they were of course confirmed. But too often confirmation was the end rather than the beginning, with a much higher rate of attrition among these mission prospects than among children of members. Once their connection with the school was ended, there was no longer any sense of identity with St. John's congregation. Nor was there a very significant percentage of parents of these children who were gained for St. John's congregation and for the Lord's Kingdom.

By 1961, the final year of operation for the school, there were still 93 children enrolled, but not one of them was from a St. John's family. All but about a dozen were black. The membership had dwindled in number considerably by this time, and was finding the school to be an increasing financial burden. The principal had to resign that year because of failing eyesight. The school building was in critical need of extensive and expensive repairs. Faced with this combination of formidable obstacles, the congregation voted to close the school. The building was sold for \$500 to a Black Baptist group, but they soon abandoned it, and the City of Milwaukee took over and footed the bill for wrecking it. Formalized Christian education of the young at St. John's was definitely a thing of the past.

Other factors not directly related to the school are worth mentioning in tracing the decline of St. John's. An almoner fund was referred to earlier. This was quite active during the years when the congregation was still a "going concern" and a number of poor people came in contact with the church, mostly through the school. St. John's even developed somewhat of a reputation as a "poor farm", with a certain amount of abuse of its generosity by neighborhood residents. Pastor Brenner is even quoted as saying, at confirmation

time, "What I'm confirming is more of a liability than an asset", in a practical recognition of the attitudes that prevailed, and their likely result.

Naturally people who received financial assistance from a church would feel at least a certain connection there, if not enrolling in an instruction class at least attending services on occasion. But then welfare assistance entered the picture. In many cases when these people found out that they could get financial aid from the government, with no particular sense of obligation attached, they soon severed all relations with the church, now that they no longer were dependent on its material assistance. While there had not usually been abundant evidence of faith in the past, at least there was limited exposure to God's Word. Now welfare was weaning them from even this limited contact. Eventually the almoner fund was discontinued, with any further contributions re-channeled into the general treasury.

Why did its members leave St. John's? Here again the story is typical. They first left the neighborhood, as conditions deteriorated. This in itself was not always enough to cause faithful members to transfer their membership, but the distance was an obstacle that usually prevailed sooner or later. The other familiar handicaps of inner city churches were present, too, of course, to add to the distance problem. The unsafe character of the neighborhood curtailed evening meetings and services. Members who might otherwise have remained with St. John's wanted to send their children to a Lutheran school near their new homes, and were thus drawn into a new congregation.

So far the story of the "fall" of St. John's church, though sad, has not appeared to be particularly unusual. The purpose of this paper, however, is not merely to record another instance of the decline of a once mighty inner city church, but to probe behind the scenes a little in this particular congregation and attempt to pass a degree of judgment on the fall of St. John's. In view of the fact that other inner city churches have withstood the assaults of changing conditions in much better shape than St. John's has, to what extent is St. John's to blame for its own demise? What internal factors may have contributed to the fall? Was there anything that delayed it? To what extent can St. John's be considered an exception?

The leadership of any group during a time of change in that group can hardly escape notice when examining that change. This is especially true in the case of St. John's church, since its leader, its shepherd, was such a vital force, a dominant influence, such a strong leader. In addition, Pastor John Brenner's remarkably long 50-year ministry at St. John's spanned the most critical period of decline. What part did he play in that decline?

In answer to the question, "What was the best feature of St. John's church?" a member of over half a century there answered with no hesitation, "Pastor Brenner". While a dissenting opinion could no doubt be obtained also, this high regard was by no means an isolated instance; rather, it is more like a majority opinion. Brenner was a well-liked pastor, and in most of his actions and decisions, he had the backing of the vast majority of the congregation.

What was it about the man that elicited such high regard? His strong leadership characteristics earned him a good measure of respect. It is possible that in this area he benefitted somewhat from

working at a time when this forcefulness was a more popular attribute, more highly sought after and appreciated than in current times when the ideal leader seems to embody a more deliberate, sophisticated, professional, diplomatic smoothness, even when it comes to polemics and apologetics. Of course, historical relativity aside, strong actions in any age will bring out strong opposition, and it remains to Brenner's credit that he was able to win and hold the great loyalty he did.

Brenner was admired for his sharp intellect, his unwavering orthodoxy and firmness in decisions, for being "in control", and for his interesting and edifying Bible classes, both junior and senior, which met every week. The internal peacefulness and lack of gossip in the congregation during his tenure were also appreciated. He was very devoted to his congregational work, even to the point of rarely if ever taking a vacation. His only absences from St. John's were for synodical business. Brenner did not retire from his ministry at St. John's until he had reached 84 years of age, but he had apparently not prolonged his pastorate unduly. He is said not to have shown his age in the carrying out of his work, and there was no pressure for him to resign.

What light does this characterization shed on Brenner's role in the decline of St. John's? The simplest reply to that question is that the very loyalty and affection that St. John's members felt for their pastor prevented them from dealing effectively with his inherent shortcomings. Not that Brenner had fatal flaws that outweighed or even balanced his strengths, but his natural human failings were not checked by his sheep the way they might have been with a less highly revered shepherd.

One of these failings was Brenner's antipathy toward organizations in the congregation. While the intent is not to fault him for this basic feeling, it does appear that this policy was detrimental.

When asked, "What was the worst feature of St. John's?", the same member quoted above replied that it was most likely the lack of organizations, the lack of internal contact. A congregation that has a strong, unified sense of identity and closeness among its members will not easily disintegrate, especially given the other healthy features of St. John's. But St. John's clearly lacked this vital ingredient.

By way of example, there was no youth organization. Nor were there any sports teams allowed in the grade school. The remark was made that Brenner "would not have liked the Lutheran Pioneers". There was also a real lack of facilities, of rooms for social activity at St. John's. This of course is a matter of which came first, chicken or egg. Had there been a driving impulse toward more active fellowship, provision might well have been made for appropriate facilities. Even the traditional ladies' aid was dubbed "Ladies' Afternoon Bible Class", and its internal organization was kept to a minimum. There never was a men's club. The choir was the best organized group, but this was organization for worship, not primarily on a social scale.

This de-emphasis on social fellowship among the members, or at least on organizations that would provide such fellowship, had its price. There were, for example, relatively few marriages within the congregation; i. e., one St. John's member marrying another. Thus even when the marriage was to another Lutheran of the same fellowship, the law of averages indicates that these marriages would lead to quite a few transfers out of St. John's, at least more than if the marriages had been within the membership. The observation was also made, in retrospect, that St. John's could easily have been

termed an "unfriendly church"; not because of an unfriendly nature of the individual members, but due to habits developed from the lack of opportunity for social interaction with each other. This impression not only hurt St. John's witness to outsiders and guests from other synodical congregations, but the resultant lack of friends and acquaintances within the congregation made it that much easier for members to transfer out when other pressures made this desirable.

A very frequent comment made about the decline of St. John's, and one of the primary issues that stirred the interest which led to the writing of this paper, is something to the effect that St. John's deserted its neighborhood, made no evangelistic outreach to the area residents, didn't serve the Lord in the location where it found itself, or, more crudely put, was simply a bunch of bigoted racists. These charges call for examination.

First of all, did St. John's desert its neighborhood? Certainly not in a physical sense. As the decline became more obvious, there was agitation to relocate in an outlying neighborhood, as other churches were doing. This presented a practical problem, first of all, because St. John's members were moving to such widely separated areas that finding a central location for even a good percentage of them was hardly possible. This is why, for example, St. John's did not fully pursue its chances to procure property at Sherman Blvd. and Center Street, where Sherman Park Lutheran Church is now located. In addition, Pastor Brenner, to his credit, was much against any such move. He was strongly identified with St. John's at its present location.

The other side of the coin is more complex: while it did not actually leave the neighborhood, how did St. John's interact with the changing area where it found itself? While in the early years

of change, the neighborhood was a melting pot of nationalities, as has been mentioned, the Negro race gradually came to predominate. This brings us to the issue of racism. Some historical perspective is necessary before any final judgments are made. It was not until the last half of the 1950's, and more so in the 1960's, that the entire spectrum of integration vs. segregation, racism, minority rights, "Black power", and Afro-American self-identity really came to the forefront of issues directly facing the American public. But by this time, St. John's was almost past the point of no return. Its school had closed in 1961, you will recall. Thus if racism was a factor in the decline of St. John's, it must be viewed in the context of a period when it was not nearly so readily identified, so severely stigmatized, or even so easily recognized in one's own mind as it was during this later period. This is not to excuse racism, to deny its unchristian nature, but to see human reactions in the context of their socio-political milieu; to judge the attitudes of others, from a human standpoint, on the basis of their contemporary orientation; to attempt to put ourselves in the position of others when attempting to evaluate them.

Was there racism at St. John's? It would be difficult to deny its existence. Consider, for example, an often-repeated question put to the pastor by members of the Ladies' Afternoon Bible Class: "How many Negroes are in the school now?" There is no evidence that Brenner himself felt prejudiced toward the Negroes as such, but he was hesitant toward active recruitment of black members because he feared that they would be added to the membership at the expense of his current white members, whom he knew were leaving at least partly because of the Blacks, although they would not have dared to tell

him that. There was also the prevalent opinion that the Blacks would not contribute as well as others, and this at a time of a tightening financial picture.

Other factors help to fill out the perspective. Although St. John's was definitely negligent in neighborhood canvassing and recruitment, its very near neighbor, Trinity (LCMS) at Ninth and Highland, did carry out an intensive neighborhood canvass-witness around 1960, but it was almost entirely without success as far as members gained for the church is concerned. There was an accretion of only one or two members from the entire effort. Since then the neighborhood has become even less residential, with a resultant lowering in the likelihood of positive results coming from a repetition of any such effort. And of course in more recent years St. John's has had within its own membership an almost complete lack of manpower even physically capable of such endeavor. Over twenty years ago, the Missouri Synod attempted to organize a mission in the neighborhood specifically oriented toward the local residents, but it too came to naught. Such developments hardly encouraged further efforts by St. John's.

How then does St. John's experience stack up against the experience of other inner city churches, limiting ourselves to other Wisconsin Synod churches? To begin with, it did not follow the largely negative example (though of course open to equally fair examination as that given St. John's here) of a number of other churches, and pull up stakes in search of a "better" neighborhood. Secondly, while racism was a factor, an irrefutable shortcoming, St. John's, facing the problem in earlier years, did not have the benefit of a national awakening to the evils of racism at the time it should have

been combatting it, as did other inner city churches when they experienced a similar phenomenon a little later. Thirdly, St. John's is not located in a basically residential area any more, and hasn't been for quite some time. Other churches with similar problems at least have a relatively densely settled home base in which to work. Grace church, at Broadway and Juneau, is also located in a primarily commercial, non-residential neighborhood, but it does have a larger, higher quality housing project quite close by, and in addition has developed over the years the reputation of serving Wisconsin Synod Lutherans living on the East Side, where there is no other Wisconsin Synod church, and Grace has also become the church of Wisconsin Synod university students in the area. In both of these cases Grace was a much more logical choice for these people than St. John's would have been. The observation might also be included that the few residents who are yet in the St. John's neighborhood are for the most part on almost the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder, which is not quite true of other inner city congregations.

What is left for St. John's? What can be said for its future? After all, St. John's is dying, but it is not yet dead. While there still is life, it is extremely difficult to see any hope of revitalization on the horizon. The prohibitive expense of upkeep and repairs has already been alluded to. As more and more members die, the end draws inexorably closer. One would hope that at least the magnificent edifice, still structurally sound, and forever inspiring to behold, could somehow be preserved, but even that prospect looks dim. It is one thing to declare a building a landmark (this has not happened to St. John's), but quite another to pay for its upkeep. Once the congregation ceases to exist, it is not likely that the synod

will foot the bill for preservation, especially in light of the landmark-museum recently established at Salem in old Granville. One would hope that some practical use could be found for the building, but this is an unrealistic hope. Even the property on which the building stands is not of great value any more.

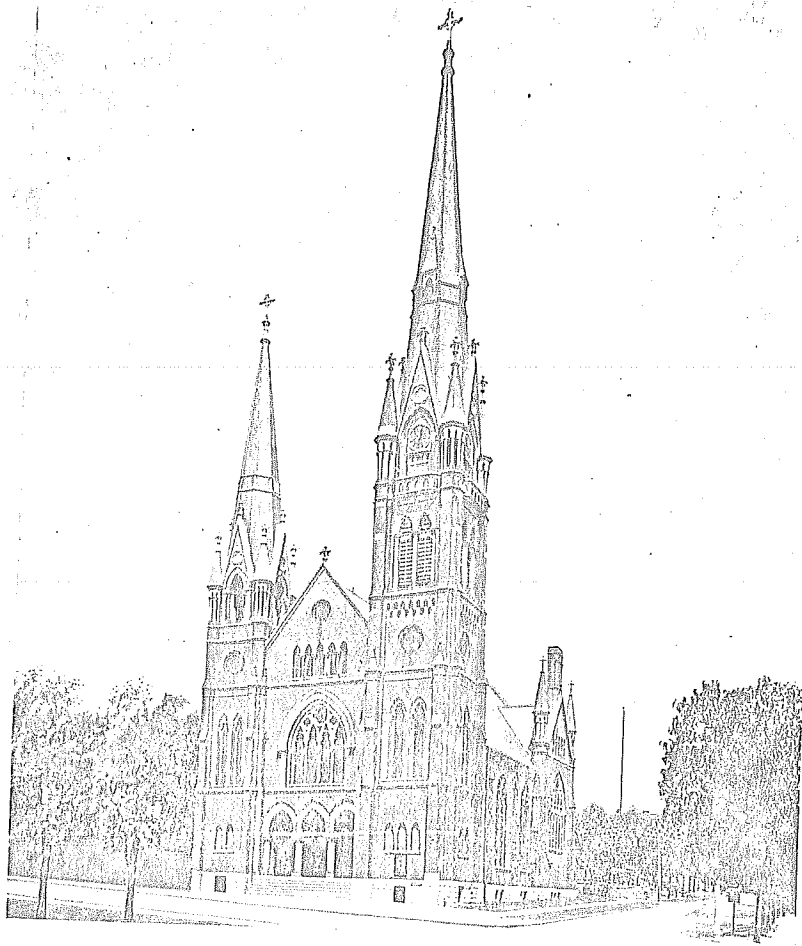
It is depressing to contemplate, but considering what happened to the old St. Jacobi church building at Thirteenth and Mitchell only a year ago, in a situation not as critical as St. John's, it is hard to imagine this church escaping the wrecker's ball. If and when that happens, I most definitely do not want to be present, nor will I ever willingly pass by Eighth and Vliet again.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

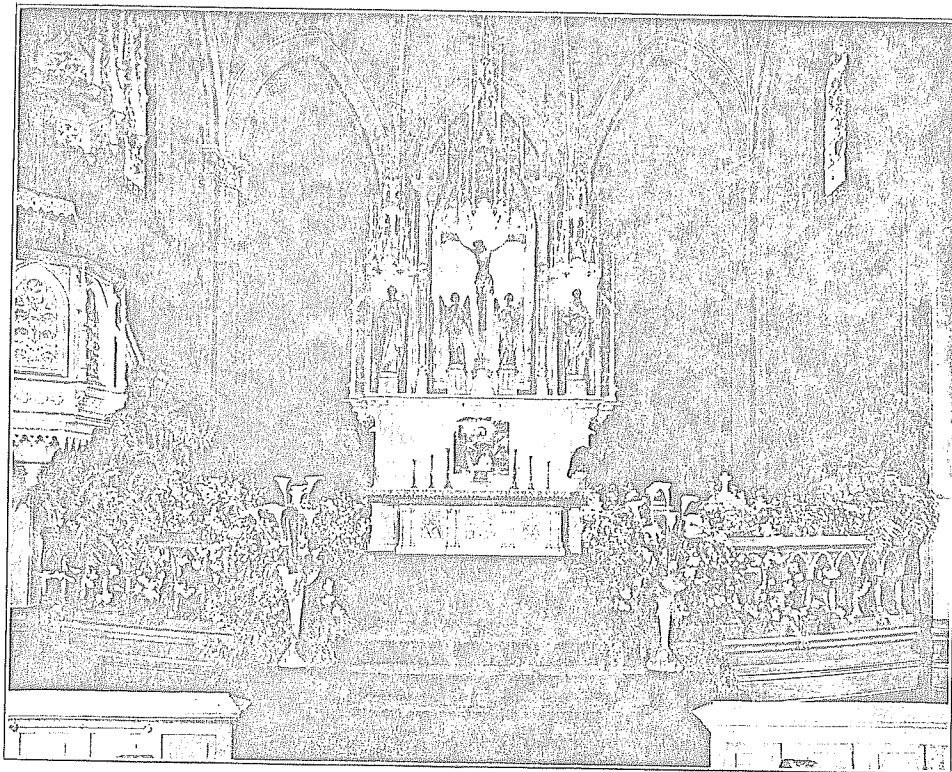
The information in this paper was culled almost exclusively from two primary sources. Of great help in getting direction for the paper and in giving background information was a set of anniversary booklets and bulletins from St. John's -- the 90th, 115th, and 125th. Thanks are due to Pastor Norman Engel for the loan of these documents.

In addition, Pastor Engel directed me to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ehlke of Milwaukee, members of St. John's. Mr. Ehlke had been principal of St. John's school for forty years, from 1921 till its closing in 1961. Mrs. Ehlke is the daughter of John Gieschen, also a former teacher at St. John's. In two extensive interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Ehlke I was able to come up with a wealth of information and insights, due to their excellent memories and free cooperation. I wish to express my gratitude to this fine Christian couple for their invaluable assistance to me in writing this paper.

Since the anniversary publications are rather short, and interviews are impossible to annotate, footnotes were not included in this paper.

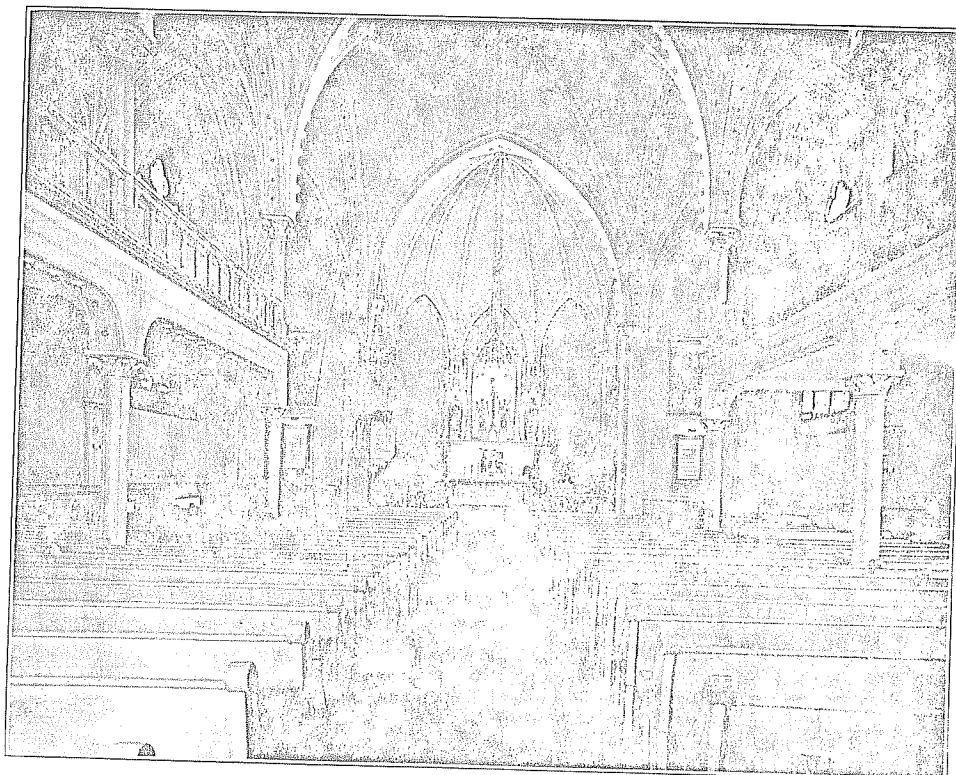


The Present Church
ca. 1938



The Altar on Easter Day

ca. 1938



The Interior of the Present Church