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WHY WAS ST. MATTHEW CONGREGATION AN INDEPENDENT
CHURCH FOR NINETY YEARS OF ITS EXISTENCE?

CHURCH HISTORY

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by

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Why Was St. Matthew Congregation an Independent
Church for Ninety Years of its Existence?

In January of 1970 our family moved to the Ontario area in western Wisconsin, more specifically, the South Ridge area. With that move my parents became members of St. Matthew Ev. Lutheran Church. At that time, being the oldest of four children, I was not overly interested in the history of the church. As the years came and passed, however, I began my studies for the ministry in the Wisconsin Synod, of which St. Matthew is a member.

As I continued my work through Northwestern College and then through the Seminary in Mequon, there was a question that always kept coming back to mind. It had always been said that the St. Matthew congregation was independent of synod until about 1966 or 1967. I began to wonder why the congregation had never joined the synod. I never pursued the answer to that question, though, until the opportunity arose to write this paper on the subject.

In researching this paper I asked several life-time members of the congregation if they knew of any group of people in the congregation who had not wanted to join synod; if they knew of any specific reasons people did not want to join synod; or if the pastors which served St. Matthew did not encourage joining the synod. I also read through the church minutes of congregational meetings available to me, those being the records from 1924 through 1968. Prior to 1924, the records were written in German script. Also of use in my research was the booklet written for the centennial celebration of the church in 1977.

To understand the question, "Why St. Matthew Congregation never joined the Wisconsin Synod?" a brief look at the history of the church may be helpful. Lutheran services began on South Ridge in the fall of 1869. The pastor at that time was Ludwig Ebert of the Ridgeville Lutheran Church. In the early 1870's, services were conducted in the local schoolhouse. In 1877 the congregation was organized and a constitution was adopted under Pastor W. Bergholz. Church services were only held once every three weeks because of the many congregations served by the pastor.

In 1883 a one-acre plot of land was purchased for \$60.00 on which to build the church. The church was completed in the autumn of 1887. This building still stands and is the main part of the present church. During the 1890's and early 1900's, the congregation had four different pastors and many additions were made for the church building. Apparently, neither the pastor or congregation made any attempt to become a member of the Wisconsin Synod, at least that is what I concluded from my readings and talks with members of the congregation.

The next year of importance is 1918. That is the year when Pastor Paul Monhardt came to South Ridge. Pastor Monhardt was a graduate of the Seminary in Wauwatosa in 1913. He went on to serve St. Matthew for the next 45 years, up to his retirement in January 1964. It is during Pastor Monhardt's ministry that our question will hopefully be answered.

During Pastor Monhardt's ministry, various church organizations were formed, such as the Ladies Aid in 1919, Sunday School in 1939, and the Young People's Society in 1939. In the early years of Pastor

Monhardt's ministry, he did bring up the subject of joining the Synod several times. He did not, however, try very hard to convince them to do so. From the letter of Walter Stratman, a voting member of the congregation from 1924, Mr. Stratman comments that,

"Pastor Monhardt was a sort of loner. He did not attend meetings or conferences with other pastors or mix with pastors well. He worked with the Synod but not with much enthusiasm. He was content to be independent and I guess everyone else was also." ¹

Apparently that independent ^{den} attitude was very prevalent in the congregation during those years. From two other life-time members of the church, Mr. Edwin Schnell and Mr. Carl Wurster, both convey that attitude of independence but from different angles. Mr. Schnell wrote,

"It was very evident that most members were very much opposed to the idea of becoming a member of the Synod, as they did feel that the congregation would then have to help support the Synod and they were having difficulty keeping up the finances for the church." ²

Mr. Wurster wrote,

"They were afraid if they joined a Synod and didn't pay enough money, that Synod would take away their church property." ³

During those years the finances of the congregation were collected by a "dues" system. This system was divided according to your status at the time, family, widows or widowers, and single people. Each group was assessed a certain due for the year. Families would pay \$7.50 a year, widows and single males over 21 would pay \$5.00 per year. The dues were increased over the years as expenses grew. Whenever something special was needed, like new pews or a furnace a special offering was taken for that purpose.

The first time anyone could remember that the congregation actually voted the motion to join Synod down was in 1940. Mr.

Aaron Pasch remembers this time because he was indirectly involved in the process. In 1940 Mr. Pasch was confirmed and his class wanted to get the new hymnals that were coming out then as confirmation gifts. This would mean, though, that the entire congregation would have to get the new hymnals and change their order of service. The class and others talked to the pastor, also bringing up the topic of joining the Synod. Pastor Monhardt said he would bring it up at the next congregational meeting. According to Mr. Pasch, the pastor did not encourage the idea too much and the entire motion on new hymnals, new order of service, and joining the Synod was voted down easily. This account was not recorded in the church minutes.

The only time that a vote was recorded in the church minutes regarding whether or not to join Synod was in 1956. All the minutes say is that a motion was made and seconded to join the Synod. A ballot vote was taken and the motion lost 11 to 7. Mr. Wurster made a comment about this vote. He stated that the same men served on the council for many years without a ~~change~~ change of personnel. "The congregation was in a rut."⁴ He also said that the men serving on council were good men but no new ideas were coming forth.

A comment about Pastor Monhardt should be mentioned here. Apparently, Pastor Monhardt had a health problem and the country air suited him well. He liked the area and had decided early in his ministry at St. Matthew that there is where he would retire. Whenever he received a call from another church he would keep it for ten days and then send it back. If he received a call it was never recorded in the church minutes either. I say this not to degrade Pastor Monhardt, because he was faithful in his ministry and kept the congregation together through some trying times.

I only offer this as another possible suggestion why St. Matthew never joined the Synod until after Pastor Monhardt retired.

Pastor Monhardt preached his farewell sermon on January 1, 1964. In his prayer he prayed that the new pastor would be able to convince the congregation to join the Synod.

Later in January 1964, Pastor Richard Lauersdorf was installed as pastor of St. Matthew, and with a new pastor came new ideas. Under Pastor Lauersdorf a family night was organized to enjoy fellowship and learn about the Synod's work in missions and other topics. In 1965 the congregation changed to the new hymnals replacing the little black pocketsize book. The collection of dues was discontinued and an envelope system was adopted. Officers and the church council could hold three-year terms as before, but now a year must pass before their re-election.

In 1966 the word Missio Dei became popular as the Wisconsin Synod pleaded for help to extend educational facilities for students at synodical schools. The congregation of St. Matthew responded with a generous gift of \$6556.00.

It was during these mission services that the congregation learned what Synod was about. They found out that their land would not be taken away. They learned how Synod worked and their attitudes changed in the congregation. In the annual meeting of January 1967, Mr. Carl Wurster brought up the idea of joining Synod. He said, "it was something we had put off too long."⁵ The subject was discussed and with help in the discussion from Pastor Lauersdorf, a motion was made and seconded to join Synod. A ballot vote was taken and this time the vote was overwhelming to join the Wisconsin Synod.

It took many years for the people of St. Matthew to overcome the

their fears of the Synod. They had to be re-taught what Synod involved, but through instruction they saw the Synod not as a threat, but as a part of the church which also carries out God's commission to spread His Word of salvation through Jesus throughout the world.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Letter by Mr. Walter Stratman, February 22, 1982.
- ²Letter by Mr. Edwin Schnell, February 23, 1982.
- ³Letter by Mr. Carl Wurster, February 25, 1982.
- ⁴Letter by Mr. Carl Wurster, February 25, 1982.
- ⁵Letter by Mr. Carl Wurster, February 25, 1982.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Letters by Mr. Emil Schroeder - life time member of St. Matthew

Mr. Walter Stratman - life time member of St. Matthew

Mr. Edwin Schnell - life time member of St. Matthew

Mr. Carl Wurster - life time member of St. Matthew and
president of congregation

Telephone call by Mr. Aaron Pasch on February 28, 1982.

History of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, as compiled
Pastor Otto Engel, Mrs. Paul Monhardt, Mrs. Robert Brandau
1977.