

Congregational History  
of  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church  
of  
Saginaw, Michigan  
1890 - 1994

By

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Senior Church History

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St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church resides at 4705 Brockway Road, on the Southwest corner of Saginaw Township, Saginaw, Michigan. The hundreds of cars that travel down Brockway Road every day enjoy the peaceful neighborhood with its large pine trees and somewhat open space. A cemetery lies on the North side of the street while St. John's with its large parking lot, play ground, parsonage and teacherage lie on the South side. People for the past twenty-six years have seen basically this same scene. Yet, the people who only know St. John's as "*just another church*" truly miss the point of its entire existence. For the past one hundred and four years this congregation has proclaimed the Word of God in its truth and purity to hundreds of people. This living family of believers continue to come to the foot of the cross every Sunday to confess their sins before God, and to receive His rich blessing of forgiveness.

## **Chapter One: The Formative Years**

On August 16, 1833, Pastor Freidrich Schmidt arrived in Detroit, Michigan. In a letter addressed to his dearly loved training school (the Basel Mission Society) in Germany, he wrote: "I can assure you that, as far as the beginning is concerned, there isn't a nicer working circle than Saginaw"<sup>1</sup>. Less than sixty years later St. John's Lutheran Church was organized. Before we look at this organization itself, we must first

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<sup>1</sup> Michigan Memories, Things Our Fathers Have Told Us, p. 193.

consider the work of a few important men who first saw the need for St. John's to exist.

Pastor Christopher Eberhardt came to Michigan in 1860 from Basel, Switzerland full of zeal for serving his Lord as a traveling missionary. His work began in Hopkins, Michigan. He concentrated his efforts on gathering scattered Lutherans into a number of preaching stations. Between 1860 and 1861 he started sixteen mission stations. He made an exploratory trip to the Upper Peninsula in 1861. Unfortunately the Michigan Synod had neither pastors nor money available to start congregations in the Upper Peninsula.

Pastor Eberhardt arrived in Saginaw in 1861 and remained the pastor of St. Paul's for the next thirty-one years. He was a remarkable servant of God. The 1880's must have been busy for him. Besides dealing with the growth of St. Paul's and helping out in the school when necessary, he also was president of the Michigan Synod. During his presidency, two very significant events took place. The first occurred in 1888 when the Michigan Synod withdrew from the liberal General Council. The second important event was the founding of Michigan Lutheran Seminary. Pastor Eberhardt was concerned that the young pastors obtained from Germany and from synods in the eastern part of the United States were not sound in doctrine or practice. Pastor Eberhardt urged the Michigan Synod to establish its own seminary. In 1885 the Synod did establish a seminary on a temporary basis in Manchester, Michigan. In 1887 Pastor Eberhardt donated land for

a seminary in Saginaw and thus Michigan Lutheran Seminary stands on this piece of land today. From the information we see above, this man dedicated his life to gathering believers around the cross of Christ. During Pastor Eberhardt's ministry in Saginaw, he established congregations in Zilwaukee, Sebawaing, Frankenmuth and Bay City.<sup>2</sup>

In 1891, Pastor William Bodamer, the first resident pastor of St. John's, wrote a history of St. John's covering her conception and birth. Pastor Oscar Frey translated this German document into English for her seventy-fifth anniversary. For the sake of preserving this historical document from Pastor Bodamer, I saw fit to include it at length.

THE LORD HATH DONE GREAT THINGS FOR US, WHEREOF WE ARE GLAD. The Lord hath done great things for us for which we thank Him. This we say today, on the day of our church dedication as we look back upon the time our congregation had its inception. Never do we want to forget to thank the Lord and to sing His praises for all the mercy He has shown us and all the help He has given us. And the history of our church, which we shall now hear, should prompt us to do this.

For some years Pastor C. Eberhardt had the thought - as soon as conditions would warrant it - to establish a congregation in this part of the city which was quite a distance from St. Paul, but not before gaining permission from St. Paul. During the past year conditions arose that indicated, were not immediate steps taken to organize a congregation, the field would be lost to us. So on July 27, 1890, St. Paul congregation gave its consent to establish a mission church in this part of the city, in which 15 of its members lived. Director F. Huber (Director at the Seminary) offered to start the work by seeking to obtain members and to find a suitable place to hold services. Pastor Eberhardt gave his support. They

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<sup>2</sup> This portion of history is taken from: And Still He Reigns. The History of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church by Professor Paul W. Kuske.

secured a place to hold services in the home of William Krueger, a member of St. Paul, who generously offered a room in the rear part of his house for this purpose. (Note: This house is now 115 S. Elm). Thereupon on July 30 Dir. Huber and Pastor Eberhardt called on people in the area and invited them to a service in Mr. Krueger's home. On the 9th Sunday after Trinity, August 3, 1890, the first service was held, and from then on services were conducted each Sunday, either by Dir. Huber or theological students from the Seminary.

On the 4th Sunday in advent (December 21, 1890) the heads of 7 families organized a congregation. They were Franz Krueger, Albert Biller, Michael Jordan, J. Goerke, W. Fischer, Rudolph Breu, and Julius Breu. The name chosen for the newly-organized congregation was St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church. The first Communion was celebrated on Christmas Day, 1890. Eleven partook of it. The attendance increased steadily and on the 1st Sunday after Epiphany, 1891, the place of worship was filled for the first time; and soon, as a result of the increase in membership and better attendance, the place became too small. The necessity of building a church was realized and so in a meeting, held Mar. 1, the congregation resolved to build a church and to delegate trustees Albert Miller, Michael Jordan and J. Goerke to look for a suitable site. They favored the site on which the church now stands, (Elm and Bliss) and in a meeting, held Apr. 1, 1891, it was resolved to buy the lots and to build as soon as possible. Building operations began Mar. 21, 1891, and today the building stands before our eyes - finished, and is to be dedicated to its purpose today: viz. to proclaim the Word of Truth. To supervise the building the congregation appointed a committee composed of the following three: W. Fischer, Rudolph Breu, and M. Voelker, who did their task in a most satisfactory manner.

A cause for happiness to the congregation was an increase in membership and at present there are 17 voting members who joined the congregation in the following order: first, the 7 named above; then on Mar. 1, 1891 there were added: Karl Schultz, Christian Kringel, Andreas Schenkusch, Karl Salewsky, Voelker; on July 5: August Stielow, and on Aug, 9: Heinrich Miller and August Neuendorf.

Unfortunately it was not possible for the congregation to build the church debt-free as it would have liked to. The side cost \$500, \$100 of which was paid immediately with a donation from a good friend of the congregation. The church itself cost about \$1000. With the help of good friends, some of which are members of St. Paul, some unchurched, it was possible,

with the contributions which the congregation itself raised, to reduce the debt on the church to \$500, so that now our total debt is \$900. An organ was purchased for \$85, the dealer donating \$25. A good friend of the congregation (Paster Eberhardt) had ordered a bell for the church, which he plans to donate. Unfortunately, it has not arrived in time for the dedication. From an anonymous friend we received a beautiful chair. We herewith extend our heartfelt thanks to him.

All of this prompts us to say thanks to all who have make donations, also to God who has opened the hearts of our fellow-men to help us. And so we thank all who have helped us with their gifts - those members of St. Paul, as also unchurched, especially in the 6th ward (the ward in which the church stands). We thank Mr. Krueger and his family who for over a year so generously supplied us with a place of worship, and those who helped us by word and deed. We thank the building committee which so gladly performed its laborious task; we thank the worthy St. Paul's choir for helping to make this a day of joy for us - we thank all who came to attend these services today. We wish all of you God's richest blessings.

For our house of worship, which by the grace of God we today are privileged to dedicate and which henceforth is to be our spiritual home, we ask God with humble and believing hearts that He may be present here and here prepare for us a place after His heart, and also that He would arouse in the hearts of many hunger and thirst for His Word and Sacrament. For ourselves, our congregation and pastor, we pray that God would above all increase in us the knowledge of His will - that He strengthen us in faith, that we receive the end of our faith: our soul's salvation! But we also pray that He may let us grow outwardly, that our number may become large, that He protect us from the wiles of Satan and the seductions of the world, and that our church may be a Zion in which He resides. Amen!<sup>3</sup>

To conclude this chapter of the Formative Years of St. John's there are a few key dates worth mentioning taken from the minutes.

August 3, 1890 = The first service was conducted.

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<sup>3</sup> History Of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890-1965... Seventy-Five Years, p. 4-7.

October 19, 1890 = Organization. Director Huber of the Seminary elected president; Mr. Frank Krueger, secretary.

December 21, 1890 = Constitution is adopted. Salary set at \$50 per year.<sup>4</sup>

## Chapter Two: The Bodamer Years (1891-1893)

In 1887 Michigan Lutheran Seminary opened its doors in Saginaw as the theological Seminary for the Michigan Synod. "March 1, 1891 - Candidate from Michigan Lutheran Seminary becomes the first resident pastor. He was William Bodamer."<sup>5</sup> Pastor Bodamer served from 1891 - 1893. While he carried out his call as St. John's pastor, he also assisted in teaching at Michigan Lutheran Seminary. "During Pastor Bodamer's ministry at St. John's the congregation was contemplating the establishment of a Christian Day School. Pastor Bodamer, however, accepted a call to Zilwaukee, and a Christian Day School would not be established until 1983 -- some 90 years later."<sup>6</sup>

In 1891 under the spiritual guidance of Pastor Bodamer, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church began to grow. April 5, 1891, just one month after Pastor Bodamer arrived, the congregation

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<sup>4</sup> St. John's Congregational Minutes, as recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965...Seventy - Five years. p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> History of St. John's Elm at Bliss/ Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965... Seventy - Five Years. p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. 100 Years Anniversary booklet, p. 6.



incorporated itself. "Shortly after his installation the congregation bought three lots on Bliss and Elm streets, and immediately steps were taken to erect a small frame church, which was completed later in the summer and still serves as a house of worship."<sup>7</sup> Along with a new church being built, on August 9, 1891, the first elders were elected. There were only two elders at this time, W. Fischer, K. Salewski.<sup>8</sup>

In October of 1893, Pastor Bodamer was released to accept a call in Zilwaukee. Pastor Bodamer respectfully has the title of The First Resident Pastor at St. John's. The Lord blessed his efforts at St. John's by bringing more people into faith and into membership during his ministry. Just five years later, after spending only seven years in the parish ministry, Pastor Bodamer serves<sup>d</sup> the Michigan Synod as her president.

### **Chapter Three: The Wenk Years (1894-1896)**

Pastor Bodamer was succeeded by Rev. Emil Wenk, Pastor Bodamer's brother-in-law. In July of 1894, the congregation began to discuss the building of a parsonage. In August of 1894, a man by the name of Mr. Trier offered to build a parsonage for \$540. The Congregation accepted his offer which also included

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<sup>7</sup> History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saginaw County and Vicinity. page 20. 1922.

<sup>8</sup> Congregation Minutes as recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965... Seventy - Five Years. p. 10.

the cost of the lumber. In 1896 Pastor Wenk accepted a call in Waterloo, Michigan.<sup>9</sup>

St. John's certainly was blessed in the first few years of its life by men who held solidly to the Word of God. Both Pastor Bodamer and Pastor Wenk were included in an esteemed list of early Michigan pastors of whom the well-known pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lansing, Michigan, Karl Krauss, once wrote:

The history of the (Michigan) district is intimately bound up with Michigan Lutheran Seminary at Saginaw. This imparted to the district a unique character which has always been referred to as 'The Michigan Spirit.' It is not easy to define... As I see it 'the Michigan Spirit' was characterized by an almost fierce loyalty, a burning zeal and congenial camaraderie. This spirit may be traced back to (Pastor Christopher Ludwig) Eberhardt and the early students of the seminary. Men of the stature of John Westendorf, George Wacker, **Emil Wenk**, John Gauss, F. M. Krauss, Carl Binhammer, **Wilhelm Bodamer**...were imbued with 'the Michigan Spirit' and imparted that spirit to those who came into the district during their careers.<sup>10</sup>

Pastors Bodamer and Wenk were instrumental in the beginnings of more than the congregation at St. John's. "Surely, their pioneer spirit stirred the hearts of those who would build the new congregation located at the corner of Bliss and Elm Streets."<sup>11</sup>

#### **Chapter Four: 13 Years Before the Boom (1896 - 1909)**

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<sup>9</sup> History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965... Seventy - Five Years. p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Michigan Memories -- Things Our Fathers Have Told Us, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 6.

**Pastor Schoenow  
(1896-1898)**

**Pastor Bode  
(1899-1909)**

From 1896 to 1909 St. John's Congregation was served by two pastors. In June of 1896, St. John's called Pastor W. Schoenow to replace pastor Wenk. Pastor Schoenow accepted the call and moved to Saginaw from Marion Springs, Michigan.<sup>12</sup>

Two years later in 1898, a call was extended to Pastor M. Bode from Reed City. In 1899, Paster Bode accepted the call to St. John's and he also served as a Professor at Michigan Lutheran Seminary.<sup>13</sup>

Pastor Schoenow for his two years and Pastor Bode for his ten years serving St. John's, enjoyed the blessings God gave to this congregation. They lived in a new parsonage. They led the worship services in a new church building. They also had the privilege of serving a small group of Christian who were filled with zeal for serving the Lord during these thirteen years before the boom.<sup>14</sup>

The congregational minutes reveal a few more interesting facts during this time. In 1904 Saginaw bricks replaced the cinder sidewalks, and gas mains were laid in Bliss Street. In 1907 a lady accepted the job of cleaning the church for \$12 a year. In this same year Michigan Lutheran Seminary closed its

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<sup>12</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saginaw County and Vicinity. p20.

<sup>14</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 6

doors as a seminary, not to be opened again until 1910 as a preparatory school.<sup>15</sup>

### **Chapter Five: The Boom Years Pastor William Kramer (1909 - 1915)**

In 1909 Pastor Bode took a call to a congregation out east. St. John's extended a call to Pastor William Kramer who was the pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Lansing, Michigan. Pastor Kramer accepted the call and began to serve St. John's while at the same time also serving a congregation in Sanford, Michigan, about forty miles from Saginaw. The Lord sent Pastor Kramer to St. John's at a time when this congregation would experience its greatest percentage of growth in its entire history. But before we take a close look at the boom years, let us first get a clear picture of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1909 shortly after Pastor Kramer arrived in Saginaw. This quotation comes to us from an old German history book of the Michigan district of the Wisconsin Synod.

The congregation numbers 28 members at the present time. It possesses a beautiful property with church and parsonage. The members of the Church Council are: August Wegener, Karl Breu, Fritz Massmann, Karl Mueller, Gustav Becker, and Hermann Banschow.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Congregational minutes recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965... Seventy - Five Years.

<sup>16</sup> Kurzgefakte Geschichte Der Evangelisch - Lutherischen Synode Von Michigan U. A. St., p. 147.

During Pastor Kramer's years, congregation minutes reveal that special efforts were made to increase the membership. A committee was appointed to look for different locations where prospects for growth might be found.<sup>17</sup> Yet, God who is in control of all history caused a world event to take place which inevitably "quadrupled"<sup>18</sup> its membership.

The years from 1908 through 1914 saw the migration to the United States of many Russian citizens who actually were of German descent. These people had descended from Germans who, during the later part of the eighteenth century had been attracted to life and farm in Russia through a program of special economic concessions promoted by Catherine II, also called Catherine the Great. Catharine was herself a German who gained Russian leadership through having been the consort of the feeble Tsar Peter III. Catherine enticed these Germans with free land and exemption from taxation in the hope that their industrious and thrifty nature would promote the economic progress of her regime. Descended from these eighteenth century Russian - Germans were those who settled in Michigan to work the sugar beet farms and fields. Those who came to Saginaw settled primarily in the area being served by St. John's. The congregation realized explosive growth during these years of Russian - German settlement.<sup>19</sup>

During Pastor Kramer's years, the congregation took out it's first insurance policy on the church for \$900, and the parsonage for \$1000. There was even some discussion on relocating the church. Yet this would not happen until 1967. Pastor Kramer

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<sup>17</sup> Congregation minutes recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1963...Seventy - Five Years.

<sup>18</sup> Michigan District History 1833-1970. Page 105.

<sup>19</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 7.

retired from the ministry in 1915 because of his old age.<sup>20</sup> He faithfully served his Lord for many years. While Pastor Kramer was the pastor at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Lansing, he was the pastor of the man who served St. John's for forty five years. This leads us to the next chapter and to Pastor Oscar Frey.

### **Chapter Six: The Frey Years Four and a Half Decades of Change (1916 - 1961)**

In 1916, Pastor Oscar Frey became pastor of St. John's, whom he served for forty-six years. Before coming to St. John's he served first as pastor in Allegan, Michigan, and second as pastor in Ludington, Michigan.<sup>21</sup> During these four and a half decades, the congregation saw her greatest growth and greatest change.

One of the greatest changes to the strong German background of the congregation was the change from the German language to the English language in the worship service.<sup>22</sup> Pastor Frey introduced this change in 1916 on a once per month basis. "No doubt, the anti-German sentiment in the United States during World War I helped encourage most of this change."<sup>23</sup> In the following year, the Sunday School also was taught in both the

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<sup>20</sup> Congregational minutes recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1963...Seventy - Five Years. p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Miss Marjorie Frey, daughter of Rev. Oscar Frey.

<sup>22</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 7-8.

German and the English language.<sup>24</sup>

The language was not the only change that took place at St. John's. The congregational minutes reveal many other changes to us. In 1918, Pastor Frey gets a telephone installed in the parsonage. At this same time many people are taken into membership at every congregational meeting. In 1919 there is more talk about building a new school. In this same year the congregation went off of mission status and became independent of synod subsidy. The congregation set the pastor's salary at \$800 a year. In 1920 that salary was raised to \$1000 a year. The congregation also recognized that they needed to enlarge the church.<sup>25</sup>

We can understand why they needed more room when we consider that in 1922, the congregation grew to 95 voting members and 300 communicant members.<sup>26</sup>

Although the congregation has outgrown its house of worship, and needs not only a larger church, but also a school building, circumstances have been detrimental to building. Yet, we dare say, that most of its members are looking forward to the time when it will possess such buildings adequate to its needs.<sup>27</sup>

St. John's compensated for the lack of space by offering a

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<sup>24</sup> Michigan District History 1833-1970. p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> Congregational minutes found in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965...Seventy - Five Years. p.15.

<sup>26</sup> History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saginaw County and Vicinity. p. 20

<sup>27</sup> History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saginaw County and Vicinity. p. 20-21.

variety of worship opportunities. The following is a complete schedule of the worship and education which took place in 1922.

Services are held every Sunday morning at 9:30, in the German language, with the exception of the first Sunday of the month. On this Sunday the German services starts at 9:00, followed at 10:30 by an English service. Sunday school is held in English immediately after the morning services.

Catechetical instructions are given from September until June, from 4:00 until 5:00 P.M., Monday, Wednesday and Friday, in the German, and Tuesday and Thursday in the English language.<sup>28</sup>

St. John's continued to go through many changes. In 1925, the congregation elected to raise and rotate the entire church structure in order to have it face Elm Street.<sup>29</sup> Not only was the church turned 90 degrees, it also was remodeled inside and out. This remodeling included a new basement, a new entry way and twelve feet was added to the rear of the church.<sup>30</sup> In 1929, A Himmer's four rank pipe organ was installed. This organ is still played in the old St. John's Church and it sounds beautiful today. (The church building at Elm and Bliss is now a Latvian Lutheran Church).<sup>31</sup>

History also records for us times where the changes St. John's went through were not pleasing to everyone.

In the 1930's, discussions of the remodelling of

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<sup>28</sup> History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saginaw County and Vicinity. p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Congregational minutes recorded in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965...Seventy - Five Years. p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Miss Marjorie Frey, daughter of Pastor Frey.



the church resulted in a break in the membership of the congregation. Twenty-seven families left to form Emmanuel Evangelical and Reformed Church located on the corner of Maine and Elm.<sup>32</sup>

In 1939, changes continued to take place. The congregation decided to build a new parsonage for the pastor. At first they intended to remodel the old one. But due to its age and condition, it was more feasible for them to start from scratch.<sup>33</sup> The new parsonage cost \$6000. The building of the parsonage and the 50th Anniversary brought on a time of celebration.

September 1939 - 50th Anniversary of congregation is observed a year early to coincide with the dedication of new parsonage as an offering of thanks to God. Guest speakers were: Pastor W. Bodamer, St. John's first pastor; Pastor E. Wenk, St. John's second pastor; and Director of Michigan Lutheran Seminary, O. J. R. Hoenecke. Pastor Bodamer at this time was superintendent of the Synod's Polish Mission. He was in this country at the time of the interest of the Mission.<sup>34</sup>

For the next 22 years, St. John's continued to grow and change under the service of Pastor Frey. The minutes bring out different tidbits of history. From 1940 - 1945 the minutes were taken not only in German but also in English. In 1940 Miss Marjorie Frey, the daughter of Pastor Frey, began to play the organ, and she continues to play the organ in some of St. John's services today. In 1945, the council continued to discuss opening a Christian day school. As early as 1953 there was

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<sup>32</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Miss Marjorie Frey, daughter of Pastor Frey.

<sup>34</sup> Congregational minutes found in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1965... Seventy - Five Years. p. 16.

discussion of using individual communion cups. In 1955 a weekly envelope system is introduced. In 1958 Advent services were discontinued, and in 1959 Pastor Frey, rounding out 43 years, discusses retirement.<sup>35</sup>

For forty-six years, Pastor Frey served the Lord in the community of Saginaw. He was highly respected in both his congregation and the Saginaw community. The Saginaw News featured Pastor Frey in an article, noting that he was affectionately known in the community as "The Walking Pastor." However, a reputation of the highest respect was held among those pastors in the area and especially of his own Michigan Synod. Prof. E. C. Fredrich, in an historical essay on the Michigan Synod, writes:

Permit a personal aside. The essayist in those good old days when he was a member of Michigan's Northern Conference used to like to invite Pastor Oscar Frey to ride with him to conferences. He always found Oscar Frey's Michigan history lessons on the way most interesting. We would drive past an attractive Lutheran property in one of the towns among the thousands of Michigan and Pastor Frey would say, 'This was once a planting of the Michigan Synod but it was lost a long time ago when the congregation grew impatient in a long vacancy and switched to another synod.' A few miles down the road it would be the same story with new names and dates. The impression was that, if vacancies could have been filled, the Michigan District would own the state's Lutheranism lock, stock and barrel....We have taken positive steps to alleviate that long-standing pastoral shortage. Between 1888 and 1896 a total of 18 graduates entered the ministerial ranks of the Michigan Synod, among them that ablest of Michigan Synod historians Oscar Frey, who unfortunately

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<sup>35</sup> Congregational minutes found in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1963...Seventy - Five Years. p. 16-17.

never got to write the history.<sup>36</sup>

Pastor Frey preached his farewell sermon in 1961. He and his family continued to live in Saginaw and remained members at St. John's. Even during his retirement, Pastor Frey preached on occasion at St. John's and he helped serve communion. The evangelical character of Pastor Frey continued to shine into his retirement years. We do not have books of sermons or devotions written by Pastor Frey. Yet, we can get a taste of the evangelical spirit of this man from a little message he wrote to the members of St. John's in 1967 for the dedication booklet of the new church building.

The Psalmist states Ps. 118, 19.20: "Open to me the Gates of Righteousness. I will go into them and will praise the Lord. This Gate of the Lord into which the Righteous shall enter." Surely these words of the Psalmist must express the feeling of St. John's members today on this joyous occasion. By the grace of God, and prompted by the need of more adequate facilities, we have erected this beautiful house of God of which we may well be proud and by which we, as a congregation, have given expression to our love and reverence for our God and Savior, and our gratitude for the inestimable blessings we have received from Him.

In dedicating this house of God today the "Gates of Righteousness" are being opened, for, as a true Christian church, the Gospel will be the message proclaimed from its pulpit; and this Gospel message is "Righteousness," not man's, but that Righteousness which alone avails before God: the Righteousness which Christ secured for us on the Cross. And through this Gospel message all we declared righteous - called righteous, not only by the Psalmist; the Apostle Paul states 2 Cor. 5,21: "In Christ we are made the Righteousness of God," and Romans 4,5: "to him that believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for Righteousness."

May the doors of our church never fail to be

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<sup>36</sup> Michigan Memories, Things our Fathers have Told Us. p. 222.

"Gates of Righteousness," doors of a church open to all, where one may hear how Christ earned this Righteousness for us, and how through God-given faith in Him we accept this gift as ours and are assured of salvation.

And as God has opened to us the "Gates of Righteousness," let us today pledge with the Psalmist: "I will go into them and praise the Lord."<sup>37</sup>

It could have been a difficult task for the next pastor, Pastor Buch, to serve at St. John's following the 46 years of service given by Pastor Frey. It could have been even more difficult for Pastor Buch, because Pastor Frey remained as a member at St John's after he retired. Yet Pastor Buch and Pastor Frey became very good friends. Pastor Frey helped Pastor Buch learn about the city, the people, and the congregation. At the same time, Pastor Frey took his guiding hand away from the congregation, and allowed the Lord to work through Pastor Buch serving the people with the Word and Sacraments.<sup>38</sup>

### **Chapter Seven: The Buch Years Time For Relocation (1961 - 1976)**

November 19, 1961, Pastor Herbert Buch was installed. The congregation found it more and more difficult to worship in the little white church on Elm and Bliss streets. In 1962, the congregation had two English services each Sunday. In addition

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<sup>37</sup> Pastor Oscar Frey. Dedication, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

<sup>38</sup> Marjorie Frey, daughter of Pastor Frey.

to this, they also had German services on the 2nd and 4th Sundays of each month. In 1963, the congregation appointed a planning committee to investigate the possibility of re-location.<sup>39</sup>

This committee began its work in February 1963. The various concentrations of St. John's membership were pinpointed on City maps as to families with growing children, then pinpointed again as to age groups. The areas North and West of the present location seemed best for re-location. The new site, (the beautiful 5.63 acres "Centennial Farm" belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Kluck and Miss Henrietta Steltzried) was purchased in May of 1963 for \$25,000.00. May of 1965 saw this entire debt paid with interest. Thus began the fine response of the membership of St. John's toward this building program.<sup>40</sup>

In 1964, Building, Finance, and Publicity Committees were appointed. In this same year, preliminary floor plans of the new church were approved. In 1965, a group of Latvian Lutherans made an offer to buy the Elm and Bliss church for \$22,000. St. John's was asking \$35,000 for that 90' x 120' piece of land.

1965 was another year of celebration for St. John's. For it was Seventy - Five years before when the congregation was organized and began worshipping together. St. John's celebrated its Seventy - Five years of God's grace on November 7, 1965. The

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<sup>39</sup> Congregational minutes found in History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890 - 1963...Seventy - Five Years. p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Dedication, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

walls of this little white church at Elm and Bliss, which was built in 1891, now had to seat a total of 560 souls and 449 communicants. Pastor Buch wrote the following in the Seventy - Fifth Anniversary booklet:

Not one of the changes already made or contemplated has in view any change in St. John's prayer and desire to remain a confessional Lutheran Church. Thus St. John's desire to thank God for His mercy and grace over 75 years. God has been faithful. St. John's wishes to remain faithful to God.

We echo the words of the Psalmist used by St. John's first pastor at the dedication of the first Church on August 16, 1891: "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad."

As St. John's sets forth on the next quarter century she prays: "The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers."<sup>41</sup>

On January 10, 1966 the congregation made the decision at the Annual Meeting to proceed with the final plans for the new church. On August 21, 1966 the voting members of the congregation made the difficult decision to go ahead with building, even though the cost was to be 35% over the estimated cost. "Ground was broken on August 28, 1966 and the cornerstone was laid on Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1966. From the beginning there has been much thought and labor put forth by many people, but it has been a work of love."<sup>42</sup>

The cornerstone, which rested in the little white church at Elm and Bliss streets, was removed and placed inside of the wall of the narthex of the new church. Inside this cornerstone, the

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<sup>41</sup> History of St. John's Elm at Bliss / Saginaw, Mich. 1890-1965...Seventy - Five Years. p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Dedication. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

members of the congregation placed many different items.

AS CITIZENS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, we placed into the cornerstone a flag, a set of coins, the name of the President.

AS INHABITANTS OF SAGINAW TOWNSHIP, SAGINAW COUNTY, MICHIGAN, we placed into the cornerstone a copy of the Township News of August 31, 1966 (ground breaking ceremonies), a copy of the Saginaw News of November 23, 1966, the name of the Mayor of the City of Saginaw, and the name of the Governor of Michigan.

AS LUTHERAN OF THE WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD, we placed into the cornerstone a copy of Luther's Small Catechism, a copy of the Northwestern Lutheran.

AS MEMBERS OF ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, we placed into the cornerstone the contents of the original cornerstone (a copy of the German Constitution and a list of the pastors who served from 1890 to the time of remodelling in 1925), the 75th Anniversary History booklet, the English Constitution of St. John's, names of all souls, names of the officers of the church and organizations, name of present pastors, names of organist, choir director, custodian, names of Sunday School teaching staff, the number of classes and number of children in Sunday School, the names of committee members who served in the building program, names of the owners from whom the land was purchased, names of architect, general electrical, and mechanical contractors, name of job foreman.

And finally, AS CHILDREN OF GOD, through Faith in Christ Jesus, our Chief Cornerstone, we have placed into the cornerstone a copy of God's Holy Word: The Holy Bible - the blueprint for building our spiritual houses.<sup>43</sup>

The dedication service for the \$300,000.00 building was celebrated on October 8th, 1967. The entire building is 182 feet long. The Narthex is 28' x 36'. The Nave is 46' x 171'. The Chancel is 14' x 20'. The Pastor's Sacristy (on one side of the Chancel) and the Working Sacristy (on the other side of the Chancel) are both 7 1/2' x 14'. The lower level has 13

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<sup>43</sup> Dedication, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

classrooms, kitchenette, two lavatories, counting room and lounge. The Fellowship Hall is 37' x 103 1/2' and can seat 240 people at tables. The kitchen is attached to the Fellowship Hall and is 16' x 30'. The Spire and Cross rise 57 feet above the ground. The Narthex, Nave, and Choir Loft can seat a total of 485 worshipers. The Pastor Frey Memorial Organ was a product of the William D. Kaltrider Organ Company of Owosso, Michigan. This organ contains 23 ranks, 44 stops, 1414 pipes. "As you leave the church and look back from the East, you see that the architect has achieved a blend of the new and the traditional, a modern church for a 75 year old Congregation that did not wish to lose its touch with the past."<sup>44</sup> "The old Church, the 'little white church', on Bliss and Elm was purchased by a group of Latvian Lutherans for \$28,000."<sup>45</sup>

Pastor Buch wrote a little message to the congregation for the dedication booklet of the new church. It reads as follows:

"THIS IS THE DAY THE LORD HATH MADE; WE WILL  
REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT" *Psalm 118,24.*

Many members of congregations and their pastors never have the privilege of watching the construction of a new church. Slowly, over many years, the Lord guided many minds, distributed many skills and inspired many hearts. Then a day like this comes, truly "A Day the Lord hath made."

All around we see the Hand of God blessing St. John's Congregation in reaching this day. From the mere desire for a new church to a real concern for larger facilities in which to train our children and more children, larger facilities to bring our

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<sup>44</sup> Dedication, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

<sup>45</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 9.



congregation together in worship and Christian fellowship - from the first halting steps in the planning to the many visits made to other congregations and their churches seeking the best possible arrangement - from the attempt to fulfill the desire to remain at Elm and Bliss Streets to the realization that our sentiment for the old Church and the old location must give way to the need for doing the Lord's work and expanding it - from the search for a suitable site to the decision made by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Kluck and Miss Henrietta Steltzriede to sell us the frontage acres of their "Centennial Farm" - from the devotion and unanimity of all committees to the interest and skill of the architect, builders, tradesmen and laborers - for the final decision to build and the readiness to support that decision with large and regular offerings - in all this we see God's hand of blessing.

To God then, we dedicate this House of Worship. He has provided the means and given our people the willingness to put these means to work.

Nothing that we have built, though different and more modern than our old House of Worship, in any way indicates that there shall be a different and more modern preaching. Our faith and life will still be guided by the Bible: God's Holy Word.

Especially in this 450th Anniversary Year of the Reformation do we wish to re-dedicate ourselves to our Reformation heritage. We shall hold dear that which God have back to us through Dr. Martin Luther: "By Grace Alone - Through Faith Alone - Through the Scriptures Alone."<sup>46</sup>

Back in the early years of St. John's, the people continually desired to train their children in a Christian Day School. In 1971 this desire was still there. "The congregation voted to pay the tuition costs for those St. John's children who would enroll in a Wisconsin Synod Christian Day School. This commitment to Christian education was a big step in the direction that the congregation was taking in the establishment and support

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<sup>46</sup> Pastor Herbert Buch. Dedication, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 4705 Brockway Road / Saginaw, Michigan, October 8th, 1967.

of her own parochial grade school."<sup>47</sup> St. John's continued to pay this tuition until 1983 when she started her own Christian Day School.

During the early years of the new church building, the congregation continued to grow under the leadership of Pastor Buch. In 1972, Pastor Buch was serving 616 souls, 465 communicants, 75 voters and 95 children in the Sunday School.<sup>48</sup> Pastor Buch served his Lord and the people at St. John's faithfully until 1976 when he took a call to Wisconsin.

### **Chapter Eight: The Bitter Years (1977 - 1982)**

St. John's was without a pastor for several months. During this time, Pastor Lynn Schroeder from Bethany Lutheran Church in Saginaw Township served as the vacancy pastor. In 1977, Pastor Robert Bitter accepted the call and became the St. John's eighth pastor. When he arrived, he and his family lived in an apartment for several months while they waited for the new parsonage to be completed. This new parsonage was completed in 1977 and now sits behind the church facing Henry Drive.

One of the more urgent concerns that became apparent during these years was the dramatic changes that effected this congregation.

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<sup>47</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Michigan District History 1833 - 1970. p. 105.

Greater mobility allowed her members to locate well beyond the immediate neighborhood which the congregation had served for so many years. The quiet and undisturbed worship services gave startling evidence to the absence of younger children. The painful parting of old friends and faithful members who more frequently were being called to their eternal reward than the modern day birth rate was capable of replacing, all worked together toward the serious reevaluation of the status of a Christian Day School in the congregation. Not only is a Christian education a precious blessing from God, but the congregation was sensing the stress of growing old while younger families sought out those congregations which offered a Christian education.<sup>49</sup>

Pastor Bitter served his Lord and the people of St. John's with the Word of God and the Sacraments until 1982 when he took a call to Oakfield, Wisconsin, where he remains today.

### **Chapter Nine: The Garbow Years St. John's Lutheran Elementary School (1983 - 1994)**

After Pastor Bitter left St. John's there was a long vacancy until the next pastor came. Pastor Lynn Schroeder of Bethany filled in as the vacancy pastor. During this vacancy many calls were extended and returned. During these months of waiting for a new pastor, the congregation formulated and accepted a resolution to open the doors of their own Christian Day School, or as we call it today, Lutheran Elementary School. The congregation decided to place this new school in the basement of the church building, in the Sunday School classrooms.

After many months of waiting, Pastor Daniel Garbow accepted the call to be the ninth pastor of St. John's Evangelical

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<sup>49</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 10.

Lutheran Church. He and his family arrived in Saginaw from Arizona in February of 1983. He soon found himself serving in a congregation as pastor and principle in which a 93 year old dream was about to become a reality. St. John's extended a call to one of its own members, Irene Cudworth, who was serving as teacher at Bethany Lutheran School in Saginaw Township. She accepted the call and the doors of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran School opened in the fall of 1983. The Lord's Word now would be taught to the children of St. John's on a daily basis, as our Lord urges us to do and as our congregation's first pastors dreamed it should be.<sup>50</sup>

By the grace of God, and with members excited over the prospect of a new school, St. John's opened her school doors to 10 little students in grades Kindergarten through the fourth grade. A grade was added each year until all eight elementary grades were available.<sup>51</sup>

In 1984 St. John's called Deborah Hewitt as a second teacher to teach the upper grades. She taught for one school year and was replaced in 1985 by principle and teacher Mr. Roger Wolf. In 1985 St. John's purchased a teacherage at 1290 Tout Drive which sits beside the church parking lot. Mr. Wolf served St. John's for two school years until he was replaced in 1987 by Mr. Kurt Bauer. Mr. Bauer served for one school year and he was replaced by Mr. James Rodeman in 1988. Mr. Rodeman served for three school years and was replaced by Susan Gilkerson and Patricia

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<sup>50</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 10 - 11.

<sup>51</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 11.

Seelow in 1991. Patricia Seelow served for only one school year while Irene Cudworth and Susan Golkerson continue to teach in the school today.<sup>52</sup>

Here in 1994, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church and School continue to preach and to teach the true and living Word of God. As of January 1, 1994, St. John's has a total of 440 souls and 347 communicant Members. There are 30 children enrolled in the Elementary Lutheran School.<sup>53</sup> Many of St. John's young people have gone on to serve the Lord in the teaching and preaching ministry. Six pastors came <sup>From</sup> St. John's and they are: George Frey, Raymond Frey, Edwin Frey, Theodore Frey, Donald Buch, and Jeffrey Bovee. There are currently three former members of St. John's, (sons who grew up at St. John's), attending Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. They are as follows: Thad Bitter (Middler), Greg Bitter (Vicar), and David Pries (Senior).

I would like to say that it has been my pleasure researching, studying, and compiling this history of the congregation I grew up in. St. John's indeed has a rich heritage and history. One can truly see God's guiding hand in the rich history of this congregation. Pastor Garbow sums this up well with the words he wrote in his history of the congregation found in the 100th Anniversary booklet.

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<sup>52</sup> Irene Cudworth, teacher at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran School.

<sup>53</sup> "The SCROLL," St. John's Newsletter. January 1994.

Although we tend to count largeness in the size and numbers that are visibly evident to us in a given generation, the Lord counts growth in the number of souls that stream heavenward to Him over the course of this world's history. There may be many that measure a larger-sized congregation than St. John's, but fewer can speak of the hundreds of souls that the Lord has called to Himself over the past century as St. John's has as an active community of God's kingdom here on earth. These are the numbers that the Lord considers. Size of a congregation means nothing to God if it does not remain faithful to the Word that saves. For 100 years our God has chosen to use us as the stepping stone to life in Paradise for many hundreds of Christian. For this we are humbly grateful For this we fearfully pray, "Preserve Thy Word O Savior!" so that we may continue to be the congregational home where fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, troubled souls, lonely souls, friends and strangers may learn of Jesus, live in His grace, die in His name, and be saved. May numbers such as these ever bear testimony to the value of our existence as a congregation for as many years as the Lord will have this world endure! Amen.<sup>54</sup>

May God continue to bless St. John's with faithful preachers, faithful teachers, and faithful members as we all look forward to Life Everlasting.

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<sup>54</sup> Preserve Thy Word O Savior. p. 11.

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