

Ninety-Five Years of God's Grace:

A General History of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Appleton, Wisconsin

Brett Ehlke

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Professor John Brenner
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St. Matthew Church has grown to what it is by the grace of God, with the help of its many enthusiastic friends and supporters, in spite of the indifference of some of its members and of some outside the church whose moral support and good wishes she could expect, but never had the pleasure to enjoy. We clearly see the hand of God here. The hand of man has brought and is still bringing much opposition to the progress of St. Matthew from within and from without. But in spite of our sins, in spite of our indifference and unworthiness, in spite of the fact that St. Matthew is a thorn in the eye of some, God's plan to build the kingdom of Christ on the West Side was carried out. Psalms 115,1. "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory for Thy mercy, and for Thy truth's sake."¹

Rev. Philip Froehlke penned these words in 1929 to describe some of the challenges and blessings which St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church in Appleton, Wisconsin, experienced in its fifteen years of existence. Even today – eighty years later – these words appropriately describe St. Matthew's ninety-five years of challenges and blessings. Even though the members of St. Matthew have encountered many challenges and changes throughout their history, they also have received many blessings from the Lord. From a small portable chapel to a large church building with a multi-room school, the Lord has blessed St. Matthew to become a large church body. This paper will take a brief look at these ninety-five years during which St. Matthew has striven to proclaim the gospel to the west side of Appleton and beyond.

1914-1924: St. Matthew's Beginnings

St. Matthew's beginnings extend all the way back to 1914 when St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Appleton saw a potential need for a Lutheran church on the west side of the city. Appleton at this time had a population of approximately 20,000 and was growing. St. Paul's church council and pastor, Rev. T.J. Sauer, asked the mission board to begin a new congregation in the west side. The mission board considered the proposal and asked Rev. W. Haase, the pastor of St. John in the town of Center, to explore the possibility of starting a new church. During the spring of 1914, Haase canvassed the area and held exploratory services in a

¹Philip Froehlke, "History of St. Matthew Church," *St. Matthew Monthly*, November, 1929, p. 6.

store. Haase's canvassing and exploratory services confirmed what St. Paul's church council had suspected. The mission board gave permission to St. Paul to purchase three vacant lots on the corner of Lawrence and Mason Streets. A portable chapel with a capacity of about seventy-five people was constructed. Froehlke observes, "The people still talk about how the loose boards rattled when they first walked across the floor. There was no side walk around the church and only two houses in the block at the time."² This portable chapel was by no means a magnificent building, but it definitely served the purpose for which it was constructed.

The mission board called Pastor Haase to continue his work on the west side of Appleton; however, "his congregation would not let him go."³ The mission board decided to extend a call to a graduate from the Wisconsin Synod's seminary located in Wauwatosa at this time. Rev. R.E. Ziesemer received his first call into the pastoral ministry to help start this mission congregation. On November 4, 1914, six members of this new mission church, two members of St. Paul Lutheran Church, and Pastor Ziesemer held the first meeting of this newly founded congregation. The six members of this new church decided upon a name: "The members were unanimous in naming the new Church St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church."⁴ In addition to selecting a name, they also elected three officers: Frank Schultz, President; Otto Schultz, Secretary; Peter Sigl, Treasurer.⁵

Why did St. Paul Lutheran Church decide to start this new mission only one mile away? It appears there are several reasons: A newspaper article about the 45th anniversary of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Appleton suggests that St. Paul wanted St. Matthew to be an option for

²Ibid., p. 2.

³Ibid.

⁴St. Matthew Lutheran Church, The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, November 4, 1914.

⁵Ibid.

people who preferred English to German: “(Ziesemer) had accepted a call to St. Matthew church, a mission of St. Paul church, to conduct English language service. In 1914 it was decided that only German services would be conducted at St. Paul.”⁶

In addition to this, the size of St. Paul’s membership had something to do with the decision. St. Paul had grown to about 1,200 communicants. In order to be able to reach out to a growing area in Appleton, a new church was probably the best solution. Ultimately, the main reason was that St. Paul saw an opportunity to share the gospel in a growing part of Appleton, and they took advantage of it.

St. Paul did not stop with the start of St. Matthew. As more of its members started to prefer English over German, another mission church from St. Paul came into existence: Mount Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church. Initially, Mount Olive held its services in downtown Appleton, close to both St. Matthew and St. Paul. In 1978 Mount Olive moved to its current location on the north side of Appleton.⁷

The mission board called Pastor Ziesemer to serve at Mount Olive as well. At first this was possible due to the small size of each congregation; however, as each congregation grew, it became more and more difficult for Pastor Ziesemer to carry out his responsibilities. The idea of combining St. Matthew and Mount Olive was suggested, but it never gained momentum. The mission board decided it was no longer fair to Pastor Ziesemer to be required to serve both congregations:

A small group of Lutherans intent upon founding a purely English congregation downtown asked him for his services, and for nearly a year he preached twice every Sunday, - on the West Side for St. Matthew and down town for the newly organized

⁶“Pastor, Congregation Mark 45th Anniversary at Mt. Olive Church,” Appleton Post Crescent, 1960.

⁷“Mount Olive Ev. Lutheran Church, Appleton, WI,” Northward in Christ: A History of the Northern Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1917-2000, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2000, p. 71.

English Mt. Olive Congregation... The field soon became too large for one man, and the Mission Board extended a call to Pastor Zieseemer to serve only the down town English Mt. Olive congregation. St. Matthew Congregation reluctantly and unwillingly granted Missionary Zieseemer a dismissal.⁸

After Pastor Zieseemer accepted the call to serve Mount Olive exclusively, Pastor E. Bruns was called to serve as St. Matthew's next pastor. Like Zieseemer, Bruns was called directly out of the seminary in Wauwatosa. Pastor Bruns came to Appleton in 1915 and served St. Matthew for about three years. In 1918 Bruns received and accepted a call to serve Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Delano, MN. Bruns served at Mount Olive for thirty years and retired due to illness. On a trip back to Appleton in 1950, Bruns died in a car accident. The funeral was held at Mount Olive in Appleton. Pastor Zieseemer conducted the funeral, and Pastor Sylvester Johnson from St. Matthew assisted.⁹

After Pastor Bruns left for Minnesota, St. Matthew called Rev. A. Werner to serve as pastor. Unfortunately for St. Matthew, Pastor Werner left shortly after to serve as pastor for St. John Lutheran Church in the town of Center, WI. Pastor Philip Froehlke was called to serve St. Matthew after Pastor Werner departed.

Pastor Froehlke accepted the call to serve as pastor for St. Matthew in 1920. Froehlke gave St. Matthew some much needed stability: he served at St. Matthew for eighteen years before he was taken to his heavenly home. During his pastorate some important events happened for this young congregation.

1923 marked a monumental year for St. Matthew as a young mission congregation. During this year St. Matthew declared itself to be a self-supporting congregation. St. Matthew also purchased the chapel on Mason and Lawrence Streets from the mission board. In addition

⁸Froehlke, p. 3.

⁹"Former Minnesota Pastor Killed in Auto Accident," Appleton Post Crescent, 1960.

to this, Pastor Froehlke married during this time, and the church decided to build him a parsonage. This small congregation continued to grow, and by 1924 St. Matthew had a membership of about sixty-five families.¹⁰

Pastor Froehlke was absolutely accurate in his observation that St. Matthew prospered only by the grace of God. St. Matthew had five pastors serve the congregation in its first six years of existence. Two other Wisconsin Synod churches were located only one mile away. It would not have been difficult for some people at St. Matthew to give up hope for their congregation and join one of those other two churches. Yet, through this difficult time, God blessed St. Matthew with numerical growth. St. Matthew's pastors and members worked hard to spread the gospel throughout the west side of Appleton, and it was certainly not done in vain.

Because St. Matthew was growing and able to become self-supporting, the congregation decided to look into the possibility of building a new church and school. A committee of five investigated the issue, and the congregation decided to build: "At a later meeting it was decided to build a new church, move the chapel back and convert it into a school."¹¹ The new church was dedicated on November, 1924 with a total cost of about \$38,000. Because of congregational support and a \$10,000 interest-free loan from the synod, St. Matthew was able to reduce the debt to about \$30,000 in 1928.¹²

In 1924 St. Matthew began its first year of school in the portable chapel. Pastor Froehlke had his hands full that first year of the school since he served both as pastor of the church and teacher of the school. "The Pastor taught one year. The next summer a petition to the Synod

¹⁰Froehlke, p. 4.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 5.

was granted to support our school with a teacher thereby giving the pastor more time for mission work.”¹³

The first ten years for St. Matthew provided some tough and unique challenges. Yet, the members of St. Matthew faced those challenges with confidence: trusting that the Lord would continue to be with them and bless them. St. Matthew not only strove to share the gospel ^{with} to its own members and transfers from other Wisconsin Synod churches, but made a strong effort to share the gospel to all the people in that area of Appleton.

1925-1950: A Young Church through Difficult Times in America

Things were going extremely well for St. Matthew in the late 1920s: a new church building, a new school, and a growing membership. The United States, however, was on the verge of some extremely difficult times. The economic difficulties of the Great Depression and the fear and turmoil of World War II impacted many in this country. Yet, for the most part, things continued to go well for the congregation of St. Matthew.

The pastor’s devotion in the monthly newsletter showed a proper perspective on the problems which Americans were experiencing:

We never walk alone. We have not passed this way before, but our Lord Jesus has. Long ago, He came down to earth to bear our burden of sin, to give us forgiveness, and to make the road of life the road to heaven. Today it may look unknown and strange to us; but He knows our joys and sorrows, our fears and temptations, our weakness, our failures. But he still leads on. We have no one else to follow. Over the hills and through the valleys – that is His way and by His grace and power also ours.¹⁴

St. Matthew still only had one teacher in 1929 even though the school continued to grow. By that time, the school’s enrollment reached forty students. With continued growth for both the church and the school, the school became self-supporting in 1930. For the next decade, the

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Sylvester Johnson, “Hills and Valleys,” *St. Matthew Monthly*, September 1940, p. 7.

school's numbers remained steady. Due to a number of members moving out of town, the school's enrollment declined to thirty students in 1940.¹⁵ Because of the declining numbers, the congregation decided to close the school during the 1945-1946 school year.

With the closing of its school, St. Matthew saw an opportunity. At this time, Appleton had five Wisconsin Synod churches fairly close to each other. St. Matthew proposed the idea of sharing one elementary school between these five churches: "At the annual meeting in January of 1945 it was decided to appoint a committee of the pastor, teacher, and five other members whose duty it would be to contact the other Wisconsin Synod Churches in Appleton to discuss the feasibility of combining our efforts for the promotion of a consolidated elementary Day School in Appleton."¹⁶

St. Matthew and the other four churches (St. Paul, Riverview, Mount Olive, and Bethany) held meetings during the years of 1945-1947 to discuss the issue; however, a joint school never was started. At the start of the 1946 school year, St. Matthew decided to reopen its school: "September 9th 1946 is a memorable day in the history of our St. Matthew School. It meant that though our school was closed last year, now contrary to the predictions of many, and in spite of the tremendous obstacles which stood in our way, the school bell rings again, at the St. Matthew School calling the pupils to classes."¹⁷

Even though enrollment was down to only twenty-four students that year,¹⁸ St. Matthew was hopeful that the school would grow. By 1944 St. Matthew had grown to 721 souls with

¹⁵Gerhard Rolloff, "School Notes," *St. Matthew Monthly*, September 1940, p. 7.

¹⁶"St. Matthew Lutheran Church and School," 1977, p. 1.

¹⁷Sylvester Johnson, "The School Bell Rings Again," *St. Matthew Monthly*, September 1946, p. 10.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

approximately 130 school-aged children.¹⁹ The portable chapel that was built in 1914 was still being used as the school building. Due to lack of room, the school's capacity at this time was about thirty-four. St. Matthew clearly needed more room if its school would be available to all of its children. Throughout the next few years, St. Matthew began to acquire property to prepare for building a permanent school building.

Even though the school did not grow during this time, the church continued to grow. St. Matthew maintained a steady growth throughout the Great Depression; however, its members were certainly not immune to financial difficulties. Because of this St. Matthew in 1935 was unable to balance its budget for the first time in its history. Pastor Froehlke made an appeal to the congregation for an increase in their offerings. The congregation responded to this appeal the following year by giving more than enough to cover the budget.

During the next few years, St. Matthew underwent some important changes as a church body. In 1938 Pastor Froehlke died after serving St. Matthew for seventeen years. He was only forty-two years old when he died. According to a local newspaper, Froehlke "died at 11:57 Sunday evening in Appleton after a 3-day illness."²⁰ St. Matthew called Pastor Sylvester Johnson to serve as its pastor. Pastor Johnson accepted and would serve St. Matthew for the following forty-three years.

St. Matthew not only experienced a change in its pastor, but financial difficulties started to become a problem. In 1944 St. Matthew still had \$15,900 of debt from the church building built in 1924. As long as they had this debt, it was difficult for St. Matthew to expand its school. The church council came up with a plan to get St. Matthew out of debt. The church council sent letters to every member to introduce a plan of issuing non-interest bearing certifications.

¹⁹Sylvester Johnson, "Parochial Report," *St. Matthew Monthly*, January 1944, p. 4.

²⁰"Lutheran Pastor, 42, Is Dead After Illness of 3 Days," *Appleton Post-Crescent*, 1938.

Through these certifications, the church council hoped to cut down on any interest payments St. Matthew had, and ultimately to make St. Matthew debt free.²¹

The congregation was receptive to this idea. By the summer of 1944, about one third of the congregation was participating in the program.²² The plan was accomplished sooner than anyone could have imagined: “Within 3 years, on Nov. 28, 1947, the last payment was made to a certificate holder. Instead of the original plan to complete this project in 12 years, it was completed in 3 years, and for the first time in the history of St. Matthew Church the congregation was debt free.”²³

St. Matthew experienced some other changes during these years. By 1939 St. Matthew had grown so much, the congregation thought it would be a good idea to start holding sunrise services on Easter Sunday. It was also during this year that a communion rail was built around the altar. In 1941 St. Matthew started using the Lutheran Hymnal for its services. This hymnal was called, “the new hymnal” at that time. As German speakers became fewer within St. Matthew, the congregation decided to limit its German service to only one service a month (2nd Sunday of the month).²⁴

How St. Matthew’s members continued to support its church during the Great Depression and World War II is impressive. As part of a growing town, the Great Depression may not have impacted its members as much as farmers in rural areas. Nevertheless, St. Matthew as a young congregation seemed to handle financial difficulties and other challenges well.

²¹M.G. Theimer, “January Meeting,” *St. Matthew Monthly*, January 1944, p. 12.

²²H.W. Goerl, “The Refinancing Plan,” *St. Matthew Monthly*, June 1944, p. 1.

²³“St. Matthew Lutheran Church and School,” p. 1.

²⁴“Brief History of St. Matthew Ev. Lutheran Church,” 1989, p. 4.

Part of the reason for this comes from the leadership under Pastors Froehlke and Johnson. It would have been easy for them to get wrapped up in the problems they were experiencing in their congregation as well as in the nation. While in their newsletters, they talked about these problems, it was clear they had a good understanding of their main responsibility: proclaiming God's Word to the people of St. Matthew. For example Pastor Johnson in a monthly newsletter around Easter wrote:

We shall celebrate Easter this year in a world which is trying its best with its widespread wickedness, its flagrant unbelief, to rob the festival of its true importance. But all the throbbing of war drums, the sound of the tramp of millions of armed men, the selfish plotting of international diplomats and leaders of nations, the terrors and uncertainties of a badly muddled economic situation, the theories and speculations of spiritually perverted churchmen, all the evil plotting and designs of hell let loose upon our suffering earth, cannot close the open tomb of the risen Christ nor dim the luster of His redeeming grace. No power on earth or in hell can take away the glory of His victory won for us over the foes of our souls.²⁵

1951-1980: St. Matthew Expands

With the church building's debt paid off and with plans for building a new school, these years proved to be ambitious ones for St. Matthew. By January 1, 1950, St. Matthew had grown to approximately 280 families with 696 total baptized members.²⁶ In order to offer Lutheran elementary education to all its members, the congregation voted to build a three-classroom school.²⁷ They broke ground on Mother's Day, May 10, 1953.

The overall enrollment increase during the first ten years of this new addition exceeded the expectation of most people at St. Matthew. By 1962 the enrollment grew to over 100 students. It became clear that in order to keep up with the increase in enrollment, St. Matthew needed additional classrooms. In 1961 the congregation purchased two properties west of the

²⁵Sylvester Johnson, "Easter," *St. Matthew Monthly*, March, 1945, p. 1.

²⁶Sylvester Johnson, "Pastor's Annual Report," *St. Matthew Monthly*, January, 1950, p. 2.

²⁷Norman Pope, "Annual Congregation Meeting," *St. Matthew Monthly*, January, 1953, p. 6.

campus. In 1963 two more classrooms, an office, and storage space was built and dedicated. St. Matthew purchased one more piece of property in 1967. This property was purchased originally to serve as a teacherage for Principal Alfred Gresens.²⁸

The congregation decided to make one final addition to its school. "On Monday, April 8, 1974, the congregation voted 25-22 to proceed with an Expansion Program to include a Kindergarten room, space for additional classrooms, office, new heating system, auditorium-gym, kitchen, and dining/fellowship hall (under the gym) at a cost of \$377,626 excluding interest payments on loans."²⁹ The enrollment for the 1975-1976 school year reached 148 students with six teachers.

Even though most of the changes to St. Matthew during these years involved the school, the church experienced some changes too. The attendance for the German services had been diminishing for a number of years. The congregation voted to cancel all German services in 1953.³⁰

The following year the church decided to build a bell tower. During 1956 this project was finished: "In June 1956, three bronze church bells, each with an inscription of a cross on one side and Martin Luther's Coat of Arms on the other, and housed in a modified Gothic 62-foot tower, were dedicated. The \$25,000 tower was erected adjoining the church building."³¹

In May 1964 St. Matthew began its own Lutheran Pioneers. The congregation decided to have Lutheran Pioneers for both boys and girls of the congregation. The idea went over well: "We are happy to report at this writing that 34 of our young boys have joined the Lutheran

²⁸"St. Matthew Lutheran Church and School," p. 1.

²⁹Ibid, p. 2.

³⁰Pope, p. 6.

³¹Sylvester Johnson, "Annual Report," *St. Matthew Monthly*, January, 1956, p. 5.

Pioneers.”³² Pastor Johnson played an active role in Lutheran Pioneers: “For many years (Johnson) was the district and national chaplain of the Lutheran pioneers.”³³

From 1970 to 1987 St. Matthew also participated in the vicar program. While a major reason for this was to help in the education of future pastors, St. Matthew benefited from the services of these vicars. In addition to assistance in preaching and teaching, the vicars helped tremendously in visits with shut-ins and those hospitalized. St. Matthew stopped receiving vicars for a few years, and they decided to call an associate pastor in 1987. St. Matthew would once again start receiving vicars in the mid-1990s until the early 2000s.

In 1976 St. Matthew started its first official Board of Stewardship. Even though handling the finances was part of its purpose, the Board of Stewardship had a larger scope of “getting information to and from the members, take part in financial canvases, delinquent visitations, and any way such a committee could be of service to the church.”³⁴

During these years St. Matthew continued to grow, especially in regard to its school. Pastor Johnson played an important role during these years of growth. After forty-three years of service, Pastor Johnson retired on January 26, 1981. Pastor Johnson had the privilege to serve many people during his pastorate: “Since his installation Johnson has made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of 1,969 babies, confirmed 961 youths and married 295 happy couples.”³⁵

From his articles in the *St. Matthew Monthly*, it is clear that Pastor Johnson had a concern for souls. Perhaps to some, Johnson seemed stern as he openly talked about the problems with which he was concerned as a pastor. He often talked about the problem of delinquency and poor

³²Carl Meitner, “Lutheran Pioneers,” *St. Matthew Monthly*, June, 1964, p. 7.

³³“Pastor Johnson Retires,” *Appleton Post-Crescent*, January 17, 1981.

³⁴The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, September 7, 1976.

³⁵“Pastor Johnson Retires.”

financial stewardship in monthly newsletters. Yet, Pastor Johnson wanted what was best for his people. He frequently encouraged his people to come to church in order to receive the blessings from God's Word. He also encouraged people to make the Lord's Supper a priority because of the blessings that come from it. Pastor Johnson had a love for God's Word, and he wanted his people to have that same love too.

1981-2006: St. Matthew Starts to Become Stable

With practically all the building projects completed, things started to settle down for St. Matthew during these years. After Pastor Johnson retired, the congregation called Pastor David Pagel in 1981. In 1987 Pastor Robert Hein was ordained and installed as the associate pastor at St. Matthew.³⁶

It was also during the 1980s that St. Matthew decided to offer non-Sunday services. In 1983 St. Matthew started to hold Monday services from May through October, and then in 1988 St. Matthew started to hold Saturday night services during the school year. The Monday night service was changed to include only the summer months. For the most part, these serves have remained in tact to this day.

During the 1980s St. Matthew conducted a self-study of the congregation and decided more could be done in terms of outreach. The church council showed a good understanding of why outreach is such an important part of the congregation: "It is suggested that the primary purpose of evangelism is to reach out to the unchurched with the gospel of Jesus Christ."³⁷ The recognition for the need of outreach was part of the decision to call Pastor Hein. At first things seemed to go well with their outreach endeavors: "Pastor Hein reported that 20-25 people

³⁶"Brief History of St. Matthew Ev. Lutheran Church," p. 6.

³⁷St. Matthew Church Council, "St. Matthew Ev. Lutheran Church Self-Study 1986-1988," Appleton, WI, 1988, p. 3.

worked on the survey visits...Pastor Hein noted that the Friendship Evangelism Sunday was very popular as 780 people attended the four services.”³⁸

Because St. Matthew was beginning to focus more on outreach and was hoping that St. Matthew’s numbers would increase, the members voted to enlarge the church building. In 1989 St. Matthew added twenty-six feet to the front part of the church. The cost totaled about \$325,000. The estimated increase in capacity was about 130 people. Included in this remodeling were a new chancel, lighting and sound systems, cushioned pews, communion rails, church office, and additional basement space.

Pastor Hein received and accepted a call in 1994 to Apostles’ Lutheran Church in San Jose, California. In 1995 Pastor Bradley Ragner accepted the call to serve as the associate pastor. During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, St. Matthew’s membership steadily grew. By 1993 St. Matthew had over 1,500 souls with 1,122 communicants. The average Sunday attendance was about 700 each week. Pastor Pagel reported that St. Matthew’s attendance made it “one of the top 20 largest churches in the Wisconsin Synod.”³⁹

During the late 1990s into the next decade, St. Matthew experienced several changes among its pastors. In 1998 Pastor Ragner accepted a call to serve as pastor for Messiah Lutheran Church in Shiocton, WI. Pastor Randall Johnson accepted the call to fill the vacancy left by Pastor Ragner. In 2001 Pastor Jeffrey Verbeke accepted a call to serve St. Matthew. In 2002, Pastor David Pagel accepted a call to Immanuel Lutheran in Oshkosh, WI. He served St. Matthew for twenty-one years. In 2003 Pastor Paul Schuler came to St. Matthew as an associate pastor. Also during that year, St. Matthew decided to call a full-time staff minister. They called Jon Ruddat, and he still serves St. Matthew to this day.

³⁸The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, November 1989.

³⁹David Pagel, *Annual Report 1993*, p. 1.

Because the offerings of St. Matthew were not adequate to support two pastors and one staff minister, the congregation decided to terminate one ^{of} the church's called positions. Pastor Verbeke decided to resign in May 2007.⁴⁰

Due to declining enrollment and financial difficulties, St. Matthew's school started to struggle. On September 20, 2005 St. Matthew began a Joint School Task Force to discuss the possibility of starting a joint school with other WELS schools in Appleton. St. Matthew and St. Paul agreed to a joint school for the 2007-2008 school year.⁴¹ This joint effort lasted only one year though because St. Paul and St. Matthew were unable to work out a long-term plan. St. Paul continued its day school, but St. Matthew debated on whether to keep its school open. On April 1, 2008 St. Matthew made the difficult decision to close its grade school.⁴² Despite this difficult decision, St. Matthew committed itself to help paying for Lutheran education for its children: "St. Matthew will pay 100% of the difference between member and non-member tuition and fees for members of St. Matthew to attend any WELS area school of their choosing."⁴³

The Future

In 2008 Pastor Thomas Mielke accepted a call to serve at St. Matthew as an associate pastor. Today St. Matthew is served by Pastors Schuler and Mielke as well as Staff Minister Jon Ruddat. Membership has declined since St. Matthew closed its school. Since the school closing St. Matthew has put more emphasis on outreach and adult education. By December 2009 St.

⁴⁰The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, May 2007.

⁴¹The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, July, 2006.

⁴²The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, April, 1, 2008.

⁴³The Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, May 13, 2008.

Matthew's membership dropped to 1,091 with a total of 921 communicants.⁴⁴ St. Matthew's leadership is optimistic about the future as they continue to share the gospel ^{with} to the people in their community.

Only the Lord knows what the future holds for St. Matthew Lutheran Church. Throughout its ninety-five year history, St. Matthew has experienced many challenges as well as many blessings from the Lord. Whatever lies ahead for St. Matthew and whatever challenges its members might face, one thing will remain constant: The Lord will remain faithful to his promises. "Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness."⁴⁵

⁴⁴"Parish Tidings," December, 2009, p. 5.

⁴⁵Psalm 115:1, NIV.

Appendix 1: Lessons Learned from this Project

Importance of keeping church records

St. Matthew had done a pretty decent job keeping records throughout its history. The one exception was that I was unable to locate the church council minutes from 1914-1975 with a few exceptions. No one seemed to know where they are located. From the other research, it sounds like they kept records of those minutes.

What I really enjoyed about this project was gaining an understanding of my home congregation. Before this project, I regarded St. Matthew as an important part in my life, but studying its history has added a layer to my appreciation for my home church. This project helped me to understand the importance of keeping clear and accurate records for future generations.

The blessings of called workers

St. Matthew has been blessed with very faithful pastors throughout its history. I am amazed at how much time they have devoted to the pastoral ministry. One thing in particular was just how many pastoral visits some of them made. It is hard to imagine how they found the time to carry out all their duties. Their faithfulness to the means of grace was something I also noticed. The pastors at St. Matthew have emphasized regular church attendance, the importance of Bible study, and regular attendance to the Lord's Supper.

The blessings of its members

St. Matthew may not be one of the most active congregations in the WELS, and yet it does have many members who care deeply about their church. Without key leaders and active members, St. Matthew would not have been able to become what it has become. From my

perspective, I can see how St. Matthew has become more friendly and welcoming in recent years. I believe that with pastoral encouragement, its members have been an important part of this.

Seeing how a few members stepped up in difficult situations reminded me of the importance of asking and looking to lay people for help in the church's ministry. It might be tempting for me to try to do it all as a pastor, but this project helped to realize the importance of looking to and equipping lay members to serve in various ways.

The Lord's faithfulness

When St. Matthew was struggling to begin, there were many obstacles in its path, but yet the Lord continued to bless its members with numerical growth. At the start St. Matthew only had six members, and now today its membership is over 1,000. The Lord through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments has caused this growth. While St. Matthew could have boasted in their efforts and abilities, its pastors and members have given glory to the Lord for its successes.

Emphasis outreach

I was probably most surprised by the emphasis on missions at the beginning of St. Matthew's history. Two mission churches started out of St. Paul Lutheran Church around 1915. The church council and pastor at St. Paul saw the importance of starting new Lutheran churches in a growing community. Even though today, congregations like St. Matthew and Mount Olive are considered older congregations, it is important to remember that they had their start as mission congregations. This should serve as a reminder of the importance of supporting our missionaries today.

In addition to this, I was amazed at how much St. Matthew grew throughout its history. The Holy Spirit is the one who creates faith and makes the Church grow through the means of

grace. Yet, St. Matthew's leaders saw the importance of proclaiming God's Word and administering the sacraments. The fact that the Holy Spirit grows the Church through the preaching of the gospel is also another important point to remember.

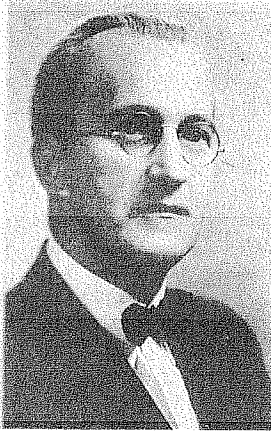
There were many benefits from doing this project. Even though doing research in a church's history might be tedious at times, it is certainly rewarding. I pray that I represented St. Matthew's history accurately, and I hope that others will have the opportunity to grow in their appreciation for the blessing St. Matthew has been to many people.

Appendix 2: Pictures of St. Matthew Lutheran Church and School (circa 1990)

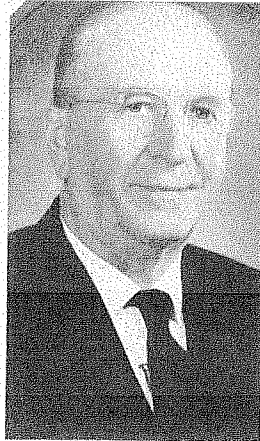


Appendix 3: Pictures of Former Pastors

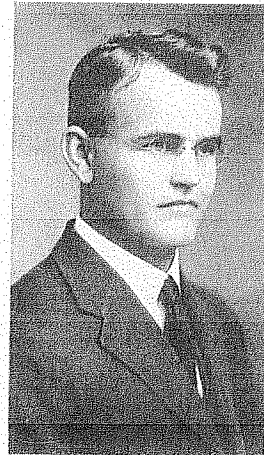
St. Matthew's Former Pastors



Rev. Walter G. Haase
1914 Exploratory



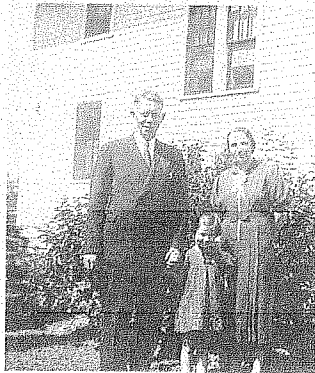
Rev. R.E. Ziesemer
1914-1915



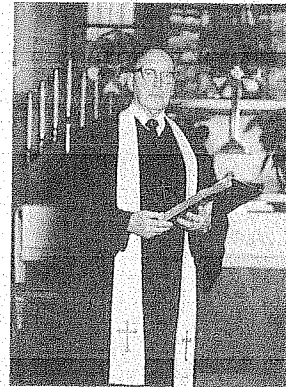
Rev. E. Bruns
1915-1918



Rev. A. Werner
1918-1920



Rev. Philip Froehlke
1920-1938



Rev. Sylvester Johnson
1938-1981

Appendix 4: List of St. Matthew's Pastors

Rev. Walter G. Haase – 1914 (Exploratory)

Rev. R.E. Ziesemer – 1914-1915

Rev. E. Bruns – 1915-1918

Rev. A. Werner – 1918-1920

Rev. Philip Froehlke – 1920-1939

Rev. Sylvester Johnson – 1938-1981

Rev. David Pagel – 1981-2002

Rev. Robert Hein – 1987-1994

Rev. Bradley Ragner – 1995-1998

Rev. Randall Johnson – 1998-2001

Rev. Jeffrey Verbeke – 2001-2007

Rev. Paul Schuler – 2003-

Rev. Thomas Mielke – 2008-

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