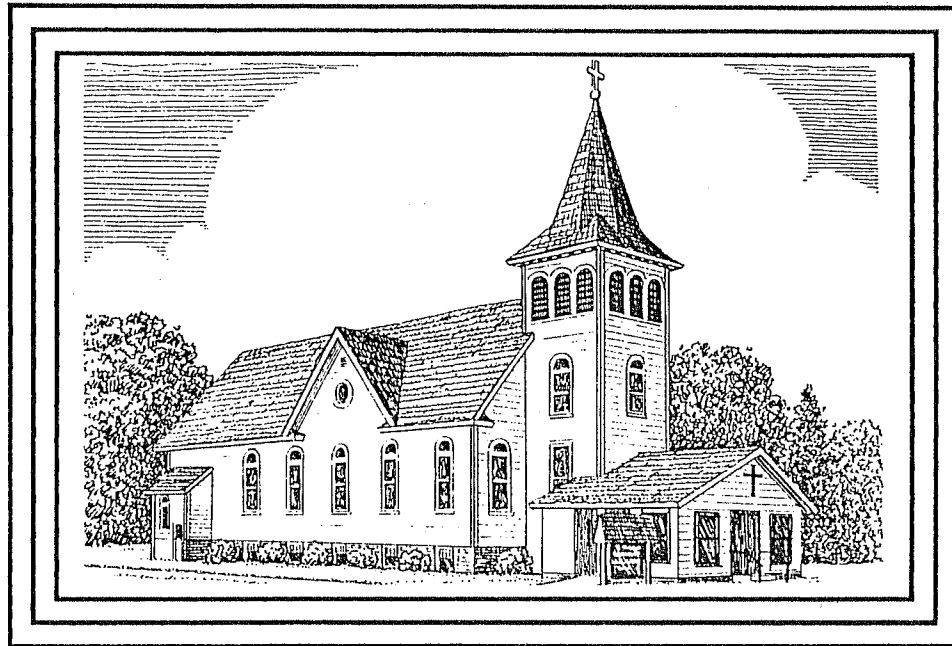


God's Grace Shining Through:
A History of St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church
Balaton, Minnesota



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St. Peter, Balaton God's Grace Shining Through

FORWARD

Perhaps before one undertakes this project a few preliminary remarks are in order. This paper will deal with the history of the church and controversies that developed in the congregation. To be forthright much of the information discussed, especially in the later years, is subjective. Information gathered through many conversations with members and former members. Information that relies upon the biased opinions of tellers. Basing a research paper on subjective truths, without documented evidence is probably a stretching of the term "research paper." Nevertheless, I feel that through many conversations I have acquired enough facts to state matters bluntly, yet truthfully.

As a final thought I do not want to give the impression of "church bashing." Such an outlook accomplishes nothing. St. Peter as a congregation has some problems, but the Word is still proclaimed and the people remain faithful. My father often uses the example of Noah and the ark. For some 365 days that ark must have been a place where a stomach was easily churned. The noise, the tasks, the cleaning--the smell, provided ample work opportunity and perhaps opportunities to even complain. Long days were involved for that man Noah and his family. But compared to outside the ark, inside was a much better alternative. So too with the church called St. Peter in Balaton, Minnesota. She has her problems. But being inside the church is much better than being outside.

TRIAL BY ORDEAL
A SEMINARIAN TAKES A YEAR OUT

In August of 1991 I accepted a call to St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church Balaton, Minnesota to serve as emergency pastor. Their current Pastor, Dale Arndt, was recovering from cancer and unable to perform the duties of the ministry. It was the thinking of the congregation to temporarily call a seminary student until such a time that Pastor Arndt was again able. The Lord however had other plans for him and he resigned from the ministry due to poor health. What subsequently followed for myself was a year of most interesting experiences. Experiences I shall always remember. Experiences, I suspect will affect my ministry for years to come.

Through the years the church has been through much. Deaths of pastors, ill health--it is uncanny to note the abundance of so much pain.

The dilemmas do not stop with the pastors personal lives. Year after year there always was a grass fire of controversy burning or smoldering--just waiting to ignite. Three times since 1954 a sizable number have left the church.

What were these controversies? What were their causes? Could they have been avoided? What role did the pastor have in starting or fanning them into flame? As we study the rather unique history of this house of God and her people, we shall see that these issues and crises resulted not from the church being attacked from the outside, but far more devastating--from the inside. We shall see that it was her pastors and church leaders who at times were not faithful to their calling.

Above all we shall also see that despite the problems and difficulties,

the schisms and adversity, the Holy Spirit has held this church together. The Gospel is powerful. And the Holy Spirit working through this message has guided and directed St. Peter as a beacon of truth in the community and as a source of comfort and strength for her members.

This paper shall look at the history of St. Peter. The highlights and triumphs of her members, the good days and the bad. The joy of a new church, the enthusiasm of a new building, and the days when controversy surrounded her, tearing apart the fellowship. Above all through the years, God's grace has shined through.

A CHURCH IS BORN

1884-1900

During the second half of the 19th century many Lutheran people from Germany moved into the southwestern part of Minnesota and into South Dakota. They settled on the rough prairies and untamed land. The goal, through hard work, was to establish for themselves farms and homes. The plight of these people became known to the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Minnesota primarily located in the Twin Cities. Aware of the obstacles of the Lutheran settlers in this part of the state, the Minnesota Synod commissioned the Revered J.J. Hunziker to serve as many people as he could. In 1878 the Revered Christian Boettcher was sent to assist Pastor Hunziker in preaching the Gospel to the German settlers in southwestern Minnesota. Pastor Boettcher was a man of considerable stature and unending energy. He was a *Reiseprediger* in the truest sense of the word. He traveled the tall-grass prairies of Minnesota by horse and buggy and himself opened 27 preaching

stations. One was in the bustling town of Balaton, Minnesota. In the winter of 1884 he and his hearers organized *Evangelische Lutherische St. Petri Gemeinde der Unreranderten Augsburgischen Konfession*. A constitution was drawn up during the winter months of 1884 - 85. On a cold night in February 1885, 27 men signed their names to the church constitution. (The last founding parent died in 1957 at the age of 92 years). At the annual meeting held on December 21 1885, the church records indicate the congregation passed the following resolution:

Since we are not able to build our own church at the present time, we ask permission to rent the Presbyterian church building in Balaton for one year for \$20, services to be held every three weeks in the afternoon. Should they be unwilling to grant permission to use their building, that we try to obtain the school house for our purpose. Should this, too, not be available, that we hold services, alternately, in the houses of members on the south and north side of Balaton (Church Proceedings of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, December 21, 1885).

A CHURCH IS BUILT

1900-1938

Because of failing health Pastor Boettcher could not continue to serve St. Peter after 1885. For three years the congregation was without a pastor. On October 4, 1888, the Reverend Reinhold Poethke, a graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College, became the first resident pastor. He faithfully served the church until 1900, when he also resigned due to failing health. These years brought to the congregation tremendous growth as the area attracted an increasing number of German settlers. In these times the congregation and her fathers eagerly awaited the day when they would own their own worship facility. Action was finally taken in the annual meeting of December 5,

1889. The minutes recount for us the progression of the building.

It was suggested that the time is now at hand for us to build our own house of worship. In response to this suggestion, the congregation appointed a committee to obtain pledges from the members for this worthy cause and to report to the congregation at a meeting called early in the year (1900). This committee is to consist of the pastor and Mr. Carl Bollmann. The treasurer reported that there was a sum of \$42.11 in the treasury (Church Proceedings of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, December 5, 1889).

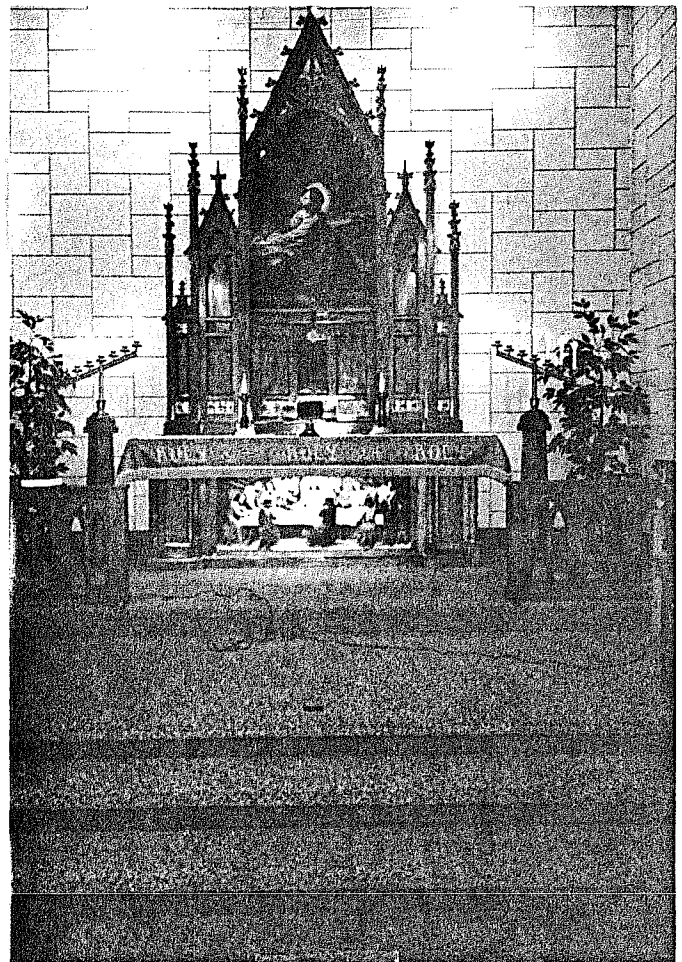
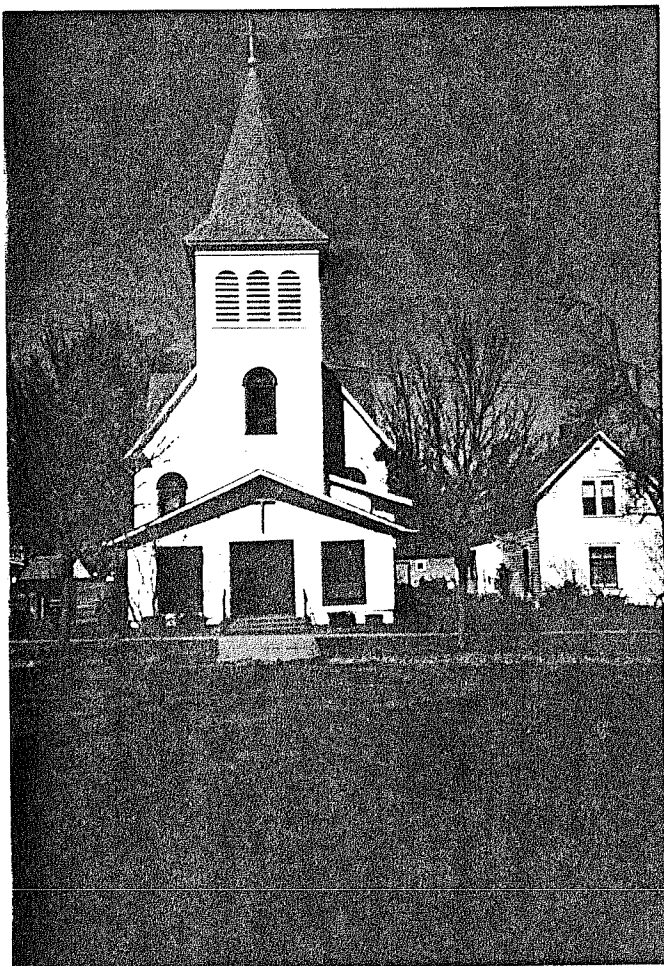
On February 6, 1900, the congregation held a special meeting to consider the construction of their own church building. At the request of the members present, the pastor read the list of members and the amounts of their pledges. Pledges totaled \$2110. Therefore, it was resolved that the construction of the church should commence this very year. A committee was chosen to find a site for the church (Church Proceedings of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, February 6, 1900).

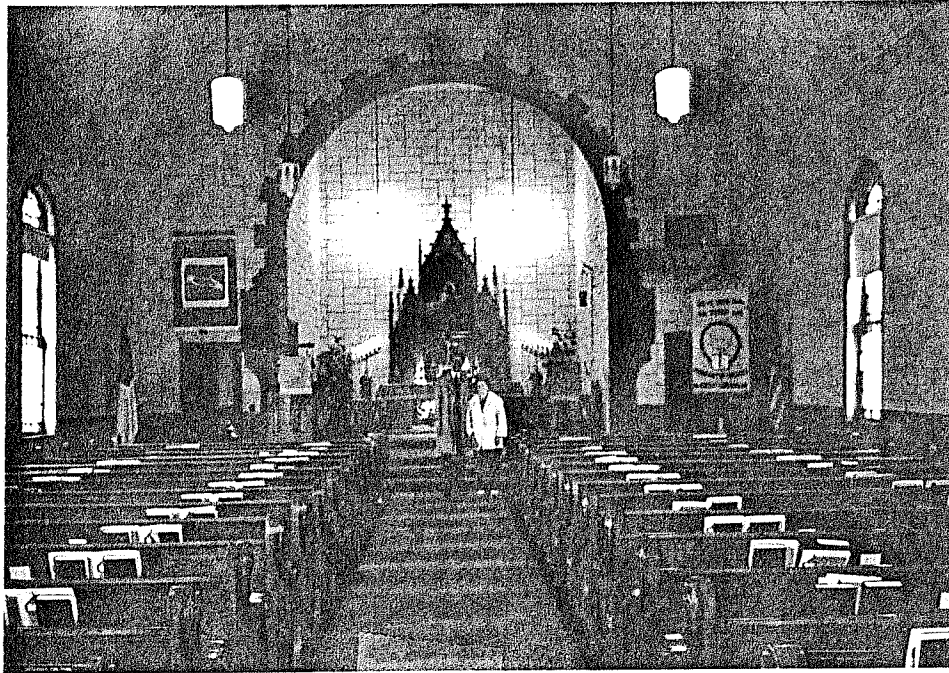
On March 12, 1900, the congregation met again for further deliberation in regard to the new church. The committee reported it had found a suitable site and that the site had already been purchased by the trustees for the sum of \$200. The congregation approved the site and its purchase by the trustees and decided that each member should pay \$10 toward its cost, with the understanding that this amount should then be deducted from the pledges which had been made. After some discussion it was determined that the church dimensions should be 30 by 58 by 16 feet high. It should be constructed with a chancel (Church Proceedings of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, March 12, 1900).

The building of the church progressed. Although the minutes do not indicate, there appears to have been a slight problem in raising the necessary funds. For this reason a chancel was not built at that time. The church was completed in the spring of 1901 at a total of cost of \$3000.00. Other amenities that were added included an altar and pulpit for the price of \$50, both homemade. A stove, a reed organ and chairs instead of pews rounded out the worship facility. In 1906 a church bell, the present altar, pulpit,

and lectern were added. Pews replaced the chairs in 1912. Electricity first made its way to the church in 1922. In 1945 the church was lifted on stilts and a basement was added. This rather ambitious undertaking was the result of church deterioration. The building already some 45 years old was leaning so much the neighbors expected the building to topple. In fact so certain of inevitable destruction were they, that their house, next to the church was sold. In addition to this project a 20 foot chancel was also added. In 1974 a narthex was added.

Present Church Building





From 1901 to 1926 the congregation was served by three pastors, each man staying roughly eight years. An item of note comes in 1904 when the congregation, without a pastor, called a professor by the name of J.P. Meyer from Doctor Martin Luther College in New Ulm to serve as a vacancy pastor. He served the congregation for six months until St. Peter had a resident pastor. This was no small task, seeing that Balaton lay 75 miles west of New Ulm. Whether by horse or car, it would have been a considerable journey. From 1926-1937 the congregation was faithfully served by the Reverend John Bade. During these years the congregation continued a steady growth. Organizations also began to develop within the church. A Walther League, Ladies Aid, and Sunday School were added to further Christian education and fellowship within the congregation. During the ministry of Pastor Bade English services began to predominate over the German.

A CHURCH DIVIDED
1938-1992

The next pastor to serve St. Peter was the Reverend Henry C. Sprenger from 1938-1954. From all indications Pastor Sprenger was a personable man, able and efficient. During the years of his service, the congregation reached its highest numbers of almost 400 souls. But it was also during these years that trouble began to arise amidst the church. The cause is arduous to pinpoint and describe. We begin by looking at the times.

Reflection of the years from 1930 - 1950 remind us of a difficult chapter in the history of the Wisconsin Synod. During these years our synod watched in horror and disbelief as our "older sister" strayed farther and farther away from the truth. These movements by Missouri served as a loud wake up call to our synod. The time to stand alone appeared to be around the corner. The fire of controversy was burning in Balaton.

Perhaps the spark which caused the flame was Pastor Sprenger's background. He attended Concordia Seminary and was called from the Missouri Synod to the congregation. By the 1950's the call to break from Missouri was crying out from across the Wisconsin Synod. The same was occurring in St. Peter. Within the congregation drifts developed between those who supported the adopted synod resolution of "wait and see what happens in Missouri." There were those who adopted the position of the soon to debut Church of the Lutheran Confession, "separate now or we will." And there were those who supported the Missouri Synod position and Pastor Sprenger's of "nothing is wrong, the point is moot."

If one may make a redeeming point, Pastor Sprenger practiced what he believed to be true. Toleration of ecumenical services, Boy Scouts, and

lodge members were common during his tenure as pastor. Pastor Sprenger did keep the church together despite the many sweltering voter and church council meetings. There was a personal price paid however. The pressure and demands of shepherding a flock in turmoil finally exacted a toll on the pastor and in August 1954, Pastor Sprenger submitted his resignation from the ministry due to ill health, the third pastor to do so.

In 1955 the Reverend Robert Schumann accepted a call to St. Peter. During his pastoral ministry the matters in the congregation went from bad to worse. In 1959 a sizable portion, about 50 members of the congregation, left the church and the synod for doctrinal reasons. The break with Missouri was too slow in coming. The following two years brought further wrestling and wrangling in the congregation. In 1961 the congregation reached the conclusion the time to break with Missouri was now. It was a matter of maintaining sound doctrine. As before another faction developed. This time a group, again of around 50, left the church and joined the local American Lutheran Church. The reason was the accusation of legalism. This sad chapter in the history of St. Peter drew to close in 1961 when Pastor Schuman accepted a call. The church, tarnished and torn, lay in pieces. Strong, supportive members had left the ranks in anger. In a community where everyone knows everything about someone, the trials of St. Peter became the common topic around morning coffee at the local restaurant.

For two years the congregation remained without a resident shepherd. Finally through the Lord's will the Reverend Walter Lindke accepted the call to serve St. Peter. Pastor Lindke appeared on the scene at the right time. He was a kind, loving man. Strong in doctrine, yet also abounding in love. Under his ministry, slowly the pain of the previous years began to subside. Members who had left in the 1950's and 60's slowly began to trickle back.

Pastor Lindke was a man faithful to his calling. He was the right man for church at that time. The Lord of history, however had better plans for this man of God. Just like the days of good King Josiah abruptly drew to a close, so too the pastorate of Walter Lindke. In 1966 while returning from a conference, Pastor Lindke was involved in a car collision that claimed his life and three other church members. At such actions we can do not better than to exclaim with the Apostle Paul when he writes,

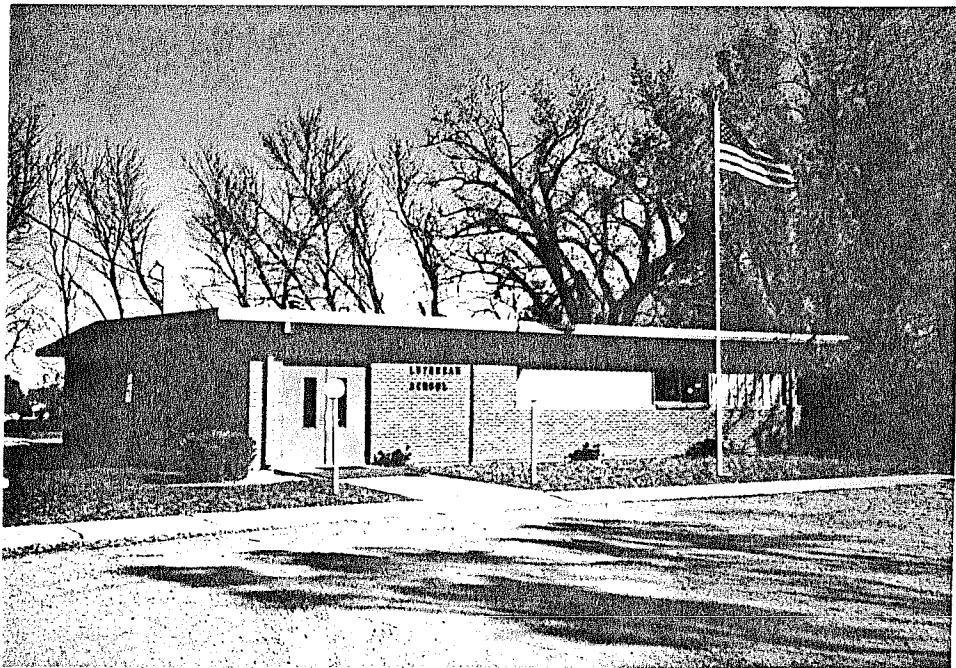
Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Who has ever given to God
that God should repay him?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen (Romans 11:33-36 NIV)

One year after the death of Pastor Lindke, the Reverend H.W. Bittorf accepted the call to serve St. Peter. Pastor Bittorf was a strong willed and forceful man. Where Pastor Sprenger back-stepped, and Pastor Lindke proceeded in caution, Pastor Bittorf went in with guns blazing. All lodge members were immediately removed from the church roster. One member described this "cleansing" in the following way, "If you were a member (of a lodge) Pastor would call on you and say, 'It's the lodge or the church. Take your pick.'" Pastor Bittorf also began to wage war against the inactives. If you had not attended church in a year, you were automatically removed, no questions, no letters, no calls. Needless to say a faction of disgruntled members began to develop.

Pastor Bittorf however did have his supporters. With them in 1971 he pushed through a plan to open a Lutheran Elementary School. The thought for

such a venture dated all the way back to 1953 during the pastorate of Sprenger. At that time \$20,000 was given through a memorial to establish a school. No action however was taken. Pastor Bittorf seized the day and a school was established. 35 children, about 40% of the congregation, enrolled in the school. As the situation usually goes when the vote is of importance, voter turn out is high. The vote to open a Lutheran Elementary School passed by one count. Members recall that spirit's were soaring during the discussion. With the vote taken and the measure passed, individuals expressed the sentiment that they would never support the school. Those people remain to this day. Regular attenders, but desire nothing to do with the school. Another crisis raised its head. As a personal commentary on these actions and attitudes, it is a sad state of affairs when individuals allow their sinful nature to manipulate and blind their thoughts.

The Present School Building



Tragedy again struck the congregation in 1973 when Pastor Bittorf's eldest child, while crossing a road, was hit by a semitrailer. Seven years later, the Lord called Pastor Bittorf to himself when he died after falling from a horse.

In 1980 the Reverend Dale Arndt accepted a call to serve as Pastor of St. Peter. With Pastor Arndt the pendulum swung back. His "hands off" approach to ministry brought many members alienated by Pastor Bittorf back to the fold. But it sent those who desired a strong leader away. Slowly through the years the lackadaisical approach to ministry reaped a whirlwind of troubles.

In 1991 numerous families were actively involved in the Boy Scouts. The school without the support of the pastor had dropped to an enrollment of 10. Open communion was tolerated. The teacher married with a family of three was making \$13,000.00. The congregation with 300 souls, had an inactive list of 100. Church contributions had dropped considerably. Only through several bequests did the church survive financially. Adult confirmands were granted membership without the benefit of classes. Members who publicly espoused the benefits of ecumenical worship were simply looked over. The church was crumbling.

In January of 1991, Pastor Arndt begin to experience nausea and stomach pains. Canceling Sunday services due to illness became common. On Easter Sunday he was admitted to Sioux Falls Hospital. He was diagnosed with cancer. Many operations followed. He was on death's bed. He remained in the hospital until September of 1991 when he was released to home care. Thus from April 1991 to September 1991 the church was without a pastor. No vacancy pastor was called. During the summer months a seminary middler opted to help the congregation and serve as a summer vicar. He rotated with other area pastors

allowing them to preach at St. Peter.

Between the months of April and June, a controversy developed concerning an invocation and prayer at the local public high school graduation service. A public form was held and various members of the community voiced their opinion. Unfortunately there were members of St. Peter on both sides of this issue. The school board was at an impasse. Public opinion was high on both accounts. A week after the public hearing there appeared in the *Balaton Tribune* an anonymous letter detailing the doctrine of church and state. It was pointed out that this is what Scripture says and this is what St. Peter believes. Thus the point was underscored, public prayer and invocation during a high school graduation is contrary to Scripture. Two weeks later there appeared another letter. Oddly enough this one also was anonymous, but of a different tone. This letter stated that not all members of St. Peter believe the church's "official doctrine." It spoke of many members who disavowed such teachings and belonged to the church because of friends and convenience only.

Two weeks later another letter appeared. No surprise, it was anonymous. This letter detailed the Scriptural position of fellowship. It stated that if there were members who disagreed with the church's position they were obligated to make this known that St. Peter might "separate from them."

As it went the following week another letter appeared. This anonymous letter expressed dissatisfaction with the church and the legalistic members.

The episode was out of hand. The church's shepherd lay in a hospital while the sheep frolicked. This incident not only caused a rift in the congregation, but it put the leadership of the congregation in bad light. It is terribly sad when leaders of the church make a mockery of their faith in public. It saddens one even more when the church itself is dragged down to the depths of human depravation.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This was the situation in August of 1991 when I accepted a call to serve as emergency pastor. God saw fit for a pleasing solution to the problem. Dealing with this incident brought a taste of the ministry like I never expected.

In January of 1992, Dale Arndt officially resigned from the ministry. He is slowly recovering and now able to be up and about. He continues to live in Balaton and is a member of St. Peter. In June of 1992, St. Peter began calling for a resident pastor. In December of 1992, the Reverend James Renz accepted the call to serve St. Peter. In January he was installed as their 12th pastor.

Reflecting on the activities surrounding this congregation it brings one to a sense of amazement in two perspectives. First, amazement at how quickly Satan will rear his head. Whenever the opportunity, whatever the situation he desires more than anything to tear down what the Lord has built. Not with his own hands, but with the very hands of those who built it. Second, amazement that God entrusts his glorious gospel to mere mortals. That fact that we have not destroyed it completely serves testimony to his guidance. A promise that God's grace will shine until this world breathes her last.

Pastors of St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church, Balaton, Minnesota

Pastor Christian Boettcher	1879-1885
Pastor Reinhold Poethke	1888-1900
Pastor R. Fehlau	1901-1904
Pastor J.P. Scherf	1905-1921
Pastor Fredrick Manteufel	1921-1926
Pastor John Bade	1926-1937
Pastor Henry C. Sprenger	1938-1954
Pastor Robert L. Schumann	1955-1961
Pastor Walter Lindke	1963-1966
Pastor H.W. Bittorf	1967-1980
Pastor Dale Arndt	1980-1992
Pastor James Renz	1992-present

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Minnesota, June 14, 1959.
- Centennial Booklet of St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church, Balaton, Minnesota, June
10, 1984.

Individuals

- * Mr. and Mrs. Dean Mitzner
- * Mr. Eldon Mitzner
- * Mr. Gordon Mitzner
- * Mr. Raymond Mitzner
- * Mr. and Mrs. Greg Schultz
- * Mr. and Mrs. Neil Schultz
- * Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon Schultz
Mrs. Clara Schultz
- * Mr. and * Mrs. Lawrence Wichmann
- * Mr. and Mrs. Lowell Wichmann
- * Mr. and Mrs. Lynn Wichmann
- * Mr. and Mrs. Wallace A. Wichmann
Mrs. Wallace G. Wichmann

*denotes lifetime member of the congregation