

Always about his Father's Business: Pastor Adolph C. Buenger and his Role in the Founding of
St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, Port Washington, Wisconsin

Church History 3031

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“He was always about his Father’s business.” That is how Pastor Adolph C. Buenger’s wife Avis described her late husband. Pastor Buenger has been in heaven for more than twenty-eight years, but the legacy of his ministry lives on. Even after his retirement from full-time ministry, Pastor Buenger served the Lord faithfully as he labored to gather the harvest of believers into a congregation in the field of Port Washington. That desire to spread the gospel came to fruition in St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church. The history of this healthy, active congregation has been guided by the Lord of the harvest, even in the way he brought her first pastor to Port Washington.

Pastor Adolph C. Buenger was born in Kenosha, Wisconsin, on November 14, 1909, to Pastor and Mrs. Carl H. Buenger. The elder Pastor Buenger served at Friedens Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenosha. In 1936, Pastor Adolph Buenger graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and was assigned to serve St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. On January 6, 1937, Pastor Buenger married his wife Avis. She and their three daughters remain members of St. Matthew. In 1946, Pastor Buenger accepted a call to be his father’s assistant at Friedens, Kenosha. He served at Friedens until his retirement in 1978.¹ The story of Pastor Buenger’s involvement with the founding of St. Matthew begins near the end of his time at Friedens.

The Lord’s hand can be seen in the circumstances that brought Pastor Buenger to Port Washington. The story really begins with the relationship between Pastor Buenger’s daughter Aurie and his future son-in-law, Don Cosentine. Don met Aurie while they were both working at the Milwaukee School of Engineering in the early 1970s, he as a teacher in the building construction program and she as a secretary. Don was a Roman Catholic at the time. His parents,

¹ Darryll W. Kenagy, “A History of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church Port Washington, Wisconsin” (Church History thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1987), 3.

who lived in Grafton, had been canvassed by the local WELS pastor. Don mostly ignored that contact because in his mind he already had what he needed in the Catholic church.²

Don and Aurie began dating. In the course of their relationship Don traveled to Kenosha several times since both of them had family there. On one of those trips, Don talked with Pastor Buenger about places to move after his impending retirement. Port Washington came up as one of the options. Don told Pastor Buenger, "If you buy a lot in Port Washington, I will build your house on that lot."³ Shortly after that conversation, Don and Aurie, who were now married, moved North Carolina.

Don had taken a good construction job in nearby Atlanta. By late summer in 1976, the construction business had slowed down considerably for Don. Pastor Buenger was going to come down for a visit. While en route at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Pastor Buenger suffered a heart attack on September 19, 1976. He was hospitalized until October ninth of that year.⁴ That heart attack left Pastor Buenger with health problems that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Not long after the heart attack, Don and Aurie realized they wanted to move back to somewhere in the Midwest where they were more comfortable.⁵ They decided to get an apartment in Port Washington while Don built a house for them in town. Don got help with the construction from Pastor Buenger, who managed to do so without taking any vacation time from Friedens in Kenosha.⁶ In addition, the Buengers provided for the out of work Cosentines for six

² Don and Aurie Cosentine, Interview on 9/25/10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Undated Handwritten Autobiographical Timeline.

⁵ Don and Aurie Cosentine, Interview on 9/25/10.

⁶ Ibid.

months while Don was building their home. Soon Don would have the opportunity to return the favor.

Pastor Buenger knew his retirement was fast approaching due to his health issues. He decided to take Don up on his offer to build a house on a lot Pastor Buenger would purchase. On July 12, 1977, Pastor Buenger made the down payment on a lot in Port Washington to Ervin Antoine. On October 14, 1977, foundation work started on the Buengers' new home.⁷ Now health issues began to have a definite impact on Pastor Buenger's ministry. On November 27, 1977, he hyperventilated and briefly lost consciousness while in the pulpit. After entering the hospital, Pastor Buenger did not return home until December fourteenth of that year.⁸ At this point he realized he would have to take on a reduced role in the parish for the good of the ministry. But the Lord still had plans for Pastor Buenger.

January 1978 found Pastor Buenger making hospital calls and acting as a visiting elder for the Southern Conference of his circuit. Meanwhile, construction on the new Port Washington residence continued. Finally, on July 2, 1978, it happened. Pastor Buenger read a letter to the congregation asking for official release from his call at Friedens for health reasons. The voters granted his request at their next assembly. During the next few months, Pastor Buenger made several trips to Port Washington to check on the house construction.⁹ At times during this process, he would get bored. In an effort to keep himself busy, Pastor Buenger conducted an

⁷Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Undated Handwritten Autobiographical Timeline.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

informal canvass of his new neighborhood. As he strolled and talked with people, he realized the area had the potential for a WELS mission start-up.¹⁰

Pastor Buenger was not the first to notice the potential for a WELS mission in Port Washington. WELS members in isolated communities to the north had been requesting a mission in Port Washington for years. They wanted to shorten the great distances they were travelling for worship.¹¹ Up to this point, no action was taken by the synod. There was no manpower available in the area. When Pastor Buenger retired and moved to Port Washington in 1978, the Lord supplied the manpower and the mission zeal necessary to begin work in the area.

God's plan for the Wisconsin Synod in Port Washington was coming into clearer focus. Pastor Buenger and his family were making the transition to life in their new town. On October 1, 1978, the Friedens congregation held his farewell.¹² Just over two months later, on December 9, the Buengers moved into their new Port Washington residence.

Once Pastor Buenger was settled in Port Washington, the synod began to make plans for exploratory work in the greater Port Washington area. Pastor Howard Kaiser of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board Chairman, asked Pastor Buenger to oversee the establishment of exploratory services in Port Washington.¹³ He consented, and the work began in earnest. If not in name, then certainly in spirit, St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Mission was born.

¹⁰ Don and Aurie Cosentine, Interview on 9/25/10.

¹¹ Darryl W. Kenagy, 3.

¹² Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Undated Handwritten Autobiographical Timeline.

¹³ Darryl W. Kenagy, 4-5.

As one of his first steps, Pastor Buenger wrote to the Port Washington Director of Public Works to seek information about the town.¹⁴ He asked Mr. Michaud how to go about organizing a church in Port Washington according to city codes and laws. Pastor Buenger also briefly explained how he became involved with the prospect of a WELS mission in Port Washington. He then requested population projections for each of the next three decades, through 2020. Toward the end of the letter, Pastor Buenger expressed great interest in the future potential of Port Washington as a social, economic and regional hub. He was doing his homework in preparation for the next step in founding a mission.

In July of 1979, informational meetings started. Pastor Buenger also began the initial work of contacting interested WELS members in the area to form a nucleus for the new mission. Later that same July, he presented an extensive report to the voters at Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church in Grafton, Wisconsin. It explains the rationale and procedures behind the attempt to establish a mission in Port Washington. The District Mission Board had a list of towns they were interested in for a mission in that area. They wanted a WELS link between Our Savior in Grafton and the Sheboygan congregations, a gap of thirty miles.¹⁵ Port Washington was the town most central to that area. A number of WELS people living in the area were commuting to Milwaukee for worship. A large number of unchurched people also resided in the vicinity. If a mission started in Port Washington, it would give the members of Our Savior a chance to do outreach to a surrounding community. The big question was: Would people from these small towns travel to a centrally located community for worship?¹⁶

¹⁴ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Letter to Raymond Michaud, 4/20/79.

¹⁵ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Report to Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church Voters' Meeting, 7/79, 1-2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In his report, Pastor Buenger made the purpose of the mission abundantly clear: to share the gospel Jesus gave his people. His canvassing of the town up to this point yielded thirty-one people from seventeen families who were willing to help with further outreach. The District Mission Board wanted Pastor Buenger to continue his involvement in the mission to evaluate the possibility of the mission becoming a full-fledged congregation. He was uniquely suited to this task, having served as President of the Southeastern Wisconsin District of the WELS from 1962 to 1972. Pastor Buenger and his wife Avis spent the remainder of the summer visiting people on the list of names given to them by the District Mission Board who expressed interest in starting a new congregation. During the visits, Pastor Buenger received the names of four more families who might be interested in the new mission.¹⁷

These initial prospects helped with a deeper study of the community. If they found enough interest, the General Board for Home Missions would give the group permission to start exploratory services in Port Washington. If the request was approved at the board meeting in September, services would start in October. They would go on for one year, at which time the general and district mission boards would evaluate the status of the mission.¹⁸ The Lord heard the prayers of that little group in Port Washington. In a letter to the core group, Pastor Buenger shared the exciting news. The General Board for Home Missions had granted their request to hold exploratory services.¹⁹ At the end of the letter, pastor Buenger called for a meeting of the core group on October 4, 1979.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 3.

¹⁹ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Letter to Members and Prospects, 9/28/79.

Before that meeting occurred, Pastor Buenger received a letter from the WELS Office of the Board of Trustees explaining the procedures for renting a temporary facility and the preliminary steps to be taken toward securing a permanent home for the church/ mission. The mission wanted to rent the Knights of Columbus Hall in downtown Port Washington to serve as their place of worship. It would also be the site for any large meetings or fellowship activities. Small meetings were generally held around the large dining room table in the Buenger household. Unfortunately, the hall's insurance policy would not cover WELS, so the young mission had to acquire its own insurance policy. In order to get one from WELS, they needed to supply the synod with a sketch of the worship area and its road exposure. This was done in a satisfactory manner and insurance was secured through WELS.²⁰ The mission also had to have a policy with a mutual insurance company. If they did not, the WELS fiscal office would take out insurance in the name of the mission and charge it to them. These conditions were successfully met.

The core group met at the Knights of Columbus Hall on October 4th. Pastor Kaiser, the District Mission Board Chairman, was also on hand to answer questions. St. Matthew succeeded in renting the hall for Sunday worship for thirty dollars a Sunday, with the exception of the fifth Sunday of the month, when there was one. Due to his health, Pastor Buenger could not preach, but he would carry out the liturgical responsibilities. Professors Jeske and Balge from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were brought in to handle the preaching duties.²¹ Mrs. Kathleen Eddy served as the original pianist. The first services were without the sacrament of Holy Communion. Sunday School and confirmation instruction would also come later. A sandwich board in front of

²⁰ Letter from WELS Office of the Board of Trustees, 10/1/79.

²¹ Minutes from Initial Meeting of Persons Interested in WELS Mission in Port Washington Area, 10/4/79, 1.

the hall would advertise the service on Sunday mornings. The new mission still needed several important items, such as altar ware, offering envelopes, and a larger supply of hymnals.²²

Expenses to be met were a stipend for the seminary professors and other guest preachers, hall rental, bulletin covers and other miscellaneous supplies. St. Matthew had a long road ahead, but the nucleus trusted in the hand of God to provide for them and to prosper their efforts.

All of the hard work of the nucleus group was about to come to fruition. In a letter to the group, Pastor Buenger called a meeting for November 1, 1979, at the hall. At that meeting, they would hear a development and progress report.²³ Pastor Kaiser would also attend and present a film strip about home mission work. The letter closed with an invitation to bring friends to the first worship service of St. Matthew Lutheran Mission, to be held at the Knights of Columbus Hall on Sunday November 4, 1979, at 10:30 a.m. During the weeks leading up to it, the service was heavily advertised in local newspapers.

Finally the day came. One of the members at that first service, Ade Hansen, recalled its special significance in the twentieth anniversary memory book produced by the church. He and his family lived in Mequon, attending Trinity—South Mequon there. In the summer of 1979, Ade heard about a WELS exploratory mission starting in Port Washington from his wife, who wanted to become involved. Because of his heavy involvement at Trinity, it was initially hard for Ade to commit to this.²⁴ Yet his love for the Savior and spreading the gospel won out. Ade realized his strength was in evangelism and knew he could help this new church by simply

²² Ibid.

²³ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Letter to Members and Prospects, 10/26/79.

²⁴ Ade Hansen, *The 20th Anniversary of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church: Member Accounts of the Past Twenty Years* (Port Washington, Wisconsin: St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, 11/7/99), 2. (Hereafter cited as *20th Anniversary Book*)

telling people about Jesus. Ade and his family attended the first service of St. Matthew, which also happened to be on his fiftieth birthday.

Ade remembered those first days at the Knights of Columbus Hall fondly. The altar consisted of two desks put together with a white sheet over them and a wooden cross on top of that. Since it was owned by Catholics, the hall had a large picture of the pope hanging behind the location of St. Matthew's altar. This picture was turned backward for services and returned to its original state after worship.²⁵ The congregation kept a large box in one corner of the hall. It protected the worship items from the wild parties held at the hall during the week. Members were responsible for cleaning the hall and setting up before worship on Sunday mornings. After church, the bonds of fellowship and love were strengthened by time for conversation over coffee and other refreshments.

Time passed quickly. On January 17, 1980, eleven weeks after the first service was held, it was time for the exploratory mission status of St. Matthew to be evaluated. The first service had twenty-four adults in attendance and eight more had joined since then. St. Matthew now numbered thirty-two communicant members and eleven children from nineteen homes in six towns. They came from ten WELS congregations, along with two others from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.²⁶ Attendance averaged forty people each Sunday, with about \$1,218 in offerings given to date. Professors Balge and Jeske of the seminary continued to cover the preaching responsibilities in rotation. Pastor Buenger presided at worship and provided spiritual care for the flock during the week. The Lord's Supper had only been offered in two services so far, with fifty-two communicants between the two services. Expenses were being met. The two

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Presentation to Members or Press Release, 1/17/80, 1.

hundred dollars borrowed from the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board for the mission start-up had already been repaid. In addition, a fifty dollar donation was made to WELS Missions.²⁷ A Sunday bulletin was published each week. Two ladies from the congregation played piano for worship. The congregation had yet to establish a Sunday School, adult Bible class or choir, but these things were of secondary importance. Right now, some important questions about the future direction of the mission needed to be discussed.

This meeting was held to mull over some of these questions. What should St. Matthew do now? Should they try to get a personal, face-to-face invitation to worship to the entire town? Who would help with such a massive undertaking? No matter what the answers to these questions were, everything would be done under the supervision of the District Mission Board.²⁸ Advertisements for worship services were already running in three local papers. Was a highway sign feasible? Is the mission ready for phase two? That would involve the core group transferring their membership from their home congregations to St. Matthew.²⁹ The group would know the feasibility of that option by mid-April.

Pastor Kaiser was again available for consultation at the meeting. Pastor Buenger encouraged the group to consider Thursday Lenten services. The hall was not available on Wednesdays. For the sake of good order, he also wanted the congregation to come to an agreement about which Sundays of the month Holy Communion would be offered. The members were also polled to discover their interest in or availability to teach Sunday School classes, sing in or lead the choir, and about adult Bible class.³⁰ The option of the mission paying the tuition for

²⁷ Ibid, 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 3.

its children to attend local Lutheran elementary schools was raised. That would cost the mission about nine hundred dollars per child per year. As he looked to the future of St. Matthew as a full-fledged congregation, Pastor Buenger now had much to consider. By late spring, the Lord would answer many of these questions in a definitive way for both the shepherd and the sheep of the new mission in Port Washington.

Shortly after the congregational meeting, Pastor Buenger met privately with Pastor Kaiser to discuss some important decisions regarding the future of St. Matthew. Pastor Buenger knew he could not serve them full-time due to his health. The arrangement for preachers from the seminary was also meant to be temporary. St. Matthew needed a pastor. Buenger and Kaiser discussed two options. The mission could call a candidate from the field or look to the assignment committee for a new seminary graduate in May. Costs for an experienced pastor versus a new graduate were discussed at length.³¹ They decided it would be best to go to the assignment committee for a graduate. Over the summer of 1979, the mission had conducted a survey of the community to determine its religious make-up. Pastor Buenger presented those survey results to Pastor Kaiser.³² In his comments to Pastor Kaiser about the potential for future growth of the mission, Pastor Buenger's boundless mission zeal and love for lost souls shined through. Now Pastor Kaiser needed to present a request from the District Mission Board to the General Board for Home Missions to gain mission status and the ability to call a pastor for St. Matthew.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, Handwritten Meeting Notes from Meeting with Pastor Howard Kaiser, 3/25/80, 1.

³² Ibid, 2.

In his request, Pastor Kaiser gives the rationale for granting mission status and calling power to St. Matthew.³³ Five months after the initial service on November 4, 1979, the mission had been blessed by significant growth. Membership now stood at forty-two communicants, fifty-seven souls and twenty-five families, an increase of almost fifty per cent. In addition, the community survey of 1,681 homes the previous summer yielded the following results. Forty-one per cent of the houses visited were not home. Literature about St. Matthew was left at the door of those homes. Those houses surveyed yielded promising results. Of all the homes visited, thirty-five per cent identified themselves as Roman Catholic, six per cent as belonging to the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, two per cent to the American Lutheran Church, one per cent as WELS, seven per cent as miscellaneous denominations and seven per cent claimed no denominational ties. Three per cent expressed no interest in taking the survey.³⁴ The survey did generate interest in St. Matthew. Three of the families surveyed joined the mission, as did a fourth who read about it in one of the newspaper advertisements. The fields of Port Washington were, and still are, ripe with a harvest of souls to be brought in by St. Matthew.

Port Washington made an ideal location for a full-fledged WELS mission for several reasons. The town is a hub for 22,000 people who live from Grafton north to Sheboygan. Pastor Kaiser did not expect spectacular, but steady growth for St. Matthew.³⁵ His expectation has proved true to the present day. Almost twenty-five per cent of the member families had one person who worked thirty or more miles away in the greater Milwaukee area. That statistic has held steady if not increased up to the present day. Eight WELS congregations were represented

³³Pastor Howard Kaiser, Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board Request to WELS General Board for Home Missions for Mission Status and Manpower, 4/7/80, 1.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

in the membership, and four pastors in Milwaukee had referred names to Pastor Buenger since exploratory services began. Pastor Kaiser made a compelling case for mission status and manpower to be given to St. Matthew. Now it was up to the General Board for Home Missions to make the decision.

On April 8, 1980, the day after the request for mission status and manpower was submitted to WELS, Pastor Buenger held a meeting for the membership of St. Matthew.³⁶ He informed them about the application for mission status, pending mission board approval. Then he laid out the goals for the future of St. Matthew. All present members would become charter members of the new mission church.³⁷ They would support their new pastor, a graduate called from the seminary by the assignment committee. All members would commit themselves to working toward the future growth of the mission, possibly into a regular congregation.

St. Matthew had reached a crucial crossroad. How would the members answer the challenges before them? Pastor Buenger presented some options. The mission could continue as is, with growth gradually slowing down to a trickle. If their application for mission status and manpower was approved, where would their pastor come from? Pastor Buenger had already thought through these issues in his meeting with Pastor Kaiser, but he wanted the members to think through them, too, and take ownership of the decisions being made. They could accept the upgrade to mission status, but not utilize the manpower option.³⁸ Then the current circumstances would remain in effect. If the people chose to call an experienced pastor, they would face a real challenge in providing for their new shepherd. The mission did not yet have the financial muscle

³⁶ Either the request date or the meeting date must have been recorded incorrectly. As it stands, the chronology of these two events would be illogical.

³⁷Pastor Adolph Buenger, Minutes of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church Membership Meeting , 4/8/80, 1.

³⁸Ibid.

to take on that challenge. The third option, calling a seminary graduate, seemed most reasonable. It would only cost twenty-two dollars per communicant per month to support him. The twenty-seven members present voted twenty-six to one to call for a graduate and apply for mission status.³⁹

Less than a month after the request was submitted to WELS, St. Matthew received much good news. The WELS General Board for Home Missions had granted their request for mission status and calling ability. On April 28, 1980, the congregation was officially organized as St. Matthew Lutheran Mission.⁴⁰ Their call for a graduate had been sent to the assignment committee at the seminary. In May, Pastor Daniel Simons was assigned to St. Matthew as its first full-time pastor. He was ordained and installed on July 6.⁴¹ And the mission had grown to sixty-four souls. The Lord was richly blessing St. Matthew.

The second half of 1980 saw St. Matthew increase its evangelism efforts in the community. They ran newspaper advertisements for their Vacation Bible School held from August eighteenth through the twenty-second at the hall downtown. Children three years and up were invited to attend.⁴² Another notice announced St. Matthew's first Christmas service to the community.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Darryl W. Kenagy, 5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Pastor Daniel Simons, Press Release, 8/7/80.

⁴³ Pastor Daniel Simons, Press Release, 12/5/80.

With a young, full-time pastor in place, Pastor Buenger took on a reduced role in the life of St. Matthew. Yet he still made hospital calls, shut-in visits and the majority of the mission calls.⁴⁴ By October of 1980 St. Matthew had grown to eighty souls.⁴⁵

By 1981, St. Matthew had a problem. The Knights of Columbus Hall where they currently worshipped was no longer suitable for worship. The Sunday morning set-up routine had become tedious for the growing mission. The owners of the hall wanted to sell it so that it could be torn down and turned into a parking lot. A site committee was established to find a permanent home for St. Matthew.⁴⁶ Pastor Buenger served on that committee. He wanted to see the mission put down permanent roots in the community that desperately needed to hear its message of Jesus' love. The committee went through lots of meetings and WELS red tape. The Buenger house hosted most of the meetings and the fellowship that followed them. Finally the land on which the church now sits was purchased. But Pastor Buenger would not live to see the permanent home for St. Matthew. The Lord called Pastor Adolph C. Buenger home to himself on April 25, 1982.⁴⁷ Within three years of his death, the new church was dedicated and a parsonage was built.

Even in his retirement, the Lord used Pastor Buenger's love for the lost to establish a mission in Port Washington. St. Matthew has become a healthy, vibrant congregation. It is rapidly outgrowing the current facility and may have to move in the near future. Although most of the members today would not know who Pastor Buenger was if asked, they have certainly

⁴⁴ Nicollin Ballbach, Minutes of 1st Quarterly Voters' Meeting of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, 8/3/80.

⁴⁵ Nicollin Ballbach, Minutes of 2nd Quarterly Voters' Meeting of St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church, 10/19/80.

⁴⁶ Aurie Cosentine, *20th Anniversary Book*, 5.

⁴⁷ Darryl W. Kenagy, 5.

inherited the things Pastor Buenger would have wanted them to have most—boundless mission zeal, a strong bond of Christian fellowship, hearts motivated by love to serve others humbly and growing faith in their Savior Jesus. Thanks to the faithful labor of Pastor Buenger, St. Matthew Evangelical Lutheran Church exists to shine the light of God’s love to Port Washington and the world. Pastor Adolph C. Buenger truly was a man, “always about his Father’s business.”

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