

A Tale of Two Churches:
The Early Years of St. Mark's and St. John's in Watertown
(1852-1860)

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According to the 1982 Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, within the city limits of Watertown, Wisconsin there are four Wisconsin Synod congregations. Two of these congregations, St. Mark's and St. John's, are among the largest in the Wisconsin Synod. ^Their total number of communicant members combined equals more than 3,600, and together they include well over 4,600 baptized souls. That there exist two WELS congregations of this size within the same small town (and, incidentally, that they worship in church buildings located only one block apart) suggests that in their histories there is a story. That story is the subject of this paper.

I. THE SEED IN GERMANY

The story begins, not in Watertown, but in ^Germany in the early 1800's. In the year 1817, the three hundredth anniversary year of the birth of the Reformation, Frederick William III of Prussia decreed the union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany. Of course true Lutherans were strongly opposed to the unionistic practices the Prussian Union imposed on them. Following the dictates of their consciences, they held their own "Lutheran only" services, communed only at Lutheran altars, and sent their children to Lutheran, not Reformed, instructions. The state responded by hitting them with penalties in fines and imprisonment for non-compliance. The religious persecution was more than many of these Altlutheraner, or "Old Lutherans,"

were willing to put up with.

In 1839 a group of about 800 of these Old Lutherans from Pomerania arrived in Milwaukee. From there they followed the westward flow into Dodge County. It was in 1843 that a number of them settled in the town of Lebanon, about seven miles northeast of Watertown. These Pomeranians were earnest, sincere Christians, whose staunch confessionalism was to exert a healthy influence on the type of Lutheranism that would come to pass in the Watertown area.

Besides these Pomeranian immigrants, there were others who came from Germany who were to play a part in the early history of the Lutheran churches in Watertown. In 1848 a revolution in Europe, and particularly in Germany, collapsed. Several of those involved in the revolt in Germany left their homeland to spare their lives, and emigrated to America. Among these "Forty-Eighters" were a number of intelligent men with good educations. A few of them settled in Watertown.

II. THE SETTING IN WATERTOWN

Watertown grew up in a strategic location. The spot where the Rock River veers north from its southward course and makes a U-turn back south had long been a favorite meeting place for the Winnebago and Potawatomi Indians. Now it was the location of the junction of two roads--one traveling north and south from Chicago to Green Bay, and the other a plank road stretching westward from Milwaukee to Watertown. It wasn't long before Watertown became the second largest city in the state. By 1851 Watertown had a population of about 4,000. It was only natural that people would join one another in seeking to fulfill their spiritual needs.

III. THE FOUNDING AND EARLY YEARS OF ST. JOHN'S

In the summer of 1851, a closely knit band of Pomeranians--Old Lutherans--arrived in Watertown. They made it their immediate concern to provide for their own spiritual welfare. There already was a German-speaking congregation in town, under the pastoral care of a Pastor Friedrich Rentsch, but it didn't take long before the Pomeranians discovered that this congregation was not orthodox Lutheran.

Without any pastor who would serve the congregation to their satisfaction, this little group of devout Lutherans decided to rent a school building and have one of the members read a sermon each Sunday from a book. But without a pastor, without a church building of their own, and without any kind of formal organization these people were not satisfied. These conditions lasted for about another year, until in late 1852^{when} this small congregation of believers called their first pastor, Rev. A. Kleinegees.

Rev. Kleinegees was a Watertown resident, a member of the Ohio Synod who in 1851 had attended the Wisconsin Synod meeting at Grace, Milwaukee as an advisory guest. Under his leadership the congregation took its first steps toward organization by electing for itself a board of trustees and adopting the name "German Evangelical Lutheran St. John's Church." (This was the first entry in the first volume of the records of corporate bodies filed with the Jefferson County register of deeds.)

Pastor Kleinegees, however, did not remain long with St. John's. Like Pastor Rentsch, Kleinegees also could not satisfy the congregation's desire for a strictly orthodox Lutheran minister. After a

short ministry he was ousted by the members of St. John's (even though he later must have altered his doctrinal stance, since he eventually joined the conservative Missouri Synod and served parishes in Ohio and later in Missouri).

For over ~~1~~ half a year St. John's again was without a pastor. Since ministers were hard to come by, the members of St. John's asked Rev. L. Geyer of Immanuel in Lebanon to serve part-time as their pastor. On November 1, 1853 he began serving St. John's. He was able, however, to conduct worship services for the congregation only once a month. Nevertheless St. John's congregation could now rest a little easier knowing that now they had an orthodox Lutheran minister. Immanuel and Pastor Geyer were members of the strictly conservative Missouri Synod.

Previously the pastors of St. John's had served double duty both as pastor and also as teacher of the school. Now, however, because Pastor Geyer's duties elsewhere did not allow him to teach school besides, St. John's needed to obtain a teacher. They got him from Immanuel Church in Lebanon also, a Mr. Wetzel, the son of the teacher in Geyer's Lebanon congregation. There was in these early years a close connection between Immanuel Church in Lebanon and St. John's in Watertown. Not only did these congregations share a common ethnic background as Pomeranians, and not only did they have similar confessional beliefs, they now also shared the same pastor, and the teacher of the one congregation was the son of the teacher of the other.

It was at this time, while Pastor Geyer served at St. John's part-time, that this congregation followed the Lebanon congregation in becoming a member of the Missouri Synod. Geyer attended the 1850

eighth annual convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States. St. John's applied for membership and was accepted at that meeting. This was a major event in the history of the congregation because St. John's had now become affiliated with a doctrinally conservative Lutheran synod--one that was dedicated to proclaiming and defending orthodox Lutheranism according to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

St. John's was not, however, satisfied with having only one service a month, and limited pastoral service in other areas as well. The congregation longed for services every Sunday, so in 1854 they called Candidate Anton Wagner, a recent graduate of the Missouri Synod seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. He came to replace Geyer about the first of the year in 1855.

IV. THE FOUNDING OF ST. MARK'S

By 1854 there were at least seven different church denominations in Watertown. Only one of those was strictly conservative Lutheran, and that was St. John's. There was also a "Protestant" congregation, the "Evangelical German Church of Watertown," founded in 1849. This was a doctrinally lax church, at that time under the direction of a Pastor Goerges. It would not be until 1909 that this congregation would finally adopt the Lutheran Confessions and become "The German Evangelical St. Luke's Church." Today St. Luke's is affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod.

There were at that time in and around Watertown several Pomeranian Lutherans who avoided such a doctrinally permissive church, but for whom, at the same time, the strict stance of the "Old Lutheran" Pom-

eransians was equally unacceptable. They could not ^{see} eye-to-eye with the members of St. John's

...simply because the "Old Lutherans" who wer^e the backbone of this Missouri Synod congregation had already in Germany in great earnestness and with much heart-ache fought their way through to a much more solidly Lutheran position than could be appreciated by these ordinary immigrants who by and large came from German state church parishes where such matters were not even discussed.¹

What is now known as St. Mark's Lutheran Church began in the summer of 1854 when a number of these Christians were gathered together by Rev. Christian Sans to hear God's Word and receive the sacraments. Sans came from out east, where he had served Evangelical, Lutheran and Reformed churches along the New York-Pennsylvania border. He had received no regular theological training. His only formal education was his education at a teacher's college in Germany. Accordingly, he had no deep Lutheran convictions. On the other hand, Sans was gifted with a natural eloquence, and was a man full of energy and ambition. When, on October 22, 1854, "The German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jefferson Co., Wisconsin" was formally organized, Sans was elected "preacher for two years."

At this time the congregation was not a member of the Wisconsin Synod, or of any synod, for that matter. In a letter to a colleague, Pastor Reuter in Columbus, Sans once remarked that he wanted to have nothing to do with either "the Old Lutherans" or with "the henchmen of Muehlhaeuser."²

¹"A Century With Christ," St. Mark's Centennial Booklet, p. 11.

²Ibid., p. 12.

V. SANS AND WAGNER

Sans himself had been a product of the Franckean Synod, which had tossed out the Augsburg confession in favor of a watered-down confession of its own. He tended to be unionistic, holding joint services with practically any sect, regardless of its beliefs and confession. Still, if Sans' theology had been his only weakness, he very likely would have gotten along fine in Watertown and enjoyed a good long ministry in his parish.

He was an energetic man, with several admirable qualities. He championed the cause of the Christian Day School in his congregation. He had the foresight to push for "Americanization" of his parishioners by holding English/German prayer meetings and an "American Sunday School." He was a strong advocate of mission work, traveling as far as Columbus to gather German immigrants into congregations and preaching in schoolhouses throughout the area.

An interesting story is told of one of the schoolhouses in which Rev. Sans preached regularly. It was located in the town of Lowell, about thirteen miles northwest of Watertown. Here there were Bavarian immigrants who desired the services of a pastor. Sans had regularly held services in a public school building in Lowell on Sunday afternoons. Many of the Lutherans, however were dissatisfied with his avoidance of any clear-cut statement on Biblical doctrine, so they asked Pastor Wagner of St. John's to serve them. Wagner also wanted to use the schoolhouse for his services on Sunday afternoons. In an attempt to resolve the matter, while at the same time remaining completely neutral, the Lowell school board decided that whichever preacher arrived first on Sunday

afternoon could use the schoolhouse for conducting the service. Needless to say, the Sunday trip out to Lowell after services were over in Watertown often amounted to a race between the two pastors. The competitive spirit ran high:

When Sans hired a farmer to take him over Mud Lake in a boat and thus got to the schoolhouse first, he obtained the right to use the schoolhouse, but the Old Lutherans then retired with Pastor Wagner to a near-by farm house for a Lutheran service.³

If Sans was considered an energetic man, Wagner was no slouch, either. Upon accepting his call to St. John's Wagner traveled by train as far as Oconomowoc,

...from where the young pastor traveled the remaining miles to Watertown by stagecoach. He arrived in the middle of the night, and found lodging in a hotel. The next morning, in spite of having contracted a severe cold on his journey, Candidate Wagner walked the six miles through snow a foot deep to the home of Rev. Geyer in Town Lebanon.⁴

This was in January of 1855. Wagner spent his first several days in the area at the home of Pastor Geyer in order to copy by hand his copy of the Agenda, since neither St. John's congregation nor Pastor Wagner had one of their own.

Being a Missouri man, Wagner's theological background and outlook were different from that of Sans, and much more closely akin to that of Geyer. It was only natural that Geyer assist at Wagner's installation on February 1, 1855, and that Rev. O. Fuerbringer of the Missouri Synod's Northern District be the man to ordain him into the public ministry. With Wagner's arrival, the ties between the Old

³"A Century With Christ," p. 13.

⁴"One Hundred Years of Grace," St. John's Centennial Booklet, p. 10.

Lutherans in Lebanon, the Old Lutherans in Watertown and the Missouri Synod were solidified.

Now that St. John's had acquired a new full-time pastor, Mr. Wetzel of Lebanon discontinued his services to St. John's, and Rev. Wagner was now able to take over his duties, though only for a while. By 1857, it became apparent that a full-time teacher was needed. In that year St. John's congregation both erected a school building and called a teacher, Mr. Fredrich Hasz.

The story at this time was growth, both in the town and in the churches. Watertown doubled its population between 1851 and 1855, growing from a city of about 4,000 to a city of 8,000. By 1857, only five years after its founding, St. John's had grown from a handful of families to a congregation of 381 souls. St. Mark's increased its number of baptized souls from 34 in 1854 to 112 in 1859.

VI. TROUBLE IN THE SANS CONGREGATION

About this time there was trouble brewing, however--in both congregations. St. Mark's (still known simply as "the Sans congregation") became involved in a controversy over the moral character of its pastor, and St. John's became involved in a doctrinal controversy over the use of private confession. Both were to have far-reaching effects in the doctrinal solidification of St. Mark's as a Lutheran congregation.

As a pastor, one of Sans' weaknesses was that he preached from the pulpit on social issues. That would have been tolerable, if he had come out on the right side of the issues. As it was, however, Sans came out on the side of temperance and the abolition of slavery, and several of the unchurched Germans in Watertown were^e angered by

what Sans had to say. When he began to condemn Sunday picnics and beer drinking as sinful, these Germans, among them some of the well-educated "Forty-Eighters," began to spread rumors about Sans. They claimed his name was actually Langhoff, not Sans, and that he had come to Watertown to escape a scandalous past life in Germany, down South and back East. The local Reformed minister, Rev. Peter Joerris of the congregation which is now St. Luke's, accused Sans of being an impostor who had been exposed in several German-language newspapers. This accusation--which, by the way, was never proven--set off a controversy which led to threats on Sans' life, mob action and finally his removal from office.

The congregation was not unaffected. There were stormy debates at congregational meetings as to what should be done, sometimes lasting as much as six hours. Fearing violence, Mayor Skinner of Watertown appointed armed vigilantes, who slept in Sans' home for his protection. The German-American statesman Carl Schurz got into the act, telling the citizens of Watertown in an address that what was going on in the congregation and what had gone on in the private life of its pastor was their own business and that those who did not belong to the congregation had no right to meddle in its affairs. This settled things down somewhat, so that the congregation was able to carry out an investigation of its own. A committee of the Franckean Synod came to Watertown to investigate the matter, and they found no evidence to convict Sans of any kind of unacceptable behavior. Yet when he was asked to appear before the congregation to defend himself against the charges, Sans had refused. Sometime after his suspension from office as "preacher"

Sans received and accepted a call to "The United German St. Peter's Lutheran Congregation of Joliet." The congregation was without a pastor.

VII. THE LEBANON CONTROVERSY

At the same time trouble was brewing in Lebanon over the custom of private confession. In 1857 a group of about 100 communicants in Immanuel congregation under the leadership of teacher Wetzel accused Pastor Geyer of trying to impose private confession on those who preferred general confession. At St. John's in Watertown a group of members under teacher Hasz brought the same charges against Pastor Wagner. At first the opposition was done privately, but eventually the whole matter was brought out into the open. In spite of the fact that both Missouri pastors, Wagner and Geyer, had allowed for either form to be used, and that the General Confession was added as an optional practice, the objecting groups remained adamant. They continued to accuse their pastors of false doctrine. The 100 Lebanon protestors were eventually excommunicated by the Missouri Synod, and about twenty families were excommunicated also from St. John's.

At this point in time Johannes Bading enters the picture. He had received his training at Hermansburg under Louis Harms, and was sent, as were most Wisconsin Synod men at that time, by the Langenberg Mission Society. In Germany Bading had learned what sound Lutheran doctrine and practice really were. His influence on the Wisconsin Synod, which was not as yet totally sound, was to be greatly felt.

The Lebanon Controversy arose while Bading was still serving as pastor in Theresa and the surrounding area. The Lebanon excommunicants

formed their own church, St. Matthew's, which today is a part of St. Paul's, Ixonia. In Watertown the excommunicants shied away from joining Sans' congregation, with all the disturbances going on there at the time, and also probably because Sans' doctrinal position was not all that conservative. This group formed St. Michael's church. Bading was called from Theresa to serve both these groups. The decision of the St. Matthew's and St. Michael's congregations to call Bading produced long-term effects. Temporarily, it made for ill will between the two synods, Missouri and Wisconsin, but in the long run it in an indirect way served to strengthen the doctrinal position of the Wisconsin Synod and brought to the St. Mark's congregation the pure gospel message.

Through his visits to serve the two break-off congregations in the Watertown area, the Sans' congregation recognized Bading's abilities. When the congregation voted on July 15, 1860 to remove Sans from office, Pastor Bading was called to replace him. Immediately changes took place:

At the first congregational meeting conducted by the new pastor in September of 1860 a new constitution was adopted by the congregation which definitely made those historic confessions proclaimed by Luther and our Lutheran forefathers at the time of the Reformation the basis for all doctrine and practice in this Lutheran congregation. At the very next meeting a Lutheran liturgy was adopted to replace the sectarian meeting-house type of service which Pastor Sans had favored. Un-Lutheran hymns and such as did not proclaim God's truth aright were dropped.⁵

Now that the congregation had a solid basis in the Lutheran Confessions and in the Word of God, the congregation grew, both in numbers and in faith and understanding in God's Word. The congregation agreed to accept Pastor Bading's position on lodges. With the calling of this

⁵"A Century With Christ," p. 18.

one man, Johannes Bading, St. Mark's began taking giant steps toward becoming an orthodox Lutheran congregation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

St. John's Lutheran Church is the oldest orthodox Lutheran body in Watertown; St. Mark's Lutheran Church is the second oldest. When Pastor Anton Wagner received a call late in 1858 to Trinity Church, Freistadt, he could feel secure knowing that the congregation would through turmoil and controversy still follow along orthodox Lutheran lines. At the beginning of 1859 Wagner left St. John's.

His congregation had developed confessionally largely because of the influence of the congregation in Lebanon, Immanuel. The two churches shared common ethnic backgrounds and held from the beginning common confessional beliefs. They grew together as they shared the same pastor and had related teachers. They shared the pain of going through a doctrinal controversy together and seeing splits in their congregations. They became strong together as they saw the Missouri Synod solidify itself through the Lebanon controversy.

St. Mark's congregation, too, shared a common ethnic background with Immanuel, Lebanon, but that was about all. There was no common confessional stance, no common pastor or teacher. In fact, the pastors of St. Mark's and St. John's were rival evangelists. Unlike St. John's, St. Mark's needed to survive a doctrinally weak pastor before becoming confessionally strong. It was fortunate that this pastor's preaching caused troubles that forced him to leave the congregation.

The story at St. Mark's was timing. Pastor Christian Sans was forced to leave about the same time that the Lebanon Controversy

had reached a head and Pastor Johannes Bading was called to serve the two break-off congregations in the Watertown area. It was his service to these congregations that attracted the attention of the congregation Sans had formerly served at the very time when this congregation was experiencing its first vacancy. Had Sans never been removed from his office, or had he been removed at another time, St. Mark's, today one of the largest congregations in the Wisconsin Synod, might not even *have become* ~~be~~ Wisconsin Synod. Indirectly, then, the controversy that began in two other congregations, Immanuel and St. John's, strengthened the doctrinal position of St. Mark's, through the calling of Johannes Bading as pastor. In the same way, the turmoil that for a time caused St. Mark's and the city of Watertown much grief eventually turned out for the strengthening of St. Mark's, since through it Sans was removed.

God preserves his Word and pure doctrine today as he has throughout all history. Very often he preserves it through controversy. It was through controversy that he preserved pure doctrine in ~~two~~ pioneer Lutheran churches in Watertown between the years 1852 and 1860. May God grant that when controversy arise in the church today, it also serve not to tear down, but rather to strengthen his church.

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