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St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church

1982: the Split

James Grabitske.

Church History 331

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I. Introduction

In 1982 a large congregation in Arlington, Minnesota split. Fingers were pointed at who was to blame. A newspaper got involved. People were bitter toward each other. However before we get to this point we need to understand the history of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

II. St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation: The first 110 years.¹

During the 1850's and 1860's much of Sibley County was served by traveling Pastors and missionaries. In 1859 St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was established outside the city of Arlington. Pastor Karl Schulze was the second pastor to serve St. John's. In the late 1860's he was also the one to gather the Lutherans in Arlington together into a congregation. In 1871 the members of this group built a log church and it was dedicated. In March of the following year a constitution was adopted and St. Paul's congregation has recognized this from then on as the date of its establishment.

The first sixteen years of the congregation set the tone for the history of the congregation. St. Paul's was independent. The first two pastors, Pastor K. Schulze and Pastor F. H. Kolbe, who served St. Paul's for the first 3 years, both seemed to have belonged to two different Synods.² From 1875 to 1877 St. Paul's was served by various pastors of the area without regard to Synodical affiliation. Starting in 1877 the congregation was served by area independent pastors. Pastor Hunziker of Fort Road was the first. He conducted services at the log church twice a month while serving his own

¹ This portion is taken from various histories of the congregation listed at the end of this paper. The centennial was heavily relied upon, because I feel from much of my research that this is the most reliable and cites the most reliable sources. These histories supply all the information unless otherwise noted

congregation in Fort Road. By 1878 it seems that the membership outgrew the old log church and desired a new building. The new church wasn't built until 1886. That year Pastor Ziegler (Siegler) was called to serve the congregation until December of that year. In 1888 and 1889 Pastor Rumpf from New Rome (formerly Fort Road) served. During these first sixteen years the membership had increased rapidly.

During these years St. Paul's did not have its own resident pastor. It had relied on area pastors to serve its spiritual needs. The members began seeing a need to have its own pastor. In 1889 St. Paul's congregation called Pastor C. F. Kock to be its first resident pastor. Pastor Kock joined the Minnesota Synod shortly after his installation. He served both as pastor and as the Christian day school teacher as was common at that time. He would remain the pastor until 1902 when he took the call to Trinity in Belle Plaine.

Pastor Robert Heidmann (Heidemann) accepted the call to St. Paul's in 1902 and was installed on Thanksgiving Day. Numerous changes took place then. A pipe organ was installed in the church along with a hot air heating system and electric lights. By 1911 Pastor Heidmann could no longer teach the day school and faithfully keep up with the growing work of the congregation. St. Paul's then hired a part-time teacher. In 1916 a new school was built. Up to this time the school had used the old log church, which had been moved from the original location to the site of the second church. In 1921 Mr. Fred Meyer was installed as the first permanent teacher. In 1922 St. Paul's congregation celebrated fifty years and had a membership pushing one thousand souls. In 1923 an attempt was made to introduce an English service to the congregation. English services

² St. John's where Pastor Schulze served was part of the LCMS. Pastor Kolbe served Zion, Green Isle township; I didn't find any information on this church in the records I have, but one of the many Zions in

where conducted off and on at first. The congregation resolved the conflict caused by this by holding both German and English services on Sunday mornings. In 1928 A. E. Gerlach accepted the call to fill the teaching vacancy when Meyer left. Between 1928 and 1941 St. Paul's began to change over from German to English in both the school and the church. In the summer of 1941 Pastor Heidmann tendered his resignation and the congregation sadly accepted it. Pastor Heidmann died in October in 1946.

Prior to 1938 various teachers had served the lower grades of the school. In May of 1938 Gilbert Timm, who was the lower grade teacher at the time, was suddenly taken from this veil of tears to his heavenly home. That fall candidate Waldemar Zarling replaced him as the lower school teacher until he received a call to the Apache Mission in Arizona. John Bradtke replaced him and served the lower grades until 1941 when Pastor Heidmann resigned.

The week after Pastor Heidmann's final service, Pastor John Bradtke was installed. Pastor Heidmann assisted Pastor Bradtke for the next five years in whatever ways he was able. By this time membership at St. Paul's was closing in on 1500 souls. In 1942 Mr. Gerlach accepted a call to St. James, Minnesota. The 1942-43 school year students from New Ulm came up to Arlington to help teach the upper grade students for the year. Miss Elsie Heidmann was the lower grade teacher at this time. In 1943 Aurther Glende accepted the call to teach the upper grades at the school. In 1949 a new school was built. In 1950 Clifford Footh was called to replace Mr. Glende who accepted another call.

In 1903 the handwriting was already on the wall for St. Paul's, Arlington. It was a big congregation and had already in 1903 added on to its second church to make more

the area moved to town in the 1960s and today is part of the ELCA.

room. This wasn't enough for a congregation that had nearly one thousand members in 1922 and pushing fifteen hundred in 1941. A bigger building was needed. In 1952 Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Scheer gave a plot of land to build the new church on. This parcel was located on the other side of the city from where the church and school were. The property is said to have been swamp land at that time and not useful for farming. In 1953 the congregation decides to build a new church. During the time of the planning of the new church proposals were made to build a new school at the same site to keep both church and school close. This, however, was scrapped. In 1953 a new constitution was adopted. In 1954 the gifted ^{of} land was formally accepted and plans for the new church were drawn up and accepted. In 1955 the congregation proceeded to break ground and build a new church. In September of 1956 the congregation moved into their new church building.

During the next years the congregation continued to grow. The congregation asked for vicars for several years to help out Pastor Bradtke. Many of these vicars didn't get along with the pastor and Arlington became referred to as a sentence according to Alfred Burdorf, a longtime member. It seems that one of the vicars also quit during his year and returned to the seminary. After this no more vicars would be sent to St. Paul's Arlington.

In 1967 the "Synod Question" arose. Some of the members felt that it was time to join the Wisconsin Synod. A proposal to join was placed before the voters. Before voting Pastor Bradtke was asked to comment on this, and he said, "we should stay the way we are." And they did.

In 1969 St. Paul's decided to call a second pastor. Pastor Roland Scheele accepted the call. Within a year Pastor Scheele resigned. Some interviewed said it was poor health and stress from working with Pastor Bradtke. After this the congregation tried to get vicars again, but none were ever sent.

In 1977 St. Paul's called a second pastor with the idea that Pastor Bradtke would retire soon. Having been told this Pastor Fred Fallen accepted the call at the encouragement of Minnesota District officials. Pastor Horn, President of the Minnesota District at the time, promised full backing if any problems arose.

Problems did come. In 1978 the congregation decided to review its constitution and change certain things, which had already been changed in practice just not in writing. A committee was set up and the constitution and by-laws were up dated. In the new constitution Article II-b would request membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. This was no real shock to the independent congregation since as Alfred Burdorf said, "[We] got all our called workers and sent mission money to the WELS so [we're] really not independent." A majority agreed with this but a two-thirds majority was needed or 90 votes. The congregation was seven votes shy of joining the WELS in 1980. Most credit Pastor Bradtke for this. His reply to a question on Synod policy squashed any chance of St. Paul's peacefully joining the WELS. When asked whether he followed Synod policy, he said, "Not always."

His reply was descriptive of a serious problem. Pastor Fallen received several disciplinary cases. He had to deal with a member who also belonged to the area Masons. Pastor Fallen was also told that at St. Paul's "we commune all Lutherans." He also made

the enemies' list by standing against scouting on fellowship principles. At that time a group within the congregation decided that Fallen had to go.

On March 17th 1980 the council met. On the agenda that evening was a letter from Dr. Dean Bergersen. He was Pastor Bradtke's doctor. He had written the congregation to admonish them for giving Pastor Bradtke such a heavy workload and neglecting the poor health that he was in. The minutes for this month report Pastor Fallen was willing to talk with Pastor Bradtke about shifting the workload. Pastor Bradtke was silent. In the following month a semi-retirement for Pastor Bradtke ^{w:af} is discussed without a comment from Pastor Bradtke. In 1981 Pastor Bradtke refuses[!] to go into any kind of retirement. That summer he fell ill and requested that nothing be said to the congregation.

This brings us to:

III. 1982: the Year of the Split.

In December of 1981 there were few signs that the congregation would split within a year. Things seemed to be going well. In the Annual Report for 1981 Pastor Bradtke reports that "humanly speaking, things have gone well in the congregation during the past year." Despite all the trouble in the world things seemed to be alright on the outside for St. Paul's Arlington.

Things were not going so good. This fact Pastor Fallen makes mention of right away in his report for 1982. In fact he reminds the congregation of a more pessimistic report he had delivered to the congregation in February of that year. It was September that things fell apart. In the regular council meeting on Monday September 13th, the council asked Pastor Bradtke about a date for his retirement as they looked at the

proposed budget and pastors' salaries. When he refused to answer, both pastors were dismissed so that the council might discuss it further. After the council had come to a resolution they asked both pastors to return. In a vote 16 to 3 the council asked Pastor Bradtke to retire or go into semi-retirement as of January 1, 1983. At this the minutes report Pastor Bradtke as saying, "I can see the handwriting on the wall. I quit—effective immediately."³ At this he left the meeting. It was rather quick that news and misinformation spread around the town. Before the congregation could be told what happened various rumors began to spread. On Wednesday September 15th the Visiting Elder met with Pastor Bradtke and then met later with the Elders, the Chairman and Pastor Fallen. He said that Pastor Bradtke was happy about his resignation and was making plans to move forward. The church council met with Pastor Bradtke on September 20th to discuss a farewell sermon and to give the congregation a chance to say goodbye to a longtime servant. Pastor Bradtke declined and wanted to leave without incident.⁴

Thus far things were pretty good, until two days latter. On September 22 a meeting took place out on the Arlington Fair Grounds. A group "drew up" a petition requesting the congregation act on 'nine proposals.' In his newsletter for the month of September Pastor Fallen points^{ed} out that St. Paul's acted here for the sake of peace and not because they had to. There were many reasons the proposal could have easily been rejected without any real grounds to quarrel. First, the petition itself was on two sheets of paper and not one, as required. ^{second} Two, the petition was dated on September 22nd and the

³ Council minutes, September 13, 1982

⁴ Accounts for this differ. The newsletter reports it thus: "Pastor Bradtke said he would not do this [preach a farewell sermon] and did not wish to mark the occasion in any way." However, council minutes state that

actual proposals on September 23rd. Also, ^wMany of those who had signed were not even voting members of St. Paul's. Yet to keep the peace they were accepted and a formal response was given to them. These 'nine proposals' are as follows:

1. How can the Church Council call a special meeting for the purpose of releasing a pastor?
2. How can the Church Council hire a teacher without the congregation's permission?
3. We would like the Church Council's special and regular meeting minutes of August and September read at the October 6th, 1982 meeting.
4. The Church Council should be representing the congregation, and not their own interests. We feel they are not.
5. Why did Pastor Bradtke have to make an apology in front of the congregation? What did he preach that was false? Who did the accusing?
6. What action did the Church Council take and mean about Pastor Bradtke taking a lighter work load and phasing himself out by the end of this year? Pastor Bradtke and Pastor Fallen were hired as Co-Pastors by the congregation, and can be released from their duties by the congregation only, and not the Church Council.
7. We would like to have the Church Council's opinion on why they do not approve of Pastor Bradtke's preaching and of him personally.
8. If the Church Council is sincere about Pastor Bradtke resigning, we feel Pastor Fallen should also resign for the betterment of our Congregation and Community. This should be acted on immediately and a ballot vote taken.
9. We are again stating: That Pastors should have nothing to do with the slate of Church Council Candidates.⁵

The Executive Board, the Board of Elders and Pastor Fallen wrote the following response to the 'nine proposals:'

1. The Church Council did not call a special meeting for the purpose of releasing a pastor. We called a special meeting to act on the resignation, and to ask Pastor Bradtke to please preach a farewell sermon, and to give the congregation an opportunity to express their best wishes.
2. We do not understand this question. What teacher was hired? When? Though we have asked what is meant by this, no one will tell us.

he was open to this if he could begin his sermon "Dear friend and hated enemies" but the council would not allow this.

⁵ October 1982 Newsletter, *The Voice of St. Paul's Lutheran Church*

3. We shall be very happy to read our minutes. We are even calling a special meeting of the Church Council to approve them so that they can be official minutes.
4. Whatever happened to Matthew 18? No one came to the Council with any objections. As of right now no one has bothered to point out how the Council failed to represent the Congregation, or what interests of its own it was serving. This kind of statement is meant for only one purpose and that is to tear apart the Body of Christ and raise tempers.
5. Since Pastor Bradtke said he was sorry and that it was not intentional, this matter should be dropped right there. He asked to be forgiven. Why, then, is this being brought up again? The past is the past.
6. The Church Council has an obligation to seek the best interests of the Congregation and of its called workers. Two years ago the Congregation voted by an overwhelming majority to encourage Pastor Bradtke to step down and to take it easier. The Church Council did the same. He was not told what to do. He was only asked to consider it. However, this matter of the pastors being "hired" is contrary to our Christian Doctrine. **NO PASTOR IS EVER HIRED!** A pastor is **CALLED**, which means that he has been given the **KEYS TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD** to exercise them publicly in the midst of the congregation. A pastor is not hired and he cannot be fired. If a pastor wants to accept another **CALL** to another field of labor, it is necessary for him to get a release from his first Call by the Congregation. However, if a person just wants to quit, he can do that by himself without permission from anyone.
7. This proposal is so contrary to the spirit of the Gospel that it does not deserve an answer.
8. As stated before, a pastor is not hired and he cannot be fired. He may be removed from his office for **CAUSE** (Constitution, Art. V, E. p. 4) Quote: "Any officer, pastor, or teacher may be removed from office by the Congregation, by ballot, in Christian and lawful order, for one of the following causes: persistent adherence to false doctrine, scandalous life, and inability to perform his official duties or willful neglect of them." The charges must be made, they must be proved and then it takes a two-thirds majority vote. Therefore this matter cannot be voted on. In fact, it cannot even be brought up for discussion because no charges have been made or proven. Moreover, any pastor so charged has the right to appeal his case to a review by a board of pastors appointed by the District. This matter is not being handled in either a Christian or a lawful way.
9. In the old constitution, which was adopted in 1954 and followed for almost 30 years, and in our present constitution, it clearly states: (Constitution, Art. VI, B, 4, p. 4) "The pastor, by virtue of his office, shall be an advisory member of all boards and committees." The men who signed the nine proposals claimed that they were voting members of the congregation. Let us remind them how they became voting

members of the congregation (Constitution, Art. IV, C, 1, p. 2): “All male communicant members of the Congregation shall become voting members when they attain the legal voting age and have signed the constitution thereby signifying their acceptance of the same.”⁶

In the meeting on October 6th of 1982, the ‘nine proposals’ were debated for three hours without any resolution to the problems plaguing St. Paul’s. It was resolved then that “5-7 of the voters who signed the petition” would meet with the Council to work it out.⁷ Nothing came out of this meeting worth noting. The rift in the congregation was more evident at this point.

In the November 14th edition of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* an article appeared. Evidently someone involved with the congregation alerted the paper about the strife in the congregation.⁸ A reporter came to town and interviewed several members and both pastors. Pastor Fallen recalled that ^{the reporter} he came sat down and said whether he cooperated or not the story would be written. Pastor Fallen noted that the reporter didn’t take any notes or have a tape recorder. After he read the article Pastor Fallen also then noted that he had been misquoted.⁹

On November 22, 1982 a meeting was held on the Arlington Fair Grounds. Though no known records were kept for this meeting, Pauline Wiemann said that those at the meeting (including herself) “talked about joining 1) the Missouri Synod, 2) the local ALC church (Zion), or 3) one of the country churches.” Although option two was discussed there was no backing for it. Most felt that their numbers were too great to join

⁶ October 1982 Newsletter, *The Voice of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church*

⁷ October 1982 Newsletter, *The Voice of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church*

⁸ Some interviewed had suspected a certain individual but no one had any proof of this.

⁹ Pastor Fallen, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 24, 2000

a country church (namely a LCMS congregation). Those present decided to start a new congregation in Arlington and join the Missouri Synod.¹⁰

This group contacted a Missouri Synod pastor to request membership.¹¹ A committee called for a meeting at the Arlington Community Hall for the expressed purpose to form a “Missouri Lutheran Congregation.” On December 9th they gathered to choose a name for their congregation and formally to request release from St. Paul’s Arlington. On December 13th at St. Paul’s a regular Voters’ Meeting was held and all who requested an immediate release to leave St. Paul’s to join Peace Lutheran were given their release. On December 20th the members of Peace Lutheran Church met again to set up their congregation.

The number who left for Peace Lutheran Church was about 332.¹² However, this is a hard figure to nail down. Here’s why: not everyone who left at this time went to Peace; some left and went to other denominations to get away from the strife. Peace records show that initially 60 Families left to form the congregation (No mention of a number of people). St. Paul’s records this as 145 souls. Another 120 left then in January of 1983. St. Paul’s started out with 1,439 souls in 1982 and was down to 1,152 in January of 1983 (a difference of 287).¹³ The Annual Report for 1983 lists 927 souls. Overall 512 people left St. Paul’s, but some of those were called to their heavenly home (30 people died in the years of 82-83).

¹⁰ This paragraph is taken from an interview with Pauline Wiemann, interviewed by James Grabitske on April 26, 2000.

¹¹ This is from a meeting notice, which can be found in St. Paul’s Council minutes for the year 1982, along with a file marked miscellaneous, also in Peace’s records marked beginnings; I got this off a member of St. Paul’s who kept it. It is labeled “MEETING NOTICE”

¹² This figure is arrived at from the yearend report for 1983 for Peace Lutheran Church.

¹³ Figures taken out of the January Newsletter for 1983, *The Voice of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church*

IV. Reasons for the Split

Who's to blame for nearly 500 people leaving their congregation? Initial response might be to blame one of the two pastors or maybe even both. However, from the history of the congregation, it was a congregation with congregations within it. It seems that since for a long time St. Paul's was the only Lutheran congregation in Arlington, until the mid-1960's when Zion moved to town. If you were a Lutheran, you joined St. Paul's. In the 125th Anniversary Booklet for St. Paul's records that many of the members had Missouri, Wisconsin, Iowa and Ohio Synod backgrounds.¹⁴ There was a lack of common stance. Earl Dammann stated that his "father-in-law saw the split coming years before" and he said Earl would see but he wouldn't.¹⁵

Pauline Wiemann recalled that St. Paul's was "an independent congregation, which was independently minded" and the members who left were "loyal to Pastor Bradtke." Many felt he was shoved out. Pastor Bradtke was loved by these people. Mr. Donald Koch, St. Paul's principal, remembered that "Pastor Bradtke was a good Joe and didn't want to step on anyone's toes."¹⁶ Mr. Frank Kolander, former principal, said that "Pastor Bradtke was everybody's buddy."¹⁷ Pastor Bradtke was well liked but perhaps at the expense of discipline.

Pastor Bradtke had his faults too. He had a problem with the doctrine of fellowship, especially when it came to scouting. "After the pastor had made his statement on Scouting, it was decided to allow Scouting, without religion."¹⁸ He also

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¹⁵ Earl Dammann, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 30, 2000

¹⁶ Mr. Donald Koch, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 25, 2000

¹⁷ Mr. Frank Kolander, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 27, 2000

¹⁸ Taken from a bulletin from April 20, 1969

said to Pastor Fallen, "We commune all Lutherans."¹⁹ Pastor Bradtke never delivered a paper in his conference nor did he preach for conference in 40 years.²⁰ Mr. Koch recalled that "Pastor Bradtke didn't go to District meetings."²¹ This was probably a symptom of a greater problem.

Lax doctrinal practices also contributed. The congregation had so many different Lutherans and very little discipline in it. It was hard to carry out discipline too, because much of the congregation was related. Pastor Fallen got in trouble at times because he was in a congregation with a long history of fellowship problems. He ended up with the blame for a life-history of lax fellowship standards.

Pastor Fallen was another sticking point for the congregation. The Wisconsin Synod became more prominent with his arrival. Pastor Bradtke let all things dealing with the Synod fall to the back burner. Whereas Pastor Fallen was accused by a member of being in league with the Synod to siphon off funds from the congregation. Pastor Fallen was also hated by some for his stance on Scouting and the Masons.

There was also a perception in the congregation that the two pastors didn't get along. Mr. Koch recalled that it just seemed petty that one did the bulletin one way and the other would do it differently the next week. This could have been just a stylistic difference but it was viewed as general animosity toward each other. This may have been true to some extent. Pastor Fallen had requested to see the books when he arrived to get acquainted with the congregation. This request turned into a bitter dispute resolved by the Council siding with Pastor Fallen's request to see the books.

¹⁹ Pastor Fallen, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 24, 2000

²⁰ Pastor Fallen, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 24, 2000

²¹ Mr. Donald Koch, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 25, 2000

Pastor Bradtke in general didn't get along with his fellow called workers. Mr. Gerlach had a break down while working together with him.²² His vicars didn't get along with him, one even left before his year at St. Paul's was completed. Pastor Sheele also left for the same reason. The only exceptions to this might be Mr. Kolander and Karen Miller.²³

A bigger reason for the split and perhaps the number one reason was that there were two factions, pro-school and anti-school. These two factions had been going at it for years. Some thought that if the school was closed then the congregation could join the LCMS. The pro-school faction seemed to want to join the WELS. It was these two factions who probably pulled the most to go one way or the other.

V. Aftermath

Sheep-stealing. Though much of it cannot be proven a few instances can be. It seems that someone went to various shut-ins and claimed that Pastor Fallen would never visit them. These shut-ins were shocked to see their pastor come, but he served them faithfully. Another case, Meta Sander was transferred by her son to Peace. She was the daughter of Pastor Heidmann and a longtime member of St. Paul's. It seems that while at the town's nursing home, she refused to be dismissed after the service was held at the home, but she waited to be communed with the other members of St. Paul's.²⁴

The 'boycott' reported in the Star Tribune seemed to have continued for years. Members would not go into stores owned by the other side for years and then very

²² Mr. Alfred Burdorf, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 29, 2000

²³ Mr. Donald Koch, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 25, 2000

²⁴ Pastor Fallen, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 24, 2000

seldom. Pastor Fallen said, “The thing that hurt most is when former members would cross to the other side of the street so that they wouldn’t have to say, ‘Hi,’ to me.”²⁵

It’s easy to look at this and see only something tragic, which it is. No one wanted to see the people who left go. The silver lining in this stormy cloud is this: St. Paul’s became a stronger congregation because of it. Offerings went up after the split. One member is said to have offered to give what those who left had given in years past to make up the difference. Offerings overall were up. Attendance was up. Those attending the Lord’s Supper was up.

²⁵ Pastor Fallen, interviewed by James Grabitske, April 24, 2000

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