

1906-1977

A CHANGE OF PLACE, BUT NOT OF WORSHIP

Church History 331
Lutheranism in America

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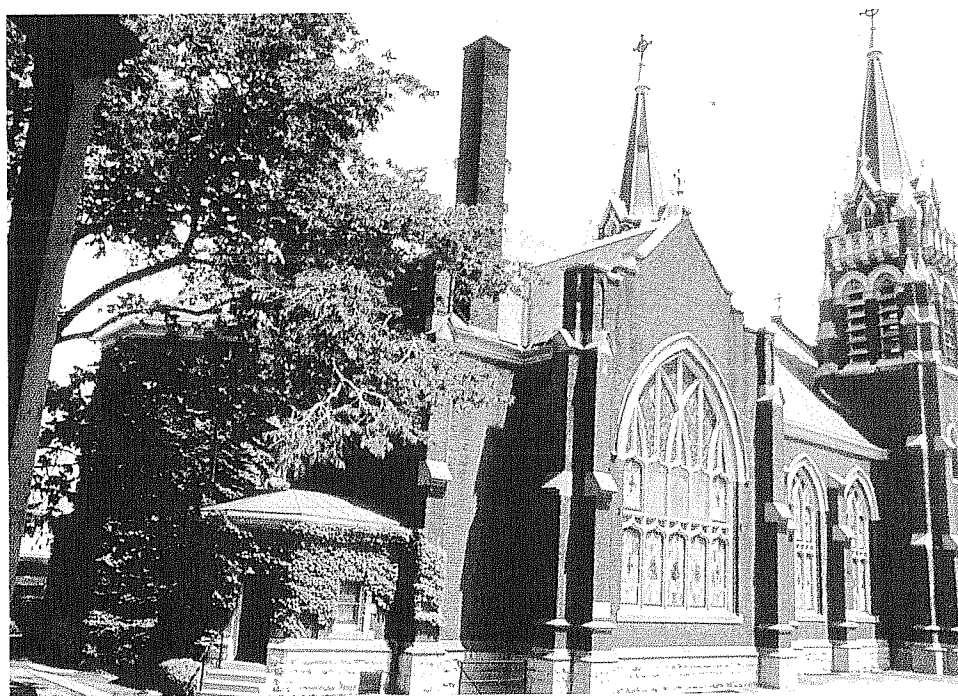
April 22, 2002

St. Jaroslavl Lutheran Church

- Martin Nyam -

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the assistance of Pastor Paul Eckert and Gilbert Manske, a life long member of St. Jacobi. Pastor Eckert provided valuable insight into the decisions regarding the church move. Gilbert Manske provided irreplaceable historical information in the form of newspaper clippings, personal letters from parties involved in the move of the church, church publications, and all photographs.



St. Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church

On April 20, 1873, St. Jacobi congregation came into existence. On April 22, 2002, 129 years and two days later, this paper considering the move of the congregation from its second church building to its current home six miles down Forest Home Avenue in Greenfield, was handed in by a senior at



St. Jacobi, Milwaukee - Nave and Chancel

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Even though this paper focuses on just a few short years of St. Jacobi's history, it is important to remember that God has showered his grace on this gathering of believers from its earliest days in a blacksmith shop up to today at its current location in Greenfield.

I. Leaving What Our Fathers Gave Us¹

When a congregation decides to move from the city out to the suburbs, there may be a few eyebrows raised along with a number of questions. Is the church moving to escape a decaying urban neighborhood? Is the church simply moving to be closer to where its members live? Are Christians abdicating their responsibility to carry out the Great Commission under seemingly adverse circumstances just to find an easy way out?

¹ *The Final Closing Service*, St. Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, February 20, 1977, church bulletin. The title and outline for this paper are the theme and parts from Pastor Eckert's sermon for the final closing service.

According to Pastor Eckert,² who served St. Jacobi through the move, the answer to all of these questions is no. The reasons surrounding the move of St. Jacobi are not what an outsider may assume. Pastor Eckert summed up the decision in this way. "It came down to a question of the mission of the church. Does the church exist to preach the gospel or to preserve a building?" Our LORD clearly states in the Great Commission that the answer is to preach the gospel.

While it is true that the neighborhood surrounding the church had gone through many changes over the first half of the twentieth century, for better or for worse, these changes did not have a direct impact on the decision to move the church. While it is true that many members of the church had either moved to a new residence or had been called to their heavenly homes, this did not have a direct impact on the decision to move the church. While it is true that circumstances surrounding the church had indeed become adverse, the Great Commission was not abdicated in South Milwaukee and St. Jacobi was not looking for an easy way out.

Early in the century the church's membership began to move out to the suburbs along with the rest of the prosperous German immigrants. Polish Catholics followed by Hispanic Catholics replaced the German Lutheran base. St. Jacobi had been wrestling with the costs involved with maintaining the large building coupled with declining membership for many years.³ A newspaper article offers evidence that St. Jacobi had considered relocating the church from the Mitchell Street property as early as 1928. In 1946 the congregation voted to relocate "if it could do so economically."⁴

It is quite possible that earlier in the century voices within the congregation could have raised the cry to follow the church's membership out to suburbs. It is a credit to St. Jacobi that the congregation did not relocate until there was no other reasonable alternative.

² Paul G. Eckert, interview by author, tape recording, Hales Corners, WI, April 2, 2002.

³ Membership in 1898, about 1300; in 1923, about 1300; in 1948, 937; in 1973, 750. Figures taken from Mueller.

By 1961 the neighborhood had changed from residential to commercial. An interstate highway, along with numerous parking lots attached to their businesses dominated the once densely populated area.⁵

Changes to Mitchell Street, Thirteenth Street, and Forest Home Avenue all hurt the area around the church. Businesses suffered, and the area deteriorated further. The ironic nature of these changes was that the roads around the church were part of an urban renewal program.⁶

The church building itself was not practical by today's standard, but again this was not the reason to move the church. The only bathrooms were in the basement. The church entryway was relatively small. The stairwells were steep and narrow, to such a point that only the younger people could navigate them. This often meant that older members could not participate in the choir that practiced and performed in the balcony. There was hardly any parking except on the streets surrounding the church.

It is undeniable that the issues surrounding the neighborhood around the 13th Street church building, the decline in membership, and the impracticality of the building were factors that played into the decision to move, but if it were just for these reasons, St. Jacobi would not have moved.

The reason that the church ultimately moved was really a matter of stewardship. Pastor Eckert recalls the figure of \$100,000 that would have been needed to do some minor repairs on the building. The problem was that over the years the safety codes grew more and more strict in Milwaukee. Over those years St. Jacobi was grandfathered into the code allowing the congregation to be exempt from compliance. However, if the congregation ever made repairs or

⁴ H. Carl Mueller, "St. Jacobi Church – Victim of Change," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 19, 1977, part 1, p. 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The following paragraphs are based on the interview with Pastor Eckert unless otherwise noted.

improvements to the building totaling a certain dollar amount, the city would enforce all of the safety codes. To bring the church up to city code would have cost \$750,000.⁷

One of the problems that needed repairs was the electrical system. The whole system used open knife switches. Pastor Eckert mused that he could have easily electrocuted himself in the dark. To replace a light bulb, someone would need to climb above the ceiling and reach down from the rafters. Because the upper area was open, this was quite dangerous, and someone could have easily fallen.⁸

The heating system was archaic and completely inadequate. There were two coal stoker stoves used to heat the church. The heat came up through two grates in the center isle. In the winter the members would sit as close to the grates as possible. On cold days the church would maybe reach fifty degrees. On those same days the sacristy would maybe reach forty degrees. Pastor Eckert remembers wearing his suit coat under his robe to stay warm.

The starting point for deciding to move, and really the driving force behind the move, involved the costs associated with replacing the school. For all of the problems associated with the church building, the school building was far worse. The school had stood for 82 years, and at one point it had actually been condemned because it was a fire hazard. The city allowed the congregation to use the school after fire escapes were installed and under the condition that the church would build a new school.

The original plan was not to move, but to tear down the old school and rebuild next to the church. Because of the declining membership the new school would have been smaller. The parsonage next to the school had been razed for extra space. The property next to the parsonage was also purchased, and the building that stood there was also razed.

⁷ The dollar amount is taken from Mueller.

The final problem came when the church tried to purchase the property next to the campus. Just a few feet of land would have cost the church roughly \$70,000. For Pastor Eckert this was the deciding factor in looking for a different location. It had become too expensive to stay on that campus.

Even with the outrageous costs involved in bringing the buildings and property up to modern standards, Pastor Eckert made the point that if St. Jacobi was the only WELS church in the area he would not have been in favor of moving to a different location.

There are four WELS churches around St. Jacobi, all within walking distance of the Mitchell Street property.⁹ The Great Commission was not being abdicated just because one of the five south side churches was leaving the area.

II. Settling Down Where The Lord Has Led

In 1961, the congregation purchased what would be the site of the future church and school in Greenfield for \$32,500. There were other sites considered, one on Becher Street and another on Loomis Road. The Greenfield site was not chosen because it was the area where the most members lived, but because it was the best deal. For the money, it was the most land with the best location, highly visible on Forest Home Avenue. The Becher Street location would actually have been closer to the membership base.

There is another WELS church two miles from the Greenfield site, St. John's on Sixty-eighth Street. St. Jacobi consulted with St. John's about whether or not they would be opposed to the relocation. St. John's actually welcomed St. Jacobi, since the new school would take pressure off of St. John's school, which was at its capacity.

⁹ Walking distance is roughly two miles. All distances are from the intersection of 13th Street and Mitchell Ave: Christ, 0.93 miles; Gethsemane, 1.70 miles; St. Peter 0.85 miles; St. Lucas, 2.27 miles; Messiah, 3.54 miles.

Moving the church was not as simple as moving the school. First a buyer had to be found who would spend a large amount of money either renovating the church or tearing the church down. A newspaper article projected the demolition cost to be \$28,000.¹⁰

The plot of land owned by St. Jacobi was a coveted piece of real estate. It was a prominent corner on a busy intersection. In the early 1970's a condominium builder almost cut a deal with the congregation, but the demolition expenses were prohibitive. In 1977, the food chain *McDonalds* showed interest, but it also backed down because of the cost to demolish the church.¹¹

Milwaukee's Department of City Development was active in finding buyers for the church property, but all buyers were scared away by the cost of demolition. They took an active role because the area around St. Jacobi was earmarked for urban renewal. The church stood in the way of the Mitchell Street mall.¹²

In 1972, the city declared St. Jacobi's gothic church building to be a landmark. This only complicated matters to sell the church because the Redevelopment Authority that was in charge of urban renewal could not go against the City Landmark Commission by demolishing the church.¹³

On January 30, 1977,¹⁴ the city agreed to purchase the property for \$225,000 on the condition that the congregation would demolish the church by May 13. In doing so, the city avoided destroying one of its landmarks. Once the property was cleared the city could more easily find buyers for the coveted property.¹⁵

¹⁰ -----, "Landmark Church Appears Doomed," Unidentified newspaper article, 1977.

¹¹ Barbara Dembski, "Noted Church Gets a Reprieve," *Milwaukee Journal*.

¹² Mueller.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ -----, *St. Jacobi Ev. Lutheran Church: 125 Years of Matchless Grace*, April 20, 1998.

¹⁵ "Landmark Church Appears Doomed."

Once the final decision was made to raze the building, voices were raised in the community that questioned the decision. Some questioned why the city should bail out a church that had enjoyed tax-exempt status for all its years. Others could not believe that the city would actually allow a landmark to be destroyed.¹⁶

Pastor Eckert recalled one woman who could not accept that the church she had walked past every day of her life would soon be gone. He pointed out to the woman that if more people like her walked into the church, instead of past the church, they would not have had to move.¹⁷

Among St. Jacobi's membership there were some that were sad to see the building demolished, but even these had accepted the fact that the congregation needed a new building. Pastor Eckert mentioned that there was not one family that left the congregation because they did not agree with the decision to sell the church.¹⁸

Part of what eased the pain for the membership was that the congregation's move from Milwaukee to Greenfield was a gradual process. St. Jacobi's school had been operating in Greenfield for thirteen years. The old church had been for sale for eight years. St. Jacobi had been conducting worship services in both Greenfield and Milwaukee for twelve years. At first worship services were held in a double room at the new school building, but within a month the attendance was so great that the services had to be moved into the gym. German services, held only in the old church building, ceased in 1970.¹⁹

On February 20, 1977, at 10:00 AM the final church service was held in the St. Jacobi's Mitchell Street building. There were 1,152 people packed into the structure that was built for 850. Despite the fact that there were many old members who returned for the last service along

¹⁶ -----, "Reluctant Destruction," Unidentified newspaper article.

¹⁷ Eckert, interview.

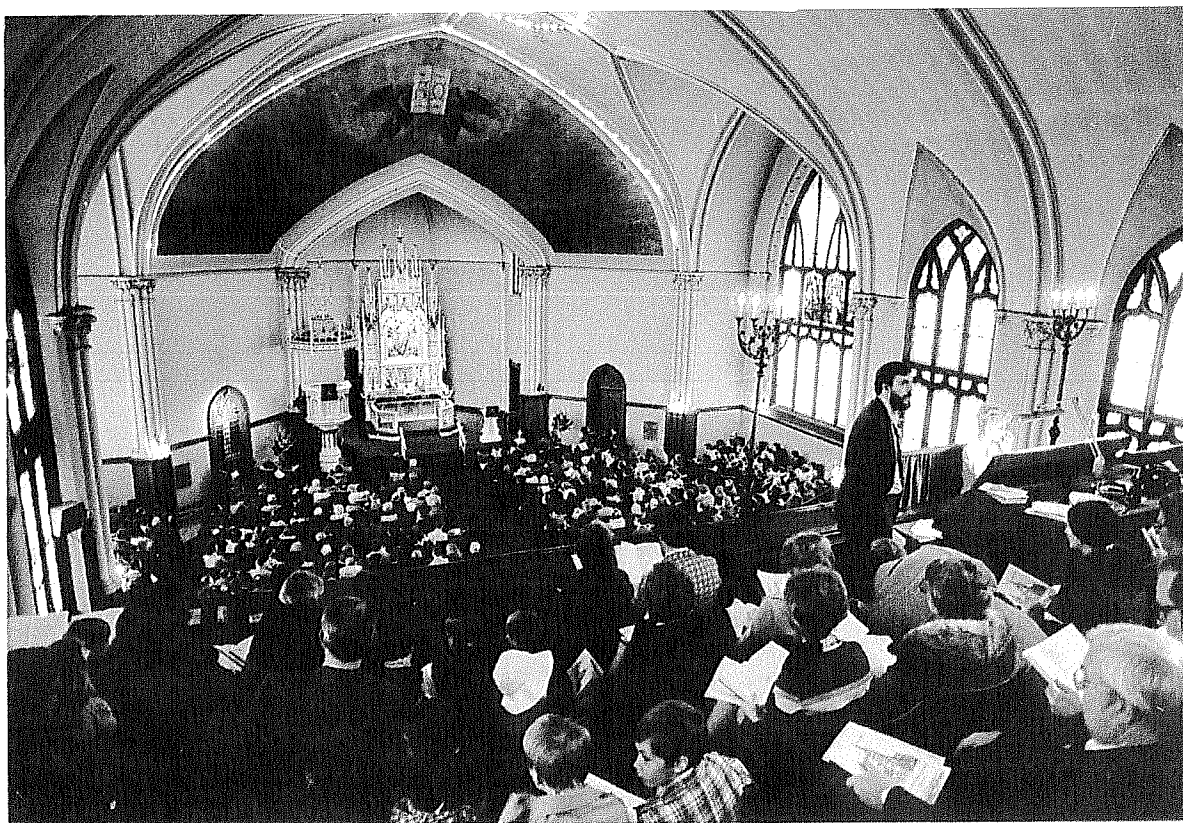
¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *St. Jacobi Ev. Lutheran Church: 125 Years of Matchless Grace*

with many people from the community, the assembly remained calm. People were genuinely sad to see the church go, but any emotions of anger on that day did not turn into violent actions.²⁰

There were six Scripture readings, each followed by a few words of comment that focused on God's grace through the years and what He accomplished in the old church. Pastor Eckert's sermon was based on the call of Abram. His introductory illustrations were of buying a new car or house. "As a car change, however, does not mean a change of driving; and as a house change does not mean a change in living; so we can say of our congregation's decision that it involves a change of place, but not of worship."²¹

Just days after the final closing service, Northwestern Wrecking began to demolish the



St. Jacobi. Milwaukee – Final Closing Service

²⁰ Eckert, interview.

²¹ *The Final Closing Service*, St. Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI, February 20, 1977, compact disk.

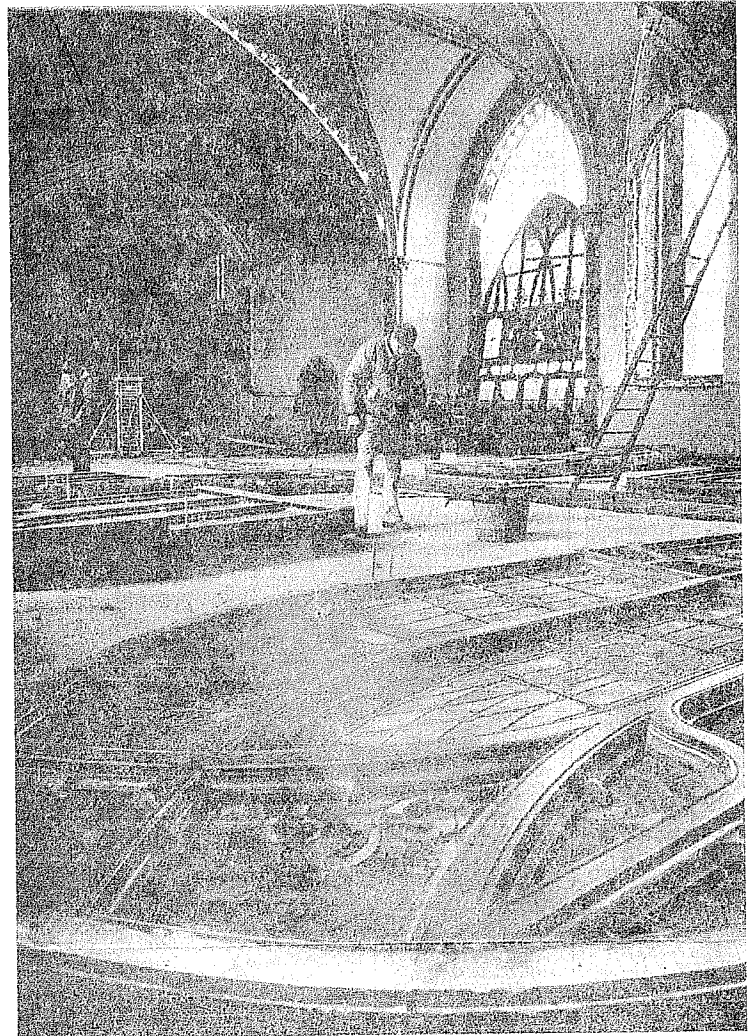
old church. The final cost for demolition was \$21,500. Northwestern removed the stained glass windows and sold them for \$4,480.²² Some items of value were salvaged.²³

Right: *Handle With Care* – by Robert Miller

“A workman checked the stained glass windows after they had been removed from the walls of St. Jacobi. The windows have been sold to antique dealers by Northwestern Wrecking Co.”

Photo and caption taken from the *Milwaukee Journal*.

Below: *The Demolition of St. Jacobi*



On June 18, 1978, the groundbreaking ceremony was held for the new church building in Greenfield. There was some stir in the community over building the new church. More than one newspaper article lamented that a 118-year-old farmhouse would be leveled to make way for the new church. There was some talk of even moving the house to preserve it.²⁴

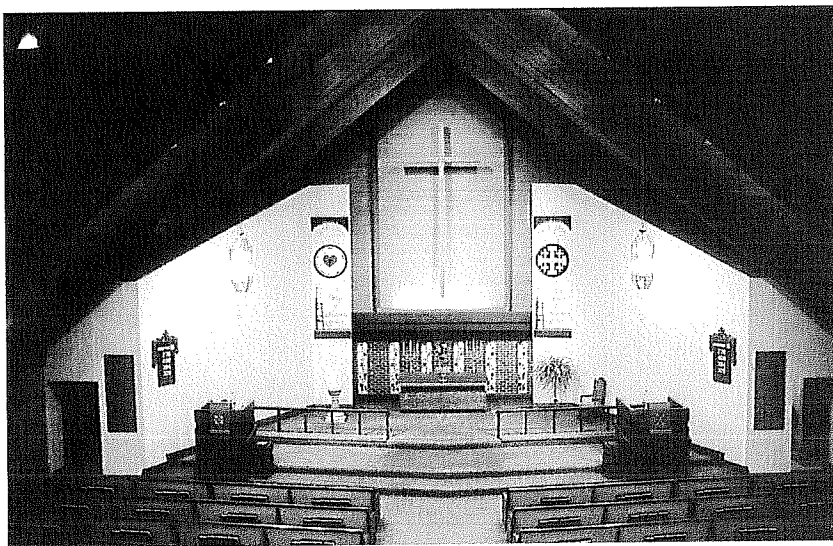
²² Paul G Eckert, *St. Jacobi Pastor's Newsletter*, 1977.

²³ These are discussed in greater detail on page X.

²⁴ George Reimann, “New Church Threatens Century-Old Residence,” *Southwest Post*, February 22, 1978. -----, “Making Way,” *Southwest Post*, July 26, 1978.

Pastor Eckert does not remember the fuss over the house. He did mention that three different St. Jacobi teachers lived in the home. The time had simply come to tear down the old home to make room for the church. There was also an old barn on the property that the local fire departments used for training exercises. The only complaints he remembers were from nearby residents who were concerned about the noise pollution that would result from the new church's bell tower.²⁵

On February 18, 1979, the cornerstones were laid for the new church. There were two corner stones, one from the old church and a new corner stone for the new church, set on opposite sides of the carport. The corner stone from the old building contained certain documents that were in very poor condition.²⁶



St. Jacobi. Greenfield - Chancel

On October 21, 1979, there were two dedication services for the new church. In the morning service Pastor Eckert preached on Psalm 127:1a using the theme, "The Lord's Building." In the afternoon service Pastor Eckert's sermon text was Psalm 90:1-2 with a theme of "Our Dwelling Place For Time And Eternity."²⁷

There is powerful symbolism in the new church. The ceiling of the church has ten arches for the Ten Commandments. There are twelve candles on each of the chandeliers that remind the

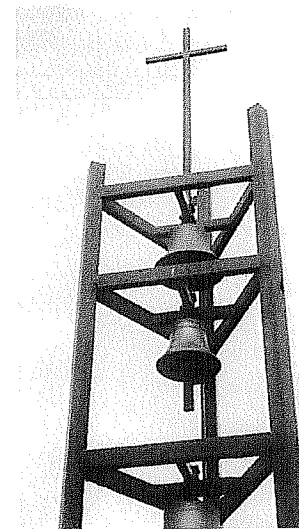
²⁵ Eckert, interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

members of God's people from the Old and New Testaments. Both the roof and bell tower have the number three in common, symbolizing our triune God.²⁸

The new building actually has more room than the old church. At 38 feet, the new ceiling is only two feet shorter than the old. The first floor measures at 7,100 square feet, the basement 3,000 square feet, and the balcony 2,500 square feet. The old church had roughly 9,100 square feet available. The practical use of space in the church, that included offices and side rooms, allows seating for about 450 people in the church as opposed to the compact seating arrangement that allowed for 850 in the old church.²⁹

There are pieces of the old church present in the new building. The only piece of stained glass that St. Jacobi saved was the church name that hung above the front door of the church. This stained piece of glass now hangs on the back wall of the basement.



St. Jacobi. Greenfield - Bell Tower

In 1906, the children of St. Jacobi congregation donated the two church bells at a cost of \$728. Each bell was inscribed with a Scripture verse in German. The top bell hanging at the new church is inscribed with Psalm 100:1, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth." The bottom bell is inscribed with Jeremiah 22:29, "O Land, Land, Land, hear the word of the Lord!" These two bells were removed from the old building and hung in the new church's bell tower on the Greenfield property. The middle bell was added in 1987.³⁰

The organ pipes were transplanted into the new church's balcony. The same baptismal font from the old church is used in the new church. The electric candles and altar cross are also

²⁷ *Dedication*, St. Jacobi Evangelical Lutheran Church, October 21, 1979, church bulletin.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *St. Jacobi Ev. Lutheran Church: 125 Years of Matchless Grace.*

being used for Sunday worship. After being fitted with a set of drawers, the old organ bench now serves as a table under the old bulletin board resting behind a glass door. Both of these are located in the back hallway on the first floor. The old hymn boards now grace opposite walls in the narthex and bear symbols of the two sacraments. The old stand used for the guest register now resides in the church basement holding the book of St. Jacobi's confirmation classes.³¹

The altar, lectern, and pulpit were saved and used for worship in the school's gym. Even though the new church was not conducive for the chancel pieces, they were not scrapped. A group of ten families from St. Jacobi purchased the chancel pieces from the congregation for \$200 and stored them in the garage of one of the families until a buyer could be found.³² The chancel pieces were appraised at \$12,000.³³

St. Marcus Lutheran church in Milwaukee was in need of new chancel pieces. When Pastor Mark Jeske from St. Marcus heard that the St. Jacobi chancel pieces were available he contacted the group of families who were storing them. On June 8, 1977, the chancel was rededicated in St. Marcus, just over twenty years from the time they were removed from St. Jacobi. The chancel pieces can now be seen every Sunday on Pastor Jeske's televised sermon address, *Time of Grace*.³⁴

III. *Continuing In The Same Worship*

Despite all of the changes St. Jacobi went through in the move from one campus to another, what was really important never changed. The mission of the congregation never changed. The mission statement reads:

³¹ Eckert, interview.

³² Gilbert Manske, interview by author, Muskego, WI, February 21, 2002.

³³ Raymond Travis, "Appraisal," Travis Auction Galleries, Inc., September 6, 1983, personal letter.

³⁴ Manske

The continuing purpose of this congregation as a gathering of Christians is to serve all people in God's world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. The primary objective of this congregation shall be to proclaim the law and the gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation (2 Tim 4:2, Lk 24:26-48), to strengthen believers in faith and sanctification through the means of grace (Rom 10:17), to equip believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses for sharing the gospel of Jesus with our fellow men (Eph 4:1).

There is a phrase often found in the bulletins at St. Jacobi, "It is better we suffer for preaching truth, than others suffer for want of our preaching truth to them." I had mistakenly thought that this was the congregation's mission statement. Pastor Eckert informed me that this phrase had been in the bulletins since he began his ministry. He is not sure where it came from, but he kept it because it eloquently states a Scriptural truth.³⁵

In fact, very little changed when St. Jacobi moved from Milwaukee to Greenfield. The forgiveness of sins is still being proclaimed in Greenfield just as it was in Milwaukee. God's people still gather on a regular basis to be fed by word and sacrament. In the grade school young hearts are filled with the Holy Spirit through daily gospel centered training. Only the location and the buildings have changed.

The question may be asked, "Was moving to Greenfield the correct decision?" Along with the answer to this question we need to be reminded that much of our lives are left up to our Christian freedom. God expects us to consider the circumstances around us as we use our freedom, always being mindful of his will for our lives. As I consider the circumstances surrounding the move of St. Jacobi, I know it was the correct decision. If St. Jacobi had not

moved, the expenses to maintain and restore the old church building would have been crippling years ago. If St. Jacobi had not moved, the congregation would have been selfishly holding onto an old building, instead of reaching out to a spiritually dead world.

Pastor Eckert said it well, “It’s the way God led, not the way I planned.”³⁶ The last lines of the responsive prayer from the final closing service sum up the move of St. Jacobi.

“For the past, dear Lord...” said Pastor Eckert.

“... We thank you,” the congregation responded.

“For the future...”

“... We trust you.”³⁷



St. Jacobi, Greenfield – Church Grounds on 125th Anniversary

³⁵ Eckert, Interview.

³⁶ Eckert, Interview.

³⁷ *The Final Closing Service*, church bulletin.

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Appendix

Questions concerning the move of St. Jacobi Lutheran Church from S. Milwaukee to Greenfield from the interview of Pastor Eckert.

- > What were some of the problems associated with the old building? (Apparently it still burned coal?)
- > Describe the role of the destruction/decay of the neighborhood surrounding the old church in the decision to move the church, (Also - no parking and residential neighborhood morphed into business area?)
- > Where did the members of the church live? (Not around the church, but in the burbs? They commuted into the city to go to church?)
- > Describe the role the relatively recent move (in 1961) of the school to the Greenfield property had on the church move in 1979.
- > If the school hadn't moved, would the church have moved?
- > The church was declared a landmark in 1972.
- > Had the church been for sale since 1969? Would it have taken \$750,000 to renovate it? Were outside interests offering to replace it with Condominiums and/or a McDonald's outlet?
- > Describe the last service in the old building, (emotions - anger/sadness?) "There have been tears over this and there will be tears, when we think of what our fathers gave us. But let us settle down where the Lord has led us." The attendance totaled 1152 people with seating for only 850!
- > How much of the old church was moved to the new church? Pews? Organ and pipes were salvaged along with the bells originally purchased in 1906 for \$728 by the school kids. The altar was actually stored in Grandpa Manske's garage until St. Marcus in the inner city purchased it. The pastor there now preaches every Sunday on TV, he hopes to soon begin a national TV ministry.
- > Was the cornerstone box opened when the old church was razed? Were any of those items placed into the edifice of the new church building?
- > Were there any struggles as the congregation transitioned to one location after holding services in two locations for twelve years?
- > Was there any controversy surrounding the building of the new church? (There was a 118 year old home on the new church property that had to get raze)
- > Under what circumstances could you foresee the church moving again in the future?
- > The LORD has truly blessed St. Jacobi. Looking back are there certain events (little or big) where you could or can now see his hand?
- > When and how was the Greenfield property purchased? Why Greenfield?
- > Was the move of the church in line w/ the mission statement and did the mission statement change when the church moved?