

An Active Giant Building on a firm Foundation

A history of St. John's, Baraboo, Wisconsin

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May 15, 1989

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Large congregations in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod sometimes receive the unfair label of being sleeping giants. However when a person traces the growth of large congregations of 1,200 or more members it becomes evident that these congregations could not have been sleeping in order to reach out to so many people. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Baraboo, Wisconsin, provides evidence that "giant" congregations are not necessarily "sleeping" congregations. Looking at how our gracious God has helped St. John's meet the challenges of the past, as well as seeing how St. John's continues to look at their future challenges will help us to see that this large congregation is living and active. Through all of their changes and all of their challenges it is important to note that St. John's of Baraboo, Wisconsin continues to build on a firm foundation.

This large congregation of nearly 2,000 baptized members (in 1988) started out with a small group of nineteen Lutheran Christians in 1873. As early as 1872, a small group of believers met for worship in the home of Mrs. Mary Platt. They had occasional services at first because they relied on traveling missionaries of the Iowa Synod to serve them. As early as 1855, the Iowa Synod had pastors serving in Madison, only thirty-five miles south of Baraboo. With the Iowa Synod's mission zeal, they quickly spread to towns north of Madison including Leland and Sauk City, Wisconsin. Pastors from Leland and Sauk City later reached out and served the Baraboo congregation during its first four years.

The nineteen members in Baraboo officially organized themselves in 1873. They adopted a temporary constitution only five paragraphs long. In this constitution, they gave the name "Evangelical Lutheran St. John's Congregation" to their newly formed group of believers. They also moved their worship services from Mrs. Platt's home to what was then called the "Institute Building on Fifth Avenue.

Their constitution made no mention of membership in the Iowa Synod or any other synod for that matter. They simply called themselves "Evangelical Lutheran." Pastors from the Iowa Synod did however, serve St. John's for their first twelve years. Pastor Rehwald, from the Iowa Synod churches in Leland and Sauk City was their first pastor in 1873. Pastor Baumbach succeeded him at Leland and Sauk City. He also conducted services in Baraboo until 1876.

With the congregation growing and with hopes of growing even more, they called Pastor E. Giesel in 1876, to serve as their first resident pastor. Pastor Giesel served St. John's from 1876 until 1880. During his years as pastor, the congregation built their first permanent church building. The newly built structure was located on Fourth Street, a few blocks east of the center of town.

On February 4, 1877, the congregation reorganized and adopted a new detailed constitution. One of the paragraphs of the new constitution included joining the Iowa Synod. Whether or not St. John's ever carried through and officially joined the Iowa Synod is unclear. Old records do show that St. John's supported the Iowa Synod with its offerings and

that Iowa Synod pastors continued to serve them for the next several years. Pastor P. Scheffelman followed Pastor Giesel in 1880. He was in turn succeeded by Pastor Johann Doerschner, who served St. John's from 1882- 1884.

During the twelve years that these Iowa Synod pastors served St. John's, the Lord blessed the congregation in many ways. The small group of believers who had gathered in the home of one of its members now had a permanent church building. They also had their own full time pastor, and had grown in number of baptized souls as well.

With pastors from the Iowa Synod, the congregation benefited from pastors who subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions. This gave them a firm foundation on which to build. Iowa Synod pastors recognized the need for doctrinal purity. The Iowa Synod also agreed with many of the conservative midwestern Lutheran bodies at that time about fellowship issues. When the Synodical Conference formed in 1872, Iowa maintained close ties with the possibility of joining the Conference.

However, during the late 1870's and continuing into the 1880's, differences in the doctrine of election became increasingly apparent between the Iowa Synod and the neighboring synods of Minnesota, Wisconsin and especially the Missouri Synod. Due to the election controversy the Norwegian Synod and the Joint Synod of Ohio left the Synodical Conference. The Iowa Synod agreed with these two synods. The gap between them and the Synodical Conference widened as a result.

During the height of the election controversy a number of tracts and pamphlets were written and circulated for lay

people. This gave the lay people an opportunity to understand the issues involved in the controversy. It is possible that the members of St. John's disagreed with the Iowa stance, and were more inclined to the position held by the Synodical Conference. This could explain why St. John's turned to the Wisconsin Synod for a pastor in 1884.

It is also possible that for one reason or other St. John's could not obtain an Iowa Synod pastor after Pastor Doerschner left. Whether for doctrinal reasons or for practical reasons, St. John's called Pastor A. F. Nicolaus to be their first Wisconsin Synod pastor in 1884. The congregation also formally joined the Wisconsin Synod at that time. Had St. John's remained in the Iowa Synod they would likely be members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America<sup>today</sup>. Their foundation would have been very unstable at best because of the ELCA's liberal approach to Scripture. However, by the grace of God St. John's has remained a member of the Wisconsin<sup>Synod</sup>, and continues to build on the firm foundation of **sola gratia, sola scriptura and sola fide.**

Pastor Nicolaus was an evangelical, mild-mannered man. He faithfully served St. John's from 1884-1887. Pastor Nicolaus was later involved in the events that led up to the Protestant Controversy. While serving St. Paul's, Fort Atkinson during the 1920's two female teachers called him a false prophet because he had allowed the congregation there to fall into spiritual decay. The Wisconsin Synod backed up Pastor Nicolaus at its 1927 convention. This leads us to conclude that Pastor Nicolaus served St. John's very early in his ministry, if not as his first assignment.

Pastor F. Popp succeeded Pastor Nicolaus in 1887. Pastor Popp served St. John's longer than the previous six pastors combined. During his years as pastor the congregation built the first parsonage on Fourth Street. Four years later, in 1898, they also celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary. In June of 1898, they held special services of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Their faithful Lord continued to shower blessings on St. John's in the years following its twenty-fifth anniversary. The congregation continued to grow. They had a membership of about 600 people. In order to meet their needs a building committee of five men was formed. Mr. Fred Kessler served as chairman of the committee, and Carl Isenberg as the secretary. They contracted Andrew Roth of La Crosse, Wisconsin as the architect. The new church building was to be located on the corner of Fifth and East Streets, a few blocks away from the first building. The congregation waited several years before they went ahead with their ambitious building project, "but decided not to build until the money was in sight" (The Baraboo Daily Republic).

Pastor Mueller was serving the congregation during those exciting days. He had succeeded Pastor Popp in 1903. Some present members of St. John's still remember attending German School with Pastor Mueller at the old church building on Fourth Street.

The Ringling Brothers contributed \$5,000 toward the building project in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. August Ringling, who were members when the congregation reorganized

in 1877. Two active ladies' groups contributed almost five thousand more dollars, while individuals in the congregation made up the other \$13,000 needed. After the congregation had saved this large portion of money necessary, they went ahead with their new plans. The cornerstone was laid on July 12, 1914. The church building was completed in February of 1915. One reporter wrote that the new church was "one of the finest finished edifices in the county- in fact," he continued, "it is hard to find any church building more beautiful" (The Baraboo Daily Republic). The nave seated approximately 400 people. The church also had a fellowship area in the basement that could seat about one hundred people for meals.

The dedication of the new building took place on February 28, 1915. The weather was beautiful for the all-day affair. A farewell service was held at the old church on Fourth Street at 9:30 that morning. The building was so full that many remained outside the church. The service was conducted in German. Since most, or possibly all of the founders of the congregation were German immigrants, the congregation had carried out its work only in German until the turn of the century. By the time of the new church, services were regularly held in both German and English. It wasn't until 1942 that the Congregation did all of its work entirely in English.

After the brief farewell service the congregation marched the few blocks to the new church. Pastor Mueller then conducted the first part of the second service on the steps of the new church building. Pastor Mueller then unlocked the door to continue the service inside the new building. Former pastor,

Aug. F. Nicolaus of Fort Atkinson preached the sermon. Two more services were held later that day. Former pastor F. Popp preached in English at the afternoon service. The closing service was conducted in German at 7:30 in the evening. The churches were filled to capacity at all four services. Meals were also provided between the services. Nearly 1,000 people were fed at the two meals.

The people appreciated all of the work that Pastor Mueller did to prepare for the special services. Pastor Mueller continued to serve St. John's faithfully until 1922. On Sunday, April 23, Pastor Mueller died suddenly. He had conducted services and a meeting that morning, but was called to his eternal rest later that afternoon.

After a vacancy of more than six months, Pastor G. Pieper accepted a call to serve St. John's. In June of the following year, 1923, the congregation celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Membership had grown to approximately 600 communicants and about 850 total souls.

Soon after the fiftieth anniversary, and only twelve years after the new church building, St. John's felt the need for a christian day school. They purchased the lot to the east of the church on Fifth Street. There they built a two-story building with two classrooms, an auditorium and a kitchen. The new school building cost exceeded \$30,000.

The enrollment at the school grew in leaps and bounds before the first class was even taught. Because the congregation had projected an enrollment of 50 students, they called only one teacher. Mr. E. W. Ebert was called as the



principal as well as the only teacher. However, when eighty students enrolled on opening day, September 7, 1926, a second teacher was immediately called. A third teacher was added the following year when enrollment reached ninety. The enrollment remained close to 100 for the next twenty years. Mr. Ebert served as principal those twenty years until his death in 1946.

In the late summer of 1928, Pastor Pieper accepted a call to St. Peter's in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. A few months later Pastor Herbert C. Kirchner accepted the call to St. John's. Pastor Kirchner served St. John's for the next 30 years.

The first few years after Pastor Kirchner arrived at Baraboo were difficult years for the congregation. Like other churches throughout the country, they too, struggled through the depression years. The congregation had purchased the house next to the school to serve as the teacherage for Mr. Ebert. The congregation also did some redecorating and remodeling of the church auditorium and basement. The various organizations in the congregation used their God-given talents to do a large portion of the work.

Prior to the seventy-fifth anniversary in 1948, the congregation made efforts to pay off some of their debts. God blessed their efforts and they liquidated their debts on the parsonage, the teacherage and the school building.

<sup>New</sup> → By June of 1948, St. John's was eager to celebrate their seventy-fifth anniversary. While there was little in the way of building projects since their fiftieth anniversary, God had blessed the congregation to more than double in size.

Communicant members numbered 1,353, and overall there were about 1,850 souls. Its difficult to determine exactly what helped the increase in membership. The Christian day school, now in its twenty-second year of operation may have attracted young families who wanted a good Christian education. The population of Baraboo was also on the increase at that time, and undoubtedly members thankful for their church reached out to others in the town.

The congregation celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary with festival services on June 6, 9, 13, 1948. Pastor G. Pieper accepted the invitation to return as a guest speaker. In addition the congregation was proud to have two sons of the congregation, Pastor A. Bartz and Pastor Lyle Koenig, return for the festive occasion. In gratitude for all the blessings they had received the congregation thoroughly renovated the parsonage and added an office to the first floor of the building.

With this large of a congregation many organizations were formed at St. John's. This gave the members in the congregation an opportunity to use their God-given talents in works of service as well as to grow in their faith. The "Naehverein," the women's sewing circle was one of the earliest organizations. It continues to exist today as the Ladies' Aid Society. In order to provide more opportunities for the women of the congregation to interact seven Divisions, or women's groups were formed. Each group had between eight and fifteen women. An eighth group was added later. The eight groups minister to needs of the church at large as well as to members within

the congregation. The Ladies' Aid Society also supports the Lutheran Women's Mission Society of the Wisconsin Synod. Many women serve the congregation on the Altar Guild as well as on the Flower Committee.

The congregation has ~~also~~ provided opportunities for the youth in the congregation as well. Besides the Young People's Society, a 4-H Club was organized in 1961. Because Baraboo has always been a farming community, the 4-H Club was very popular. In 1952, the Junior Rifle Club was organized under the supervision of Mr. Kenneth Church. This organization provided young christian children with the opportunity to learn how to handle firearms responsibly.

Besides having the opportunity to serve the congregation on the Church Council, the School Board, the Finance Committee, and the usher committee, the men of the congregation had opportunity for social activities especially in the St. John's Men's Bowling League. Prior to this Bowling League, there were only a couple of lanes in the entire town. The League at St. John's became so popular that it did not take long before a bowling alley was built in town.

The decade 1950-1960 saw many other changes. In 1951, the congregation bought a mimeograph machine. This enabled the pastor to publish the Sunday bulletin each week for the worship services. The thirty-eight year old church was renovated and the balcony was remodeled. Because of the growing demands on the pastor of a congregation this size, pulpit assistance was sought for Pastor Kirchner. In 1955, the congregation asked Pastor R. C. Horlamus, the Institutional

pastor at Madison, to help with communion services and to preach at least once a month. Pastor Holamus assisted in this way until 1968.

After a virtual standstill in the school's enrollment for nearly twenty years, there had been a steady growth between 1950 and 1955. In fact, in only three short years enrollment increased from 124 students to 200. Two more teachers were added at this time increasing the staff to six. Twenty-nine more students enrolled within the next two years. The school had already done everything possible to make new rooms to fit all of the students. It had been built to hold only 150 students. The school even had to obtain permission from the Industrial Commission to use the basement as a temporary classroom. The latest influx of new students made it obvious that something would have to be done to accommodate the large enrollment. Three different men served as principal of the schools during this transition stage. Mr. Henry Lange, a candidate of theology, served as acting principal during Mr. Ebert's lengthy illness in 1946. Mr. Lester Raabe followed him, serving from 1946-1950. In 1950, Mr. Adair Moldenhauer accepted the call to serve as principal. He stayed at St. John's for the next twenty-five years.

The committee in charge of finding a solution to the problem came up with a plan to add four rooms to the front of the school. The congregation accepted these plans. However, before any of the preliminaries began for construction, a piece of property known as the Second Ward School site became available. The property was less than two blocks east of the

present school. After a thorough examination of the situation, the congregation purchased the site in March of 1956, for \$25,000. Committees then began the work of trying to build the best possible school at a reasonable price. The congregation accepted plans to build a school with nine rooms and a gymnasium-auditorium. The estimated cost was \$285,000.

The members of this "giant" congregation devoted themselves to building the new school so that God's lambs would continue to receive a Christian education. More than 200 members were directly involved in committees or in helping in the actual building itself. The rest of the congregation actively participated through generous offerings. They recognized the blessings they received from the school. They responded by paying off the 20-year \$220,000 loan in just thirteen years.

The school was completed in January, 1959. The children then carried their books and other materials from their old building to the new building on February 9, 1959. The dedication of the school was held off until graduation services that summer on June 14.

Only a few months prior to the completion of the building Pastor Kirchner announced his retirement effective January 1, 1959. With the help of God, Pastor Kirchner served St. John's longer than any previous pastor. The congregation then extended a call to Pastor E. G. Toepel and installed him as pastor on January 18, 1959. *Pastor Toepel continues to serve St. John's at this time.*

During the few years the congregation added a few more opportunities to promote growth in Christian knowledge. In 1960, a Vacation Bible School was added to the congregation's

program of Christian education. This provided opportunity for outreach as well as for strengthening the Christian education of the children already in the congregation. In 1962, a church Library was established to give christians of all ages the opportunity to grow in their faith. In May of 1962, the congregation increased its Sunday service schedule to include a third opportunity for worship.

The next major event in the congregation was the celebration of the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1963. Pastor Lyle Koenig, a son of the congregation accepted the invitation to preach for the three morning services. Pastor Pieper had confirmed him at St. John's on April 1, 1928. Another son of the congregation, Mr. John Jenswold served as organist for the festive services. He was in the confirmation class of 1946. The anniversary services were held on June 9, 1963. The 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary pamphlet indicated that the anniversary offerings were "to flow into the already established Church remodeling fund" (Toepel, "Ninety Years of God's Grace"). It was hoped that this fund would make it possible for the church to be remodeled on the occasion of its Centennial Anniversary. A thorough renovation was needed. The church which seated 400 now had a membership of 2,259, of which 1,617 were confirmed.

Many valuable changes were made in the decade preceeding the Centennial celebration. The office of Parish Secretary was established in January of 1963, to "increase the efficiency of the congregation's entire operation" (Toepel, "The Heritage of the Past," p.23). Steps were also taken to help improve

the stewardship principles. Every Member Visitations as well as participation in Synod recommended stewardship-growth programs helped members to do just that.

The Church Council appointed a radio committee in October, 1967. On January 14, 1968, the first "live" service from St. John's was broadcast over radio station WBOO. Services continue to be broadcast today. These broadcasts helped meet the needs of the growing number of shut-ins who were no longer able to attend the services. The broadcast also reached out to people in a sixty mile radius from Baraboo.

After Pastor Horlamus stopped assisting the pastor in 1968, St. John's turned to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for help. Ralph Waak served as the first vicar of the congregation in 1969. The congregation has continued in this important part of the seminary training program to this present day. Twenty young men have benefited from serving at St. John's.

In the meantime, the church remodeling committee had found numerous areas that needed remodeling. In spite of the addition of a third worship service every Sunday, many people had to sit in the basement and listen to the service over the PA system. The church office was shared by the janitor, the Flower Committee, the Altar Guild, Finance Committee, ushers and the pastor. The pastor also had an office for during the week in his home. However, the Parish Secretary shared that office. During counseling situations the secretary would leave the office and wait in the pastor's living room.

As a result of the excessive needs to remodel the congregation had a special meeting on November 8, 1970. The

congregation voted to drop plans to remodel. Instead the congregation decided to pursue plans to build a new church. The Master Plan Committee went to work on the new plans immediately. Plans for a contemporary church were approved by the congregation. The new church was to provide a seating capacity of close to 700 worshippers. It would also have a fellowship area which could seat 300 people for various occasions.

This "giant" of a congregation ambitiously went to work on the new church building. The project was estimated to cost the congregation well over \$700,000. A three-phase funding program was put into effect to help the congregation meet this challenge. Phase I was called "Mission Impossible." "It was an 'instant money' program with a goal of \$300,000" (Toepel, "The Heritage of the Past," p.23). This program was to be completed by the end of 1972. The second phase was a two-year pledge program with the goal of \$150,000. The additional \$160,000 needed for the balance would be borrowed and then be repaid through a ten-year payment program through the Unified Budget. Although the cost exceeded the estimate of more than \$700,000, the "giant" congregation met the challenge and was able to burn the mortgage in a special service in the summer of 1984.

Prior to the commencement of the building project, the congregation celebrated its Centennial Anniversary. Special services of thanksgiving were held on March 11, April 8, May 13, and June 10, 1973. God had again blessed the congregation in an increased membership. There were now 1,825 communicants



and a total of more than 2,450 souls. The Lord had again given the increase.

Another challenge faced the congregation during the building project. The last time that the congregation rebuilt, in 1914, they were able to use the old building until the new one was completed. This time, however, the new church was to be built on the same location as the old one. Arrangements were made to hold worship services for the next year or so in the school's gymnasium-auditorium. Some weddings were also held at this temporary location. More often neighboring churches allowed St. John's couples to use their facilities.

Before the old church was torn down many of the furnishings from inside were removed. A large portion of the altar area along with the communion rail was stored away for the time being. After the fellowship area of the new building was completed the altar was placed in it. The congregation even held some worship services in the fellowship area while the worship area was being completed.

Pews were also removed from the old church. A number of the beautiful pews would later be used in the balcony of the new church. A number of members also made contributions and took some of the old smaller pews. A few members still have these pews in their homes. <sup>New</sup> The new building was completed in the early spring of 1975. Dedication services were held on April 27, 1975. While contemporary in design, the architecture of the new building reflected sound doctrine. The octagonal design of the building "is an age-old symbol for regeneration, for the new birth which the Holy Spirit works

in our hearts" (Toepel, "Dedication," p.4). The worship area is unicameral, instead of being divided into a nave and chancel. "This oneness of the Worship Area emphasizes 'the universal priesthood'" (Toepel, "Dedication," p.4). The baptismal font, the Pulpit/lectern and the altar are all triangular shaped making a confession in the one triune God. (Such a statement is important in Baraboo because of the prevalence of lodges <sup>in the community</sup>). The pews are also arranged in such a manner that the focal point of the worshippers is on the means of grace. The architects of the beautiful edifice, the Bowan Kanazawa Partnership of Madison, have received awards for their work.

Although membership has declined in the last decade or so, this "giant" congregation continues to make efforts to reclaim "lost" members, as well as to reach out to the unchurched. In 1987, the congregation voted to call a second pastor. In May of that year, Pastor Daniel Balge was assigned as the first assistant pastor. The congregation also continued with the vicar program, contributing to the training of young pastors, and giving the two pastors more time to carry out their many duties. The congregation has also accepted the School Board's recommendation to call another teacher for the 1989-1990 school year. This will increase the school staff to eleven full-time teachers.

By God's grace, St. John's congregation of Baraboo, Wisconsin, has not become a sleeping giant. Although it has ~~had to build~~ three churches and two school buildings to serve all of its people, the congregation has always <sup>met</sup> ~~taken~~ this challenge. By the grace of God, they met the financial demands

of these endeavors, often reducing their loans and even repaying them early.

The members of St. John's also continued to remember the needs of the church at large as well. In spite of large debts due to the new school built in 1959, and the church in 1975, this large group of believers has sent more than one million dollars to support the work of the Wisconsin Synod since 1965.

The congregation has also had to struggle with the issue of lodge membership which has surfaced from time-to-time. Through this and other struggles the Lord has continued to bless St. John's. More than 400 adults have completed confirmation classes since 1965. The congregation has also made efforts to reach out through its radio ministry, and as recent as 1987, started broadcasting services on <sup>cable</sup> television in the surrounding towns. The many organizations also have provided members of the congregation to take an active part in the universal priesthood.

By the grace of God this giant congregation has not fallen asleep. At the same time no one is ready to admit that there isn't room to grow in their efforts at home as well as in their efforts to the rest of the world. Only then would this congregation, or any other congregation for that matter, truly be sleeping. Tracing the growth of St. John's and the way in which God has continued to help these believers meet their challenges is reason enough for anyone to think twice before referring to larger congregations as "sleeping giants." As long as the believers at St. John's Baraboo continue to build on Christ, their firm foundation, the Holy Spirit will see to

it that this "giant" of a congregation, along with every other WELS congregation, remains awake and busy at work until the the Lord returns!

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