

A History of St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran
Church and School
(1965-2002)

Church History 331
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"It is only by the grace of God that we made it this far." Perhaps this statement might ring hollow in the ears of some that consider it to be overused as individuals and congregations reflect on their religious and personal lives. Yet that opening statement most clearly summarizes a basic fact of ministry. Christians can canvass an area, conduct demographic surveys, study neighborhood trends and plan the most intense ministry plan ever conceived. But, if it is not God's will that their efforts and planning result in a congregation, no congregation will emerge.

God saw fit to allow a group of believers to establish and maintain St. Mark Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church and School in Brown Deer, WI. The Lord grew St. Mark from an initial meeting of several souls that gathered in an Episcopal church building (located a couple of blocks south of its current location) into a long established congregation that peaked at over 300 members in the mid 1980's. Today, thirty-seven years later, St. Mark remains as a group of 215 souls. This history follows the evidence of God's grace with which God blessed St. Mark, its pastors, teachers and faithful members as they all together pursued God's Great Commission for them to make disciples with the means of grace.

"In January of 1964, at the suggestion of the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board, the project of canvassing the Brown Deer area was brought to the students of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary¹," and the mission began. It is only by the grace of God that the annual Epiphany Mission Seminar at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary headed by Chairman John Henning eventually revealed a mission opportunity

¹ "Our Heritage: A Brief History of Saint Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church". Qt. in St. Mark Member Handbook.

in the Brown Deer area. The following summer, Seminarian Keith Roehl conducted follow up calls in the area canvassed by the seminarians.²

The Mission Board and Vicar Roehl uncovered a unique area tucked in between the sprawling city of Milwaukee (Milwaukee County) to the south and the area of Mequon/Thiensville to the north. Charter member, Mr. Duane Kuehl, recalls how the landscape of the area changed around the end of WWII. He remembers how prior to WWII the area looked much like any other small town in the rural Midwest. At that time, the Brown Deer area consisted of a few buildings erected at the crossroads of what is now Green Bay Road and Brown Deer Road. There were no subdivisions, streetlights, sidewalks or busy streets. In fact, those circumstances and conditions drew people from Milwaukee's north side to the area.

The sheer number of people moving from the inner city to the north side of Milwaukee caused an out migration from Milwaukee County to the Brown Deer area. In the 1950's Brown Deer incorporated to offer what people in the city were looking for--an escape from the city. The village's rural feel, with the conveniences of the city not too far off, brought younger families to the scene (these young families with grade school age children would play a major role in the scope and direction of the outreach effort). After WWII Brown Deer was a quickly developing, fast growing and successful village.

In addition to its physical development, Brown Deer also was unique in its church development. The WELS had already established congregations around the area but not in the area. To the north were Calvary Thiensville, Trinity South Mequon and Trinity Freistadt (LCMS). To the west were Salem and Redemption. And to the south was St. John's on Good Hope. Situated in the middle of these congregations was a void created

² This information is recorded in the historical records of St. Mark in, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

by people moving just outside of Milwaukee. The ^fPeople living in Brown Deer were just too far north to be served by St. John's, Salem, or Redemption. They were also not quite far enough north to be served by Trinity South Mequon or Calvary Thiensville either. Eventually the Missouri Synod Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Roman Catholic Church all established a presence in the area. The WELS however lacked a presence in the sprouting suburb that was comprised of younger families with school aged or younger children. Both the churched and unchurched among these people were interested in quality education for their children.³

This was the area and the situation Vicar (of the District Mission Board) Keith Roehl was commissioned to explore in the summer of 1965. The Lord greatly blessed his efforts and in September of that same year Vicar Roehl invited interested Christians in the area to attend an organizational meeting. He wrote:

Dear Interested Christians,

The mission calls, which I made during the past month in your area on behalf of the District Mission Board, were received with an encouraging amount of interest and enthusiasm. Definitely Brown Deer has a need for a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church and Christian Day School. The District Mission Board is eager to do what it can to make this mission a reality. Therefore a general meeting of all interested families is scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 9, 1965 at 7:30 p.m. The place of meeting will be in the basement of St. Martins Episcopal Church, North 60th and Dean Rd. . . . Also bring along any other interested Christian whom I may not have contacted, for I am sure that the list of names and addresses which I had were by no means complete.⁴

That meeting was held in St. Martin's church building on September 9, 1965.

The first meeting determined the urgency with which a mission needed to be established. The need for a Lutheran Elementary School also continued to receive

³ Information from an interview conducted with Mr. Duane Kuehl, April 15, 2002 (e.g. Hereafter cited as Kuehl, D.).

⁴ Correspondence from Vicar Roehl, September 2, 1965, St. Mark Church records.

special attention. Both these views were expressed in a follow-up letter written by Vicar Myrl Wagenknecht who replaced Vicar Roehl. (Vicar Roehl recognized his responsibility to also serve his people in the Grafton area so he solicited the help of other seminarians including Vicar Wagenknecht.) The flavor of his letter to the group that gathered for the September ninth meeting reflects the enthusiasm of the people who attended, the unique nature of this mission opportunity, and the urgency on the part of the mission board to act in the area as soon as possible:

Dear Fellow Christians,

Several interested Lutheran Christians in the Brown Deer area attended an informational meeting this last week. Everyone present was heartily in favor of beginning worship services immediately in the area, so that a Christian congregation of the Wisconsin Synod might be formed as soon as possible. It was also their desire that this congregation should be formed with the idea of establishing a Christian Day School, since there is none in this area. Therefore, they recommended that the Mission Board proceed with the purchase of an available 3-acre plot of land located at about 8600 N. 60th, because it is most centrally located for school purposes.

Since this mission project has top priority for financial assistance from the Synod, it was felt that the congregation should be formed immediately. Worship services have been set to begin this coming Sunday, Sept. 26, 1965 at 9:30a.m. in the Brown Deer Village Hall, located at 8200 N. 60th St. The Mission Board will provide a portable organ, hymnals, a lectern, and other altar articles. The services will be conducted by senior students from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon.

You are cordially invited to join your fellow Christians in regular worship here and to support this endeavor with your presence and with your personal interest. As we join other Christians to bring the Gospel message into your neighborhood, we hope to see you at our first service this Sunday . . . Please pass this invitation and information on to your friends in the Brown Deer area. Thank you.

Yours in Christ,
Myrl Wagenknecht⁵

This group of "interested Lutheran Christians" clearly saw this as an opportunity to carry out God's Great Commission in their neighborhood. Their main mission tool

would be their Lutheran Elementary School (LES). An LES would supply Brown Deer with a school that would fit the educational need of the local families as well as fill a need the WELS had in this area. The time was right. The situation was right. The people were excited and ready. So the Mission Board responded with its support.

Thus a congregation was formed. The name for this new congregation was chosen by the congregation and stated in a worship folder for December 5, 1965 with the following explanation included:

ST. MARK, the Evangelist, wrote His Gospel for the Romans. He stressed the power and glory of Jesus to a people who were proud of their own power and glory. His words are fitting for our age, which also is beset with confidence in their glory. St. Mark's symbol is the winged lion, a sign of power. May our congregation always proclaim the Gospel of Christ, God's power unto salvation. In a meeting on November 30th, the name for our mission church was selected. Spelled out in full we are "St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church."⁶

On December 12, 1965, with the assistance of attorney, Ernst Von Briesen, the congregation was incorporated under Wisconsin law. The original incorporators were: Harold Hacker, Harvey Hacker, Duane Kuehl, Obed Scheer and Myrl Wagenknecht."⁷

The years that followed proved to be exciting for her members. Under the guidance and direction of Vicar Wagenknecht St. Mark applied for membership into the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in March of 1966 with the following letter:"

St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized with four families in November of 1965. We decided to adopt the form constitution as published by Northwestern Publishing House of Milwaukee. In December, papers of incorporation were signed to incorporate under the laws of the state of Wisconsin. St. Mark is under the guidance of the District Mission Board of the Southeastern Wisconsin District.

⁵ Correspondence from Vicar Wagenknecht, September 24, 1965, St Mark Church records.

⁶ This information is recorded in the worship folder for the Second Sunday in Advent, Dec. 5, 1965. Author unknown.

⁷ This information is recorded in the historical records of St. Mark in, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

We are writing to you to request membership in the Southeastern Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Respectfully Submitted,
H. Hacker, Secretary
St. Mark Ev. Luth. Church⁸

Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, President of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, replied to their request on March 11, 1966:

I am very happy to receive this request from your congregation, and you will be received as members of our Synod, through the Southeastern District, at the next convention, scheduled for June 21st to 23rd, at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee . . . Wishing you the Lord's richest blessings in your congregational life, and welcoming you most cordially into membership with our District, I am

Respectfully yours,
Adolph C. Buenger, President⁹

Following the aforementioned District Convention Professor Heinrich J. Vogel, Secretary of the Southeastern Wisconsin District, replied:

Dear Brethren,
Today the Southeastern Wisconsin District officially received your congregation into its membership and thereby also made you members of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod.
We are happy to include your congregation among the many associated with us in our District and Synod and welcome you into our midst.
May the Lord grant your young congregation very soon an adequate house of worship and steady solid growth, so that we may continue to proclaim the Word of our God at home and abroad.

Sincerely,
The Southeastern Wisconsin District
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Heinrich J. Vogel Secretary¹⁰

Throughout these initial meetings, congregational letters and synodical responses, the goal and aim of this effort remained joining "other Christians to bring the Gospel message into your neighborhood" (Vicar Wagenknecht) and "that we may continue to

⁸ Correspondence from St. Mark Lutheran Church, March 4, 1966, St. Mark Records.

⁹ Correspondence from President Buenger, March 11, 1966, St. Mark Records.

proclaim the Word of our God at home and abroad" (Prof. Vogel). By God's grace alone a congregation was now established to do just that--preach the gospel. The following were the charter members of St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church:

Mr. and Mrs. Obed Scheer	Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ellis
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Karsteadt	Miss Rita Ellis
Pastor and Mrs. Theodore Olsen	Mr. Ralph Klabunde
Mr. Elmer Hacker	Mr. and Mrs. Fred Karsten
Mr. Harvey Hacker	Mr. and Mrs. Duane Kuehl
Mr. Harold Hacker	Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Maio
Miss Viola Hacker	Mrs. Lois Doss
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Schlatterer	Mr. and Mrs. Warren Lenz
Pastor and Mrs. Walter Kleinke	Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Colwell

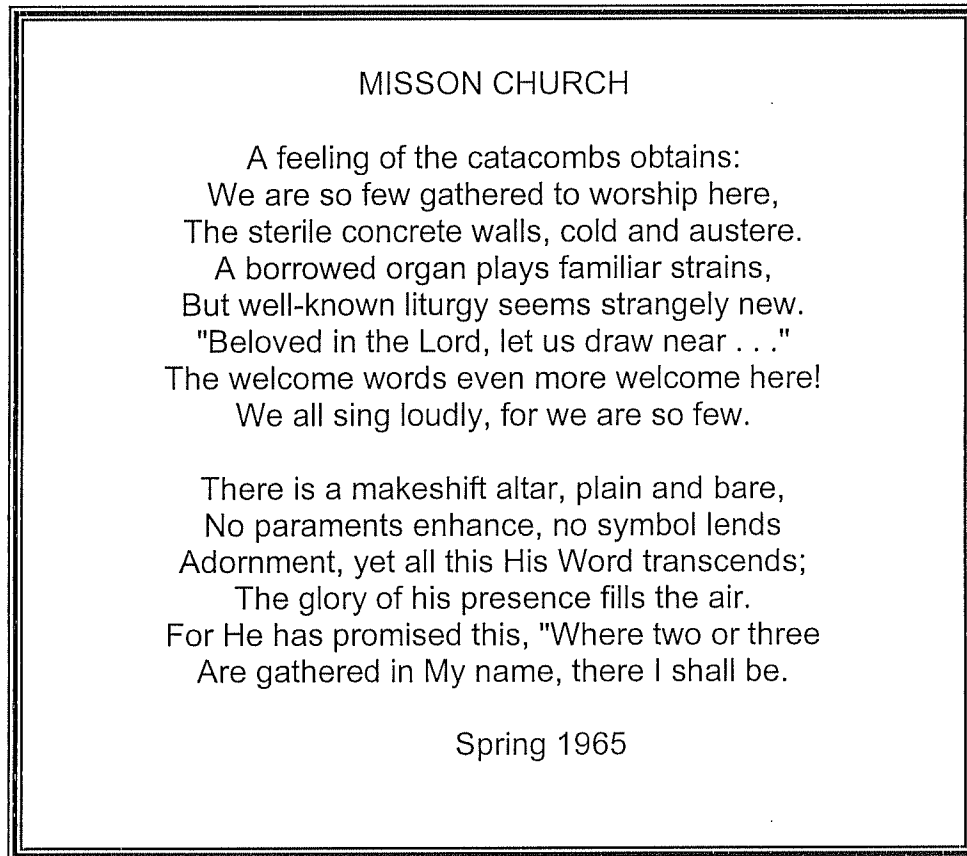
The first worship service, as mentioned earlier, was held on September 26, 1965 in the Brown Deer Village Hall. The service time was set for 10 a.m. with Sunday school before worship at 9 a.m. The congregation rented the facility at a cost of \$5.00 per week. Twenty-four people were in attendance.¹¹

Among those twenty-four was Mr. Duane Kuehl, a charter member of the congregation. He remembers the efforts many put forward to make worship possible. "Many gave of their time to set up and take down the items necessary for worship. Members were responsible for brining the altar, candelabra, the cross, hymnals, and even the organ." St. Mark and Vicar Wagenknecht (who also had responsibilities as a full-time student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary) were greatly helped by unnamed students from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary who assisted by preaching sermons and conducting Bible studies. Although not always the most convenient, or a facility the

¹⁰ Correspondence from Heinrich J. Vogel, June 22, 1966, St. Mark Records.

¹¹ This information is recorded in the historical records of St. Mark in, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

members of St. Mark could call their own, the worship setting was sufficient. The people were truly happy and thankful to have a place where they could gather together around God's Word. This attitude of contentment was recorded and preserved by Mrs. Jean Kuehl with these words:



The next stage of ministry began when St. Mark received a full time pastor from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's assignment committee in April of 1966. Prior to that assignment, via a written correspondence the congregation petitioned the assignment committee to permanently assign Vicar Wagenknecht to St. Mark. The charter members expressed their deep appreciation for all his hard work, had confidence he knew the area and the necessary work to be done, and they fully trusted him with the

care of their congregation and their own souls. A few brief excerpts from that April 1966 letter demonstrate the congregation's confidence in Vicar Wagenknecht:

The gains we have made thus far since we organized, have come about, we are sure, with the Lord's help and the capable guidance of Vicar Wagenknecht . . . There remains a tremendous amount of work to be done here . . . We feel that we should have a full time, energetic young man who cannot only supply the congregation with their spiritual requirements but one who is untiring and willing to do the necessary mission work. To our way of thinking, Vicar Myrl Wagenknecht, is this type of man . . . he has worked diligently and devotedly with us to help bring about those things which in a few short months we have accomplished. He has the respect and admiration of each and every member of the congregation.¹²

Clearly the members of St. Mark desired Vicar Wagenknecht's return to their services. However as both Mr. Duane Kuehl and former pastor of St. Mark, Rev. George Rothe, remarked, the Holy Spirit through the assignment committee did a great job and assigned the perfect man for the job, Pastor Theodore Olsen.

In May of 1966, Pastor Olsen accepted the call issued to him by the assignment committee to serve the twenty-three souls of St. Mark Brown Deer. Since at the time St. Mark lacked a permanent worship facility, Pastor Olsen was installed at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary chapel on Sunday, July 20, 1966 at 2 p.m. The reception was held outside the chapel in the courtyard of the Seminary.

Pastor Olsen is described as the perfect man for the job. He was "a fresh worker, very outgoing, a man who brought a lot of enthusiasm, a very solid young man who could relate to young families and was very much in to adult Bible study." In addition he was married to a wonderful outgoing wife who brought with her the priceless ability to play the organ.¹³ The church council wasted no time. On July 1, 1966 St.

¹² Correspondence from St. Mark, April 1, 1966, St. Mark Records.

¹³ Kuehl, D and Historical Records of St. Mark in, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

Mark invited Mrs. Olsen to be their organist: "The church council has recently learned of the fact that you (Mrs. Olsen) are a very talented organist and we would like to extend to you an invitation to be our organist on a full time basis. Do to the size of our congregation we are presently paying \$3.00 per service."¹⁴

A major physical change took place for St. Mark during the service of Pastor Olsen. In the summer of 1966 the congregation pursued the construction of a combination chapel and school complex on a piece of property located at N. 60th and Wabash Ave. (the District Mission Board had previously purchased this land). Although at the time the Mission Board rarely allowed a congregation to start with an education facility before a worship facility, the Mission Board approved St. Mark's request and a groundbreaking service was held on November 13, 1966. A record number of 85 people gathered to witness the event. On June 11, 1967, the new facility was dedicated. Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, President of the Southeastern Wisconsin District and Professor Irwin Habeck of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were the guest speakers.¹⁵

The new building served two purposes. First, it provided a permanent worship facility for the members of St. Mark. Second, it provided a facility to fill the need for Christian education both among its members and among the community in general. Since St. Mark was originally pursued with childhood education as a primary emphasis, the new building marked an opportunity for St. Mark to serve the area in its unique and specialized way.

¹⁴ Correspondence from St. Mark, July 1, 1966, St. Mark Records.

¹⁵ This information is recorded in the historical records of St. Mark in, "Twenty-Five Years of Grace."

WELS Lutherans that moved into the area from northern Milwaukee were faced with a dilemma—where to send their children to school. Mr. Duane Kuehl and his family moved to the area from Garden Homes in Milwaukee. Initially the children of WELS families in the area were able to take advantage of an independent bussing service that would bus children to Thiensville. These children could then attend Calvary, Thiensville, the only WELS Lutheran Elementary School in the vicinity. When this bussing service discontinued parents either sent their children to public schools, sent them back to the Milwaukee area schools, or made other arrangements for their children to attend other Lutheran schools to the north such as Calvary. (Society was not as mobile in the 1960's as it presently is. That meant transporting children from Brown Deer to Thiensville daily was not the easy jaunt it is today).

Under the supervision of Pastor Olsen, who served as the principal for St. Mark Lutheran Grade School, the congregation moved to call its first full time teacher. On May 10, 1967, the congregation called through the assignment committee, Miss Doris Heidtke to teach grades K-4. On June 6, 1967, Miss Heidtke replied to St. Mark:

Dear St. Mark Lutheran Church,
I have received the Call from the Assignment Committee to teach kindergarten through four at your congregation. I herewith accept the Call, and, with the help of God, will fulfill my duties to the best of my ability. I ask for the prayers of the pastor and of the members of St. Mark so that my work may be done to the glory of God and to the welfare of His kingdom.

I am looking forward to serving your congregation and am anxious to train God's little ones by means of the Gospel and in the spirit of the Gospel.

Yours in Christ Jesus,
Doris Heidtke¹⁶

The Lord immediately blessed the Christian education efforts of St. Mark with 16 children in the 1967-1968 school year. "In the spring of 1968 the first confirmation took

¹⁶ Correspondence from Miss Doris Heidtke, June 6, 1967, St. Mark Records.

place. The confirmands were Ronald Colwell and Steven Lenz. St. Mark also utilized the talents of Mrs. Olsen by calling her to teach kindergarten in 1968.¹⁷ In June of 1970, the first graduation from St. Mark Christian Day School took place. The first graduates were: Scott Cooper, Christian Karstaedt, and Karla Kuehl."

From the beginning the school functioned as a powerful evangelism tool. As parents shared information about their school with their young neighbors enrolment rapidly increased. Although initial canvassing stopped after the school began, individual members informally encouraged their friends and neighbors to bring their children to the school. Through this informal evangelism program, St. Mark Lutheran Church reached out to the community, met the education needs of the community, and served the needy members of the community with the Gospel.¹⁸

In 1970, St. Mark experienced another change when Pastor Olsen accepted a call to serve the Lord at Doctor Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN. Professor John Jeske, of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, served as the vacancy pastor through early May of 1971. "On May 2, 1971, Pastor George Rothe, formerly of Bismark, North Dakota, was installed as pastor of St. Mark by Professor Jeske."¹⁹

In that same year, 1970, St. Mark developed a Long-Range Planning Committee composed of Ronald Colwell, Harold Hacker, and Duane Kuehl. They discussed the need for an expanded facility. Initially the education/worship facility was erected to eventually serve as a four-room education facility. Two of the four classrooms served as the worship area for the congregation. The growth of the school soon necessitated the expansion of the school into all four rooms. "(The Committee studied) the need for

¹⁷ Call acceptance letter from Mrs. Joanne Olsen, September 7, 1968, St. Mark Records.

¹⁸ Kuehl, D. and interview with Pastor George Rothe, April 16, 2002 (e.g. Hereafter cited as Rothe, G.).

a permanent worship facility and fellowship space, and (met) to determine the financial feasibility of constructing these facilities as needed."²⁰

St. Mark, through the Mission Board, purchased a parsonage in the summer of 1968. The parsonage was (and is today) located at 6241 W. Ester Place. The purchase of the teacherage located at 8613 N. 60th Street also serves as a testimony to the presence St. Mark Lutheran Grade School had in the neighborhood. A widower owned the teacherage located across the parking lot to the south of the worship/education facility. Initially he was upset with the building project, the school, as well as the children they brought into his neighborhood. Needless to say he was not interested in selling his house and his land to the church. After watching the manner in which Miss. Heidtke handled the children, and the good behavior of the children, Miss. Heidtke, the children, and St. Mark grew on this individual. The owner made arrangements with his family to sell his house and his lot to the church when he passed away.²¹

During the ministry of Pastor Rothe, St. Mark ventured into another building program, the construction of the proposed permanent worship and fellowship facilities. The members of the building committee who headed up the venture were Mr. Ronald Colwell, Mr. Harold Hacker, and Mr. Duane Kuehl. In May of 1974 the congregation was granted permission by the Mission Board to proceed by securing the services of an architect to prepare the initial planning. In August of 1975, the congregation received permission to build a church building of approximately 4,300 square feet. The groundbreaking service was held on September 14, 1975 and the building was

¹⁹ St. Mark Historical Records.

²⁰ Ibid.

dedicated with a service of worship on Sunday, May 23, 1976 at 10:00 a.m. Pastors Adolph C. Buenger and Oscar J. Naumann served as the speakers in the morning and afternoon services respectively. Members of the church council at that time were: Rev. George Rothe, Mr. Harold Krantz, Mr. John Raffensperger, Mr. Allen Heckendorf, Mr. Harold Hacker, Mr. John Schroeder, and Mr. Robert Becher.²²

In June of 1976, St. Mark graduated three members of its inaugural kindergarten class of 1967. Those students were Brian Adams, Lisa Kuehl, and Bruce Scheer. "Pastor Theodore Olsen, then a professor at DMLC, New Ulm, MN and former pastor at St. Mark, was the principal speaker at the graduation services, which climaxed the 10th anniversary year of the congregation."²³

Along with the blessing of a new physical facility, the spiritual blessings also continued under the services of Pastor Rothe. St. Mark continued to carry out God's Great Commission in their neighborhood by reaching out with God's Word. In addition to reaching out with their LES, St. Mark also utilized canvassing efforts, VBS flyers, advertisements in the local paper, and floats in the annual Fourth of July parade. Pastor Rothe remembers VBS as being the most effective evangelism tool second to the LES itself. Through the VBS, children were brought to the school, parents became familiar with both the church and the school, and the children heard the gospel. Into the 1980's and 1990's the school also drew students from the public school system. Parents were looking for a relief from the pressures of public education, drug abuse,

²¹ Kuehl, D. and Rothe, G.

²² "Dedication" the worship folder of the dedication service of St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church.

²³ St. Mark Historical Records.

and gang-related activity that were areas of concern among some parents in the northern areas of Milwaukee who moved into the Brown Deer area.^{24, 25}

A high point for St. Mark as well as a fond personal memory for Pastor Rothe came in the years 1976 through 1978. Not only did the grade school peak in enrollment during those years, but St. Mark also sent five students on to continue their Christian education at Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown, WI and Wisconsin Lutheran High School in Milwaukee. Of those five, two went on to Northwestern College in Watertown to study for the public ministry and three enrolled at DMLC in New Ulm, Minnesota to study for the teaching ministry. Four of those students went on to serve the Lord in the full time public ministry. Throughout the years, St. Mark has also produced other called workers who have served in the past, are training to serve, and who are presently serving in the public ministry.²⁶

By God's grace alone, St. Mark celebrated its twentieth anniversary on December 5, 1985. The twenty year history of St. Mark records the event: "Today we are pleased to have Reverend Theodore B. Olsen (then President of Martin Luther Preparatory School, Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin) as the speaker at our morning services as, through the grace of God, we celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the incorporation of St. Mark Ev. Lutheran Church." The twenty-fifth anniversary of the first service held at St. Mark was remembered on September 23, 1990. On December 9, 1990 the twenty-fifth anniversary of the incorporation of St. Mark was celebrated "with Pastor Carl Mischke, president of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, as the speaker in

²⁴ Rothe, G.

²⁵ Although the Milwaukee Public School system (as does any educational system) had to deal with the aforementioned issues, it also provided a fine education for the members of St. Mark who chose to send their

the morning services. The theme of the twenty-fifth anniversary was: 'God's Word is Our Great Heritage.' The proceeds from an anniversary thank offering were used to erect a new lighted sign on the corner of Wabash Avenue and 60th Street."²⁷

Looking back on his time with St. Mark both as pastor and member, Pastor Rothe recalls fondly, "I have nothing but praise for what they are doing (and have done in the past). They are reaching out and canvassing." Although the area was heavily saturated with "churched" people by this time (the early 1990's) the congregation was always very active and wanted to reach out to the community. Recognizing that the area, now adjacent to the sprawling city, hemmed in by the county line to the north, 68th Street to the west and Bradley Road and the county line to the south, the congregation focused on serving the area faithfully with the gospel in whatever way possible. Pastor Rothe remains grateful for St. Mark's enthusiastic and supportive nature during his time as their shepherd.²⁸

Pastor Rothe retired from the public ministry in June of 1994. On July 31, 1994, Pastor Gregory Schulz installed Pastor Michael Feuerstahler as pastor of St. Mark Lutheran Church. In August of 1994 St. Mark continued to minister with its strengths and developed a pre-kindergarten class and resumed its kindergarten program under the direction of teacher, Delores Schuetze. In 1995, Pastor Myrl Wagenknecht preached for the thirtieth anniversary of the first service held at St. Mark. This was a

children to public schools. The purpose of this paragraph is not to defame the MPS. Rather the intended purpose is to show the role St. Mark Lutheran Grade School played as it served the Brown Deer Community.

²⁶ Rothe, G.

²⁷ The historical records of St. Mark Member Manual, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

²⁸ Rothe, G.

special service for both St. Mark and Pastor Wagenknecht because it was he who conducted the very first service for St. Mark.²⁹

Pastor Feuerstahler took special notice of the unique setting into which he was called. When the congregation was founded in the 1960's and 1970's younger families were moving to the Brown Deer area. In addition to that obvious point, Pastor Feuerstahler also recognized an additional point. "These families (that moved into Brown Deer during the 1960's and 1970's were buying their dream homes" in the rural setting described earlier in this history. They put down their roots here and planned on retiring in the homes they were purchasing.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's that flood continued. St. Mark peaked in enrollment of its grade school and membership in its congregation. In the late 1980's and into the 1990's, that population boom ceased. The number of young families in the Brown Deer area and the number of children in the Brown Deer School District in general began to decline. The original residents of Brown Deer were reaching retirement age and their children had already moved out of the area. Furthermore, during the years of 2000-2002 Brown Deer has taken on the role of a "starter home" community. Young families are no longer setting down their permanent roots in Brown Deer. Young families began to move out to the outlying counties just as quickly as they moved in.³⁰

These trends have influenced both the membership and ministry of St. Mark. In recent years the charter and core membership of St. Mark is nearing or has reached retirement age. The current trend has been for these families to move out to where

²⁹ The historical records of St. Mark Member Manual, "How St. Mark Came Into Existence."

³⁰ Interview with Pastor Feuerstahler, April 18, 2002 (e.g. Hereafter cited as Feuerstahler, M.).

their children are living. The original members moving out and younger families moving in seeking starter homes has developed into what Pastor Feuerstahler has termed a "revolving door" ministry. Families are moving through the area instead of settling down and establishing lasting roots in the area.³¹

These factors have lead St. Mark to face unique challenges in its ongoing service to the community. First it has led to an unstable or better phrased "non-stationary" membership. Members of some WELS congregations in the Milwaukee area have roots three generations deep. Children go to the same grade school as their parents. Many of the souls St. Mark has served in recent years are transplant members from other congregations. They have not established roots with any particular congregation. Especially in today's mobile society, young families find it easier to pull up their stakes and transplant into other congregations when they move.

The second challenge of serving in a "revolving door" ministry for Pastor Feuerstahler (and St. Mark) has been impressing upon the members and leaders of St. Mark "we are building the Kingdom." "We are building up souls knowing full well they may leave at any time." Getting wrapped up in numbers and the "woes" of transferring memberships does a disservice to the work of the Kingdom.

To help meet these two challenges, St. Mark continues to minister to the area with the gospel. Following the suggestion of Parish Assistance, which met with St. Mark in 1993, St. Mark continues to reach out to the community with the Word and continues to serve her members with the Word (outreach and nurture).

To serve a "revolving door" congregation St. Mark continues to stress adult education and spiritual growth through nurturing programs. Presently those programs

³¹ Ibid.

include: Sunday morning worship, Bible study, Sunday School and Teen Bible study, Monday evening Bible study that meets once a month, a "Pairs 'n Spares" group offering younger members Bible study and fellowship, a "Growing in Christ" class that offers a small group study once a month, an Adult Information Class, and a Summer Spiritual Growth Week.³² To reach the goal of reaching out to the community, St. Mark's Outreach Committee utilizes a number of programs including: A Visitors of First Time Visitors program that sends a member to a worship visitor within 48 hours of their visit to St. Mark, a Cards to Visitors program, New Member Welcome, a "First Friend" Program to welcome and assist new members, Summer Neighborhood Visits through which Pastor Feuerstahler gets out into the neighborhood of St. Mark to get to know the area and witness to the neighborhood, a New Movers' Evangelism program, and a detailed and up to date prospect list.³³ In summary they are simply faithfully carrying out Christ's Great Commission as they did in the past.

As he reflects on the current situation at St. Mark Pastor Feuerstahler remarks, "I am not surprised by the way the Lord has led things here at St. Mark, given the demographics of the area. Our members remain enthusiastic and continue to grow in commitment to the Great Commission. We (Pastor Feuerstahler and the members of St. Mark) will continue serve the souls in the area as long as God places them with us."³⁴

Remaining confident in God's promise to bless the preaching and teaching of His Word, Pastor Feuerstahler calmly addresses the issue of closing St. Mark's Lutheran Elementary School for the 2001-2002 school year after more than thirty years of

³² St. Mark Member Handbook, "Opportunities to Grow".

³³ St. Mark Outreach Committee Meeting Minutes, April 11, 2002.

operation: "I view this as an exciting possibility to expand our ministry . . . to provide a more rounded Christian Day School education for our youth through Loving Shepherd Lutheran School (located at 3909 W. Clinton Ave, Milwaukee). Given the changing circumstances of WELS congregations in the Milwaukee area, we need to work together to make wiser and more effective use of our money and manpower."³⁵ To make adjustments in ministry without the lure of an LES, St. Mark has found initial success reaching children and families in the area with young children through new outreach efforts such as using for the first time an "Easter for Kids" program. St. Mark also places equal emphasis on serving its existing membership. In an effort to do so, St. Mark recently began exploring ministry to its seniors. "A balance between outreach and nurture with the gospel is the key."³⁶

"The Lord continues to bless us with adult confirmations and prospect families." "The Lord has blessed my ministry at St. Mark beyond my wildest dreams." These statements frequently echo throughout conversations with Pastor Feuerstahler. As he, Pastor Rothe and Mr. Duane Kuehl all commented, "It is only by the grace of God that they we made it this far." It is only by the grace of God that any congregation experiences success in its efforts. God's grace continues to bless St. Mark in the present with unique opportunities and challenges. Yet just as in the past, God's grace is sufficient for St. Mark, her leaders, and her members.

³⁴ Feuerstahler, M.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

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