

The Westendorf Years: A History of St.
John's Lutheran Church, Bay City,
Michigan from 1931-1953.

Church History, 331

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The 1930s and 1940s proved to be an era of change in our country and the world. The number of automobiles on our nation's roads increased. The stock market crash and ^{Subsequent} consequential Depression tested every individual, family, and organization. The rise of tensions and war in Europe added to the stress on the home front. In a few years our sons and brothers would fight and die for freedom on the soil from which many of their ancestors had come. Without a doubt, the events of the 1930s and 1940s effected much of what is happening today.

The same is true for the history of St. John's Lutheran Church in Bay City, Michigan. The 1930s brought a new pastor, a new Day School principle, much growth and new struggles that have influenced much of what the congregation is today. With the arrival of Pastor Adelbert Westendorf in 1931, St. John's was on the brink of a new and exciting era of change, growth, and ministry.

In 1931, St. John's granted a peaceful dismissal to their shepherd Reverend Nuaman as he accepted a divine call to serve the St. Jacobi congregation in Milwaukee. In the same congregational meeting ^{in which} where the Reverend Nuaman was released, the men of St. John's voted to call the Reverend B. Westendorf of Flint. They offered "him \$1400 salary, \$120 for upkeep of car, expenses to one conference and Synod, free telephone and water, and with a two weeks vacation"¹. Within a few weeks, Reverend Westendorf of Flint returned the call and on May 31, St. John's extended a call to his brother Adelbert Westendorf. He had previously been a Professor at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin and was currently assisting his father at St. Paul's in Saginaw. On July 6, Reverend Adelbert Westendorf opened the congregational meeting with prayer.

¹ St. John's Lutheran Church Voter's Meeting Minutes, (May 3, 1931).

Throughout the span of the next twenty-one years, the congregation would go through many developments and issues. Upon viewing the Church Board and Congregational Meeting minutes, significant events and discussions unfold in three major areas: General Ministry, Evangelism, and Church Discipline.²

I. General Ministry

In the realm of the general ministry of St. John's and Pastor Westendorf five aspects are worth noting. The first of these five is Pastor Westendorf's reputation with his flock. When asked how to characterize Reverend Adelbert, many responses would clearly identify him as a "Visiting Pastor". He was known for visiting his members without announcement two or three times a year. Undoubtedly, the people respected him for his personal contact with them. This provided more than ample opportunity to get to know the souls he served and they in turn would become more comfortable with him in counseling and church business. His visitations were a key characteristic of his diplomatic reputation.

Along with his every member visitations, Pastor Westendorf acquainted himself with his members during Communion Announcements. Right away in August of 1931, Saturday evenings (before a Communion service) from 3:00 to 8:00 pm were set-aside on the church calendar for Communion Announcements. Pastor Westendorf did not especially care for announcements via the telephone. He wanted to talk to his people one on one. In fact, they wouldn't even think of calling. Instead, they would go to the parsonage on Kiesel and Jane to visit with Pastor in his study located at the front of the house. This was not an intimidating experience, but rather welcoming. Pastor would

² The ministry involved with the Christian Day School is not included in this history. The events surrounding the teachers, students, and building projects during these years are a separate topic unto themselves.

have a leisurely conversation with each member. If some people were waiting in line to announce, Pastor Westendorf was under the impression that they could just wait.

Listening and talking to his members took precedence.

A second area of general ministry that slowly began to undergo metamorphosis was confirmation. In 1931, Confirmation Sunday was changed to Palm Sunday “permanently.” (In the following years, as is the case today, Confirmation Sunday is later in the spring.) Three years later, the “recommendation of the school board in not having any more evening instruction classes, but requiring all children who want to be confirmed to attend our parochial school was unanimously adopted.”³ The congregation strongly encouraged parents to send their children to the Christian Day School. Finally, in 1941, the confirmation classes were allowed to wear white gowns on confirmation Sunday, if they wanted to do so. These three changes may not have been that tremendously important but they do lay the groundwork for subsequent discussions and traditions in this area.

Until the year of 1934, incidentals had been paid to the pastor for services rendered, i.e. baptisms, confirmation, weddings and burials. In his annual report submitted to the congregation in January of 1934, Pastor Westendorf asked that all incidentals be dropped except that which is for weddings because “the pastor serves also in the capacity of a legal executive of the marriage license.”⁴ Pastor Westendorf goes on to explain his rationale behind the dropping of incidentals. “[An incidental] gives the false impression regarding the meaning of the such service and often degrades its significance. The payment of incidentals exacts the further payment from members who

³ Voters Meeting Minutes, (January 24, 1934).

⁴ Reverend Adelbert Westendorf, Pastor’s Annual Report, (January 24, 1934).

by virtue of their contributions to the church already have full claim upon all the services of the church; the payment of incidentals has always served congregations as an excuse for paying inadequate salaries to their servants; the payment of incidentals is a source of continuous misrepresentation of the pastor.”⁵

St. John’s has only been making use of a regular Sunday Bulletin for the past 50 years. The congregation sent out the “Friendly Visitor” in the place of a bulletin and newsletter. In October of 1948, the church board decided to try out a Sunday Bulletin on the Friendly Visitor paper. A year later in 1949, St. John’s used the mission folders sent out by the Synod as the weekly bulletins. Pastor Westendorf was also encouraged to send out a quarterly newsletter instead of the Friendly Visitor, which was then discontinued. On January 23, 1950, the church board stopped using the Synodical mission folder for the bulletin and encouraged the church to make its own and send out an additional bulletin once a month.

St. John’s has always been known for sending young men and women into the public ministry. Her financial aid program has been outstanding in assisting those members studying at our Synodical worker training schools. In 1944, the voter’s assembly moved and carried “to apply the surplus over 100% in our mission treasury to a fund for needy students who want to prepare for the ministry or teaching profession. This is to be under the supervision of the church board.”⁶ On October 7, 1951, “the committee on Student Support recommended the following plan for helping students in the future: to give assistance to those families who request it for higher education for their children

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Voters Meeting Minutes, (July 8, 1944).

in a loan form if the child does not enter Northwestern or New Ulm and a gift form if he does enter the work of the church. The motion was made and carried to adopt this plan.”⁷ This financial aid program continues to the present day to be a tremendous blessing upon those studying for the public ministry.

II. Evangelism

Many false statements concerning Evangelism in our Synod’s history have surfaced in the past few years. Some claim that our pastors and congregations have neglected outreach in past years and that only now do we have a mission mindset. These accusations may be true in some respects, but in others, they are horribly wrong. St. John’s during the Westendorf years incorporated mission work into the ministry of the congregation. In Pastor Westendorf’s first annual report presented to the congregation, he reveals an incredible amount of increase in membership.

We are grateful to be able to report a substantial growth in the past years. In view of the fact that this is the first report that I am submitting to this congregation, I am reporting the growth during my entire pastorate here. During the two and one half years that I have served this church there has been a growth of more than one hundred communicants. This in spite of the fact that we were obliged to take from our list several names due to death, removal etc. Our congregation today numbers 583 communicants with the addition of the class of children now in instruction the number will exceed 600. Thus our congregation no longer is among the small churches but can be counted among the bigger churches.⁸

The amount of time that Pastor Westendorf was obligated to spend on evangelism also had its drawbacks. Not only was he a mission pastor in his own congregation but he also served on the District Mission Board. This curtailed some^{CF} the ministry needs at St. John’s. Plans for a Young Peoples Society slowly progressed through the years with

⁷ Voter’s Meeting Minutes, (October 7, 1951).

⁸ Westendorf, Annual Report, (January 14, 1934).

periods of success and failure mainly due to the amount of work demanded of Pastor Westendorf by the mission churches that were under his supervision. The demands became so much that the Church Board decided “to request thru the president that the district consider the sacrifice this congregation must make in allowing its pastor to serve on the mission board again.”⁹ The amount of demands on Pastor Westendorf may have been eased but his desire to reach the lost never subsided.

In 1941, outreach efforts by St. John’s began to surface in the Lagoon Beach area and the territories surrounding it. In August, the congregation requested permission from the District Mission Board to conduct meetings with members of St. John’s who lived in this proposed area. Two months later, the congregation honorably released three men to organize a new mission congregation here.

It is not very clear what ever happened to the mission congregation proposal around the Lagoon Beach area. Effort soon was focused on the Banks area south of Lagoon Beach and north of St. John’s. Mt. Olive Lutheran Church began to make its presence known among the residents of Banks (a neighborhood of Bay City). Five hundred envelopes, a special collection on communion Sundays, and the evening plate collection were given to Mt. Olive. On January 26, 1942, it was decided “to give this congregation whole-hearted support”¹⁰ and encourage those members St. John’s who lived in the vicinity of Mt. Olive to transfer.

In 1944, Mr. Behrens of Phoenix Brewery in Bay City (also the employer of Conrad Guntermann, the Church custodian for many years) donated new pews to St. John’s. It was at this time that St. John’s donated her used pews to Mt. Olive. Then in

⁹ St. John’s Lutheran Church, Church Board Minutes, (April 28, 1938).

¹⁰ Church Board Minutes, (January 26, 1942).

1945, they broke ground for their new church building in the Banks neighborhood of Bay City. The financial support for Mt. Olive continued until November of 1946. Mt. Olive, whose birth came in the 1940s, is truly a beloved daughter of the members of St. John's.

Mt. Olive proved herself a faithful daughter. One Sunday, Mr. Guntermann and Pastor Westendorf realized that they had ^{forgotten} forgot to order more communion wafers.¹¹

They would never have had enough communion wafers for all the people in church that Sunday. Therefore, they proceeded to call around to the other Lutheran Churches in the area in hopes of finding some extra wafers. It came time for the Sermon and Pastor Westendorf entered the pulpit still without the sufficient amount of wafers. None of the other Lutheran congregations could help St. John's out. As a last effort, Mr. Guntermann decided to try the new little mission congregation in Banks. Fortunately, they had enough wafers to spare that Sunday and gave some to him. Towards the end of the sermon, Pastor Westendorf looked in the back of the church and saw Mr. Guntermann waving a package of wafers. Pastor Westendorf said he never felt so relieved.¹² A well-loved daughter never abandons her mother in time of need.

III. Church Discipline

Perhaps the antithesis to evangelism in the ministry of the church can be found in Church Discipline. As among the church in Corinth and confessional Lutheran churches the world over, matters requiring the attention of church discipline have arisen in St. John's history. It is not the purpose here to outline each individual case of

¹¹ As the church custodian, Conrad Gunternamm also played the part of the elders, rang the church bells, took care of the communion ware, and often bought the communion wine and wafers.

¹² Earl Guntermann, personal interview, (April 5, 2002).

excommunication; rather to highlight the different issues relevant during these years of St. John's history.

The first issue would probably best fit under stewardship, yet the church during these years handled it more as a disciplinary problem. During the Westendorf years, the practice of membership dues was still enforced. In 1935, the Church Board set \$12 as the minimum sum of dues required for each member each year. Those who paid little or nothing came under the special consideration of the Church Board and the Voter's Assembly. In 1939, apparently the number of members increased who were delinquent in their offerings and dues. The voters then decided to arrange the financial committee into zones. The respective financial committee representative visited all those delinquent members who fell into their zone.

The attempts by the financial committee did not work as they had planned. There was more to the delinquency than just failure to pay dues and give offerings. On the 12th of May, 1940, the congregation adopted the following resolution: "It is hereby resolved that this congregation considers willful failure to assist in the support of the church's financial program a sin worthy of excommunication. According to this resolution this congregation will strike from her list and eliminate from further service all such members that become guilty of such willful neglect."¹³ Then in 1942, in a startling decision, the auditory and finance committees were empowered "to act for the congregation in the matter of delinquent members."¹⁴ Still the issue did not go away.

Another proposal was set forth in 1943 as a more effective way to tackle the issue. The finance secretary was "instructed to draw up a list of 25 financially delinquent

¹³ Voter's Meeting Minutes, (May 12, 1940).

¹⁴ Ibid. (April 1, 1942).

members every month. This list will then be discussed at the church board meeting. The church board members will then visit those who they think need visiting. Each church member is to take that person's collector along."¹⁵ The issue persisted. Finally, upon the arrival of Pastor Brenner in 1953, the congregation enacted a stewardship program that truly dealt with hearts and motives. The manner in which a congregation deals with these sins may throughout the course of time change. However, as long as sin remains in this world, greed and poor stewardship will always be problems.

The issue of weddings performed by a Catholic priest began to rear its head in 1941 when a priest married a member of St. John's. On July 13, 1941, the congregation voted with twenty "yeas" to zero "nays" to excommunicate those members married by a priest. The member in question at the same meeting then signed the following promise: "I hereby promise to abide by the requirements of the Lutheran Church and to repent of my sin by having been married by a priest and to sever any and all promises made to the priest."¹⁶ In November of that same year, a Catholic priest married another member and the necessary steps were taken in handling the issue.

The year 1943 saw three more members married by priests. The congregation excommunicated one in July by an unanimous rising vote. The assembly then encouraged Pastor Westendorf to substitute for a Sunday sermon Professor Meyer's article "The Pope as the Antichrist". Another two members were excommunicated in January of 1944.

The church sent out a letter of this sort to the then excommunicated members:

This is to notify you that in view of the fact that you have been married by a Roman Catholic priest, contrary to the doctrine of the Lutheran Church, you were excommunicated from our congregation in the annual meeting

¹⁵ Church Board Minutes, (May 23, 1943).

¹⁶ Voter's Meeting Minutes, (July 13, 1941).

according to the words of our Saviour John 20:23: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained."¹⁷

This matter of weddings performed by Catholic Priests afflicted not only St. John's but many other congregations as well. At the Saginaw Valley Pastoral Conference in 1949, a special committee chaired by Pastor Aldelbert Westendorf, presented a report on how congregations ought to handle such situations. St. John's adopted this report as their own policy. The report stated as follows:

Legalizing a marriage is an affair of the state. Therefore, we consider marriage by any party authorized by the state to solemnize and legalize a marriage valid. However, there are circumstances under which the solemnizing of a marriage may involve a compromise of faith for our people. This is the case when a marriage is solemnized by a Roman Catholic priest. On this we submit the following:

1. Anyone taking the instructions and signing the prenuptial agreement required by the Roman Catholic Church of the non-Catholics desiring to have their marriage solemnized by a priest concedes to the Roman Catholic errors that marriage is a sacrament, and that the Pope alone has authority in spiritual matter. His action also is a concession of the papal claim, based on these errors, that all marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics not performed by the Roman Catholic Church, are only attempted marriages, that is they actually do not exist before God.
2. The apostle Peter said, "We ought to obey God rather than men," and refused to be silenced when he was told not to bear witness of his faith. He who signs the contract agrees to do just the opposite, that is, never to bear witness to the saving truth that we are justified by faith without works, over against his Catholic spouse.
3. The non-Catholic party also relinquishes his right and duty in the training of his children by unconditionally surrendering them to the spiritual care of the Antichrist, thus placing them in grave jeopardy of soul.
4. All this makes the signing of such a contract by our members, and their submitting to have their marriage solemnized or blessed by the Roman Catholic Church, a grievous offense against our faith. Those guilty of it must be dealt with before they can again be admitted to the Sacrament as

¹⁷ An example of the form letter sent to those excommunicated under such causes.

such who are one with us in acknowledging and confessing the divine truths we believe and treasure. Until they realize their error and do what they can to correct it their status is that of being in church discipline.

5. In these rare cases where no agreement has been signed and no promises have been given, this should be established and stated, so that any suspicion of having done this be removed and no offense be given. It should also be made clear that the false teachings of the Roman Catholic Church regarding marriage are not subscribed to.

6. The carrying out of point four is a matter of Christian liberty as far as the mode of informing the congregation in those cases where there is repentance is concerned. Whether personal declaration to the pastor, or a written statement by the offender, or a personal appearance is in place is left to the individual congregation and pastor. The chief thing is that the offense is recognized, repented of, and removed. In obstinate cases, of course, Matthew 18 must be followed through to excommunication, if necessary.¹⁸

The congregation, in 1953, granted permission to Pastor Westendorf to receive back into membership in good standing those members who renounced the vows they took at the time of their marriage.

Lodge membership among the members of St. John's ^{has} since its founding, plagued the congregation. Major controversies ensued during the early years of this church, whose results were not always that pleasant. When the question began to resurface in 1941, Pastor Westendorf quickly eliminated any confusion and misunderstandings.

A deceased member's obituary revealed that he was a member of the Woodsmen of America. The question raised was should St. John's bury this man or not. In a special Church Board meeting on April 2, 1941, "It was pointed out that our constitution has a paragraph which states that any member of a secret organization forfeits his right as

¹⁸ A. F. Westendorf, Otto J. Eckert, L.H. Voss. Dealing With Those Of Our Members Who Have Their Marriage Solemnized By A Roman Catholic Priest. Saginaw Valley Pastoral Conference. 1949.

member.”¹⁹ The next evening, after careful investigation, it did not seem that the Woodsmen of America was a lodge. Therefore, they voted to give the deceased under question a proper Christian burial. Even though this brief controversy had a pleasant ending, it provided opportunity for Pastor Westendorf to address the issue of Lodge Membership in the Friendly Visitor. It reads as follows:

A lodge is an association of men or women, bound together by an oath or pledge and conducting secret initiatory rites from which all but initiates are barred. Signals and handgrips and other insignia whose meaning only initiates are supposed to know are imparted in these rites. A code of teaching to which the promises of eternal life is attached is impressed upon the initiates during these rites. This ALL lodges have in common.

The true Lutheran Church is opposed to lodges of the above description. The opposition is based upon the fact that lodgery represents a religion without Christ and his salvation, which is the heart and soul of Lutheranism. It is impossible to espouse both doctrines, and such that attempt this reveal themselves as trying to serve two opposing masters. For a Lutheran alternative is either Church OR the Lodge. He cannot, without becoming a hypocrite, attempt to hold to both, if he chooses the lodge, he must necessarily surrender his membership in the Lutheran Church.

In as much as Lutheran pastor is the representative of his congregation in all his public acts, he is enjoined from officiating at the burial of a lodge member. Lutheran congregations do not forbid their pastor burying such that have had no membership in the church if he has been called to serve them while they were ill and was able to preach the Gospel of Christ to them. But if they should prove to be members of a lodge at the their death, he cannot serve at their burial. THE SAME MUST HOLD ALSO FOR THOSE WHO SECRETLY HELD LODGE MEMBERSHIP WHILE THEY WERE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH. This is not an injustice nor unfairness. The position of the true Lutheran Church is known to her members. If in spite of this knowledge they maintain membership in such forbidden orders, then they assume full responsibility themselves in no Lutheran Pastor will officiate at their burial. This declaration is here given that our members may know what the position of St. John’s Lutheran is in the matter of the burial of members of a secret order.²⁰

¹⁹ Church Board Meeting Minutes, (April 2, 1941).

²⁰ Reverend Adelbert Westendorf, “Friendly Visitor”, (April 1941).

The End of an Era

The year 1951 brought troubled times for Pastor Westendorf. He fell extremely ill and was absent from his duties for some time. The obvious concern arose as to what the congregation ought to do during their Pastor's illness. Discussion soon followed in congregational meetings. The members expressed the following ideas: some suggested that perhaps St. John's should receive a vicar, others wanted a new young pastor, some thought that the men from Michigan Lutheran Seminary could adequately fulfill the needs of the congregation, others felt that Retired Pastor Metzger could do the work. On April 22, 1951, they voted to engage Pastor Metzger for one year.

When Pastor Westendorf returned to the parish, his members noticed significant changes in him. Pastor Westendorf was known for his excellent mind and memory. He could write a sermon, memorize it, and preach it in two English and one German services each Sunday. He never had to take notes concerning his members. He just knew them so well and could remember the smallest detail of any given member's life. After his breakdown, however, he could not even write his own name.²¹

In May of 1951, during a special Church Board meeting, they decided that:

Rev. Metzger would take care of the children's classes, German services, and sick calls. Rev. Westendorf would take care of the English Services and the other visits to be made in the congregation and mission work in the neighborhood. Other services such as baptisms, weddings, burials, etc. are to be taken care of by the pastor whom the individual member may chose. They both made the statement that they intend to work together peacefully for the glory of God and the welfare of our congregation.²²

²¹ Herman Lauphan, personal interview, (April 3, 2002).

²² Church Board Minutes, (May 9, 1951).

On July 12, 1953, “due to ill health, Rev. Westendorf tendered his resignation which was accepted by the congregation with regrets.”²³

Upon the resignation of Pastor Westendorf, an era ended, an era marked by growth, improvements, pastoral leadership, and especially the preaching of Law and Gospel. To compare his pastorate to other Pastors who have faithfully served St. John’s over the years is not for any one of us to do. Rather, this provides us the opportunity to thank and praise our glorious Lord for so richly blessing St. John’s during these years despite the Depression and World War II. Above all, we thank God for preserving his truth among St. John’s and providing a mission mindset and love for the Word to be emulated by all Ministers of the Gospel.

Gottes Wort Bleibet In Ewigkeit – I Peter 1:25

²³ Voter’s Meeting Minutes, (July 12, 1953).

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