

A CENTURY WITH THE LORD

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church
Firth, Nebraska



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A CENTURY WITH THE LORD

I don't think I will ever forget that day. There I was standing before the church steps with a westerly wind both hot and dusty lashing across my face. I was quietly wondering to myself just what it was like in years past. I pictured horses lined up, maybe even an automobile or two. Just what was it like? Just imagine, one hundred years before, this congregation had planted its roots into this area of Nebraska. This congregation was determined to withstand the obstacles, the hardships. My thoughts drifted back to the yesterdays. What was it like when that first group of men gathered to form that tiny nucleus? I could only create imaginary figures, settings, and thoughts. And yet, what had been the basis then was still clearly the same foundation of St. John's on that special anniversary day--God's Word.

St. John's didn't have that Hollywood beginning like St. Paul's of Norfolk. There weren't the whole families packing up their prairie schooners in Ixonia, in hopes of realizing their dream of homesteading along the Elkhorn River in Nebraska. This congregation did not travel enmasse in order to establish its roots by erecting a church building. Rather, these were hardened families familiar with the difficulties of the harsh Nebraska winters, the disasters of prairie fires and pestilences. These People had already mastered the prairie. They had come out as individual families. But now a bond was being established, a character molded. There was a desire to bond themselves together with something

precious to all, namely, God's Word.

Actually, we should point out that St. John's history begins even before it officially organized in 1885. Pastor Fleischmann, a Lutheran pastor from the Iowa Synod, first planted the seed in the Firth area. He faithfully attended to his labor. Pastor Fleischmann was succeeded by circuit pastors who in but a short time left these harvest fields around Firth.

It was early in 1885 that eleven of these transplanted families, now abandoned by the circuit pastors, seriously sought out the services of a minister. The ordained minister to whom they now turned to was Julius Kaiser of Clatonia, Nebraska. At that time Kaiser, a former member of the Wartburg Synod which was affiliated with the General Synod, was serving Zion Ev. Lutheran Church just outside of Clatonia. Just prior to this first meeting Pastor Kaiser had become a member of the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor Kaiser had agreed to serve this group of "sapling⁷¹" Lutherans on a regular bi-weekly arrangement. They used the Good Hope School as their place of worship. This proved quite functional and agreeable to all, even to Albert Ernst Krueger who was baptised in this rough setting on March 8, 1885. The first confirmation was also held there on March 29, 1885 when Maria Anna Krueger confirmed her faith to her Lord.

For about three months these Lutheran families worshipped on a bi-weekly basis. But then on May 25, 1885, another meeting was held. It was at this meeting that the decision

was made to organize themselves as a Christian congregation. The meeting did not come to a close with just that decision. Much more was accomplished. Pastor Kaiser was called to officially serve as the spiritual leader of the congregation. He accepted this call from the newly established congregation in addition to his call to Zion in Clatonia. A constitution was also adopted and officers were elected. Jacob Ruehl was elected chairman; William Krueger, elder; Heinrich Pape, secretary; and Heinrich Rahe, treasurer. In addition to these elected officers the following were also signers of that first constitution: Ferdinand Ristow, Ferdinand Ulrich, Gottfried Krueger, August Krueger, Michael Krueger, John Hanson, Charles Arndt, and Heinrich Perde.

On August 2, 1885, St. John's held its second congregational meeting. The main item on the agenda was whether to continue as is or join with the Clatonia congregation, thus becoming one large unified congregation. After much discussion the proposal was defeated and St. John's continued its existence. Also at this August meeting the liturgy was decided upon. It was also adopted in the meeting that a KLINGEBU¹TEL would be used to receive the offering during the services. Perhaps, the most encouraging and heartwarming note at this early meeting was to see that these offerings were not only meant for home use but were also to be used for mission endeavors.

St. John's continued to worship in the Good Hope School located just west of Firth. This at first proved quite adequate. However, by 1892 it appeared quite evident to all that

the Good Hope School was no longer large enough. St. John's had experienced considerable growth. Something had to be done. It was then that William Kramer, a member of St. John's, stepped forward to donate a parcel of land as the site for the church. Almost immediately construction began so that by October of 1893 St. John's congregation was dedicating its new facility to God's glory.

Pastor Kaiser had faithfully served St. John's for over eight years now. Yet, the need was felt for a resident pastor. That calling was answered by Candidate Max Lehninger. On November 19, 1893 Candidate Lehninger was installed and ordained as St. John's first resident pastor.

Pastor Lehninger, while he only served the congregation for two years, provided the leadership that St. John's had hoped to receive from a residential pastor. A Christian Day School was started. Classes were held in a nearby abandoned house. This became St. John's first schoolhouse. In 1894 the congregation was incorporated as the Ev. Lutheran St. John's Congregation, adhering to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. By the year 1895 the debt on the newly constructed church was paid in full. So tremendously had the Lord blessed St. John's that it was able to provide Pastor Lehninger with a salary of \$250 a year for his faithful service.

However, at the end of 1895 Pastor Lehninger, who had married Anna Kramer, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Kramer, ended his labors among God's flock in Firth and accepted a call to serve elsewhere.

For over a year St. John's remained with no pastor of its own. Then in June of 1897, Candidate John Witt was called. Pastor Witt faithfully served this congregation in Firth and vicinity for seven fruitful years. Pastor Witt spent many an hour spreading the gospel throughout the region. By horseback Pastor Witt would travel up the Blue River even as far as Kearney, Nebraska.

Now lest we sense that St. John's during this time became lax and indifferent and that Pastor Witt was drawn elsewhere, ~~it~~ hardly could such be the case. The members of St. John's constructed a new parsonage shortly after Pastor Witt arrived. In their desire to insure a strong Christian background for their children a schoolhouse was also built in 1900.

In May, 1904, Pastor Witt accepted a call to serve St. Paul's in Norfolk. Not only would Pastor Witt serve St. Paul's but also all of Nebraska as its district president.

This time the congregation was blessed with only a short vacancy. In the same year that Pastor Witt left in 1904, Pastor Blumenkranz accepted the call to St. John's. He would serve at St. John's until 1907. During these years the congregation established for the first time a choir to add musical edification to the services.

In September of 1907, Pastor Paul Mayerhoff was extended the call to serve the congregation. It was during his pastoral care that the congregation celebrated the 25th anniversary of its founding. The big attraction was the bell dedication. Also during that very same year of 1910, St.

John's hosted its very first pastoral conference.

While Pastor Mayerhoff served, the United States would be drawn into World War I. Perhaps not surprising^{ly}, the English language was introduced into the worship services for the first time. It was decided to have English services on the first Sunday of each month. An afternoon service in German would then be held on those Sundays.

Before Pastor Mayerhoff would end his labors at St. John's in January, 1919, a special celebration would take place. On July 9, 1918, the 25th anniversary of the dedication of the church building would be observed. It was quite the celebration as Pastors Witt and Lehninger served as the guest speakers.

Pastor W. Schaller was called to serve as the next shepherd of the congregation. He accepted the call in August of 1919. Pastor Schaller would serve St. John's until June in 1922 when the Lord would direct him to accept the call to serve as a professor at Michigan Lutheran Seminary in Saginaw, Michigan.

In the minutes of the voter's meetings during these years there are several interesting proposals. In July, 1920, it was proposed that a gas engine and generator be bought for lighting. The motion did not carry, however, and the church and parsonage continued to be lit by gas lamps until 1937. In 1920 there was much discussion as to the advisability of building a new parsonage. When it finally came to a vote, the proposal was defeated. In that very same year an organ was purchased for the church. It was used until 1939. An important

resolution was passed on March 26, 1922. On that date the congregation voted to become affiliated with the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod. Because of circumstances brought about by World War I, the church school was closed in 1922, never to be reopened again. Shortly thereafter the Sunday School and Vacation Bible School were begun.

Pastor Adolph Schumann was installed as the next pastor on August 6, 1922. The installation service was officiated by Pastor E. C. Monhardt of Clatonia. It would be that during Pastor Schumann's ministry in Firth, renovation would be completed on the church building. A full basement was dug beneath the church structure, a new furnace installed and several interior decorations touched up. This necessitated the holding of worship services in the old schoolhouse while the church rested on blocks. Not all special services were canceled. Funerals were still held in the church proper even while the building rested on blocks. It was stated by many on numerous occasions that the floor boards groaned under the ponderous congregation. Fortunately, all the work was completed in time to celebrate a very special double anniversary. On November 8, 1925, the congregation celebrated the Synod's 75th anniversary and the 40th anniversary of the congregation. Once again Pastors Witt and Lehninger served as officiants. Just three years later St. John's congregation would see her faithful shepherd accept a call to serve the Lord's flock in David City, Nebraska.

Thankfully, the congregation only experienced a short

vacancy for on the first call extended, a minister of the saving Gospel would accept the duties. The pastor who was called and who subsequently accepted was Pastor Lehmann of South Dakota. Twenty years of faithful service were put into these fruitful fields by Pastor Lehmann.

Despite the difficulties brought on by the depression the congregation nonetheless experienced the rich and wonderful blessings of their Lord. In September of 1935 the 50th anniversary of the congregation was observed with three services of thanksgiving, Pastors Witt and Schumann serving as guest speakers. In 1937 a light plant was given to the congregation and the church and parsonage were wired for electricity. By 1938 the English language was beginning to be used extensively in the services. It was decided at that time to have only one German service each month with all the other services in English. Interestingly enough, the pastor's salary had been appropriately increased to \$80 per month by 1946.

Another long vacancy occurred when Pastor Lehmann accepted a call elsewhere in July of 1948. The vacancy was finally filled in 1949 with the calling of Candidate Herbert Kruschel. Already before he arrived, plans for vast improvements had been put into action. The arrival of electric power lines in November of 1949 greatly hastened the realization and appreciation of these improvements. The parsonage was rewired for the continuous use of electricity, a new oil furnace, inside plumbing, and a new kitchen cabinet were all installed.

In 1951 the church structure itself likewise received some major improvements. The steeple was lowered, a new oil furnace was installed, a south entrance was added, and the interior was papered. During these years the farm buildings were either torn down or sold. Among those buildings were the barn, wash house, cob house, and chicken coop. All of these changes and improvements were realized during Pastor Kruschel's ministry. In March of 1954 he accepted a call to serve God's flock in Aurora, Nebraska.

In July of 1954, Pastor Robert Hoenecke was installed as St. John's next pastor. He would faithfully serve the congregation until January of 1958 when he would accept a call to serve in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. During his ministry an attempt was made to relocate the congregation in Courtland, just a few miles west of Firth. After several meetings the voting membership felt that the congregation was not ready for such a bold move. The plan to relocate was thus dropped entirely.

In June, 1958, Erhardt Schultz was installed as the pastor of St. John's. He was a candidate from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. It was during his ministry that St. John's celebrated its 75th anniversary. It should be noted that at that time the congregation numbered 116 communicants, 160 baptized souls, and 30 children in Sunday School. In September of 1960, Pastor Schultz would leave Nebraska to serve congregations in Michigan.

Again, another long vacancy was experienced. Fortunately,

Pastor Greenwald from Christ Ev. Lutheran Church in Beatrice functioned as the vacancy pastor. He was able to provide the seriously missing leadership.

In the Summer of 1961, the congregation called Pastor Ronald Ehlert from Zion Ev. Lutheran Church in Clatonia to serve as the vacancy pastor. At that time the congregation was indecisive about calling another resident pastor. Notes taken at that meeting held in April tell us that the voters rejected that idea by a vote seven to six. No resident pastor was called at that time. However, in the Fall of 1961, the congregation once again issued a call and once again it was declined. The congregation now feeling somewhat and understandably dejected did not issue another call.

Perhaps showing signs of unwarranted confusion, St. John's decided in 1966 to hold communion services every six months. This decision was altered once again in 1972 to once a month. Indecisiveness seemed to haunt St. John's during these trying years. We can especially see this in the years that followed.

In the spring of 1967 Pastor Ehlert accepted a call to serve a congregation in Wisconsin. The decision was made to call jointly with the Clatonia congregation. A call was placed with the assignment committee meeting at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The call was unable to be filled.

Lest such circumstances be considered a blow to both congregations, we should note their continued determination. For in July of 1967 Pastor Werre accepted the call sent him by the two congregations.

New life was pumped into the congregation again. The

parsonage was torn down and disposed of. The land around the church proper was cleared of debris. Fortunately, St. John's was given the leadership that it had so sorely missed during this time. However, that was short-lived, for in 1970 Pastor Werre requested a leave of absence due to health reasons.

While St. John's did not call another pastor, the congregation was fortunate to have Pastor Wille serve as its vacancy pastor. Pastor Wille had just recently accepted a call from Zion of Clatonia. Only a few months later, St. John's would request the services of Pastor Wille on a permanent basis.

In August, 1975, Pastor Wille was led to accept a call to serve as a missionary to the Lutheran Church in Central Africa. Pastor Wille continued to serve the congregation as he waited for his work permit from the nation of Malawi. In the Spring of 1976 the permit was granted. So for a short time the congregation was served by a vacancy pastor, Pastor Verdell Tassler of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church in Beatrice.

On April 20, 1976, a call would be extended to Pastor Larry Wiederich of South Dakota. He would serve St. John's and Zion through most of 1985 before resigning due to health reasons. New life and purpose was given to St. John's during his years of labor. While the numbers that once graced this congregation were no longer to be found, a zeal for the word was. 1978 saw St. John's resolving to join the Nebraska Ev. Lutheran High School Association. Just by her determined commitment to the school and to the district she showed that

she was willing to shoulder her responsibilities once again. Perhaps that could best be described by the aggressiveness displayed in anticipation of the centennial celebration. Remodeling was done to the nave of the church, walls were panelled, and ceilings were refurbished.

We look back over the hundred years of St. John's existence and we can see the gracious hand of God. Throughout its history St. John's was continually blessed with the Word of Truth. Sometimes that fact was overlooked. Yet now we can see that that flame of the Gospel endured. When it seemed almost to be flickering in Firth, we suddenly see it gently fanned into a roaring fire again.

Just as I stood there on the steps of St. John's and imagined the past, I also imagined the future. What would the future hold for St. John's? The numbers have decreased considerably. St. John's numbers 43 members and 36 communicants. Her younger population, that is what is left of it, is always headed for the big cities. Does that spell disaster? Humanly speaking perhaps, and yet, at the same time God has assured His flock in Firth and all over the World that He will not forget them. May His Word continue to be the strong heritage of St. John's so that through all the hardships and sorrow, God's gracious love can and will shine forth from the hearts of St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church. God bless them!

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

1885-1985

- 1885 [May 25] ... Organizational meeting of congregation
1885 ... Julius Kaiser installed as first pastor of congregation
1893 [October] ... Church is dedicated
1893 [November 19] ... Max Lehninger installed as second pastor
1897 [June] ... John Witt installed as third pastor
1897 ? ... Parsonage is built
1900 ... School is built
1904 ... Blumenkranz installed as fourth pastor
1907 [September] ... Paul mayerhoff installed as fifth pastor
1910 ... 25th anniversary of congregation--bell dedicated
1918 [July 9] ... 25th anniversary of church dedication
1919 ... W. Schaller installed as sixth pastor of congregation
1922 [March 26] ... Congregation joins WELS
1922 [August 6] ... Adolph Schumann installed as seventh pastor
1925 [August] ... New furnace installed in church
1928 ... Lehmann installed as eighth pastor
1935 ... 50th anniversary of congregation celebrated
1937 ... Light plant and electricity in church
1949 [July] ... Herbert Kruschel installed as ninth pastor
1951 ... Steeple lowered--church remodeled
1954 [July] ... Robert Hoenecke installed as tenth pastor
1958 [June] ... Erhardt Schultz installed as eleventh pastor
1960 [May 29] ... 75th anniversary of congregation
1961 ... Pastor Ehlert serves congregation as vacancy pastor
1967 [August] ... Alvin Werre installed as twelfth pastor
1972 [September 24] ... Julius Wille installed as thirteenth pastor
1976 [June 20] ... Larry Wiederich installed as fourteenth pastor
1978 [October] ... Congregation joins NELHS Association
1982 ... Nave of church is panelled and remodeled
1985 ... Congregation celebrates its centennial

