

"LORD, THIS IS YOUR CHURCH"

An Interview with the Rev. Jeffrey W. Suhr,

Pastor of St. John, Center

Eric D. Schroeder

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Professor James F. Korthals

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On November 25, 2006, Pastor Jeffrey W. Suhr sat down for an interview in his home office to share some wisdom from his years of experience as servant of St. John, Center (4 miles north of Appleton, Wisconsin). This writer intends to cover some of the highlights of that interview, recorded on DVD, which covers Pastor Suhr's early life and recollections from the past 30 years of his ministry. Suhr is a 1977 graduate of the Seminary who received his assignment to St. John and has remained in service as pastor there ever since; until May of 2006—on call day of this year, Micah Martin received an assignment to St. John as assistant pastor—he was the lone called worker in the congregation. The interviewer is, at the time of this writing, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and also a member of St. John since his confirmation in 1995.

Jeffrey Suhr entered the world on July 30, 1951, in Watertown, Wisconsin and grew up in nearby Hustisford, the youngest of three children. He enjoyed what he describes as the typical childhood of a farm boy. Only later did he realize how his early life prepared him for ministry as he learned to emulate his father in both his work ethic and his attitude toward worship. Pastor Suhr describes the lifestyle characteristic of dairy farmers with these words: "You work until the work is done; and the work is never done."¹ In his youth, Suhr never had to wonder about the family's church attendance; he could always be sure that the car was leaving for church every Sunday at the same time, 8:45 AM. In those days, he had no serious intentions of pursuing the ministry for himself, but remembers his pastor as a man who was never flashy, but simply served as a faithful preacher who spoke the truth of the gospel week after week. Whether Suhr realized it or not at the time, his pastor had a great impact on his own ideas of what a gospel minister ought to be.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are Pastor Suhr's words, from his interview with the author.

Jeffrey Suhr received a Christian secondary education at the Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown and upon his graduation, he enrolled at Northwestern College, also in Watertown. Still hesitant to become a pastor, he remained unconvinced that the ministry was for him until his junior year at Northwestern. Looking back, he still cannot explain exactly what it was that steered him toward his career path, but after that moment he never looked back or second-guessed his choice. Suhr took the next step toward ministry as he attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin, where he grew into the mindset that every pastor's job is to put the focus of all his work on Christ crucified, a central idea to which he holds fast even to the present day.

In the spring of 1977, Jeffrey Suhr graduated from the Seminary and accepted his initial assignment to St. John, Center. He admits that he had no idea where he was headed, and asked a classmate, who referred to nearby Appleton as "sin city"—a reference to a few local establishments that contributed to the area's reputation for immorality. Fortunately for the Suhrs, their first impression was different. Upon arriving in their new hometown, Jeffrey and wife Lorinda Suhr found the members of the church to be welcoming; in his own words, "good farming people." It did not take long for this new pastor to feel comfortable with his new church, since he was able to become acquainted with the members through visits to every home.

As the years passed, the partnership between pastor and church grew. Without a conscious effort by Pastor Suhr to hand-pick people to fill needs, he saw how the Lord always seemed put the right people in the right positions of leadership and service in the congregation. His lengthy stay has allowed pastor and church to function "like a husband and a wife," as he describes the mutual respect and trust they grew to have for one another. This relationship has allowed Pastor Suhr to provide leadership without necessarily being present for every meeting of

every committee. He is especially grateful for the way the church council functions: Suhr cannot recall a time when one of the council members raised his voice; in fact, moments of humor are much more common than times of tension when these men gather to do the work of the church.

The title of this paper sums up Pastor Suhr's attitude as regards his role as servant of St. John. During the interview, he stressed the fact that he does not see himself as the one solely responsible for driving the church—that honor belongs to the Holy Spirit. When it comes to decision making, the responsibility lies with the membership of the St. John and their representative council. He makes this point to stress the fact that although the pastor may provide valuable insight, the ultimate accountability for decisions made by the council rests in their hands, and they need to stand behind their own resolutions. The elders of St. John have also taken on an attitude of accountability, and motivated by a constant focus on the gospel, they consistently surpass the expectations of Pastor Suhr.

Suhr's partnership with St. John has also benefited from the congregation's willingness to provide time off whenever he desires, trusting that he will be faithful with his time and efforts. The congregation has never imposed regulations for a vacation policy, but has always urged Pastor Suhr to bring in guest preachers whenever he desires, most often from nearby Fox Valley Lutheran High School. About ten years ago, St. John also decided to employ a church secretary, which has eased the burden of the pastor by providing a helping hand to assist with clerical work. Pastor Suhr no longer needed to be the one to complete some of the tasks that a secretary could handle. One can easily see how the members of St. John have always had a great measure of respect for the work the pastor does, and how they have done their best to offer times of relief and leisure to their faithful servant.

In addition to his service to St. John, Suhr has served as circuit pastor for over twenty-five of his thirty years in the public ministry. This position has done quite a bit to help him appreciate what God has given him by placing him as overseer of St. John, since on more than one occasion other congregations in the area have called him in to mediate issues between pastors and their churches. Since he understands the challenges of the ministry and many of the difficult situations ministers sometimes encounter, as he looks back he thanks God for allowing St. John to avoid such times of dissent.

Another reason for thanksgiving is the financial situation of St. John throughout Suhr's ministry. A church that operates with a positive balance in its budget is rare these days, but St. John has been an exception. Recently the congregation purchased forty acres of land from a nearby farmer for potential expansion or relocation in the future. To whom does Suhr give the credit for such a blessing? Certainly not himself. During the interview, he stressed again and again that the heart of the congregation does not change with the latest trends or the newest outreach strategies, but is—and by God's grace will always be—the gospel. Suhr says, "I have never gotten sick of preaching the message of Jesus, and I don't think people ever get tired of hearing the message of Jesus."

It is that very message of Jesus which drives every aspect of Suhr's ministry, whether stewardship, evangelism, or education. God's promises through Christ have proven sure within the walls of St. John and in the homes of their members, as they continue to give for the glory of God and the spread of his gospel at home and abroad. Pastor Suhr insists that if the preaching focused on the cross, on repentance and on forgiveness ever ceases to yield a harvest, he will be the first to lock the doors. Until that day, the doors remain open, and more people enter every year. Suhr explains that recently the trend in St. John has been to have more adult confirmands

than children—a result of the gospel of Christ crucified working in the hearts of the members, "people inviting people," and the Holy Spirit working through the shared message. The lengthy stay of Suhr at St. John may be a contributing factor (at least humanly speaking) in this process, by giving the members confidence that friends, relatives, and visitors will find a welcoming atmosphere and a pastor willing to share the gospel with anyone they might invite to church. In the partnership of pastor and membership of St. John, Suhr stresses the fact that every Christian is an ambassador for Christ, a servant of the Lord who ought to have a loving concern for others in the hope of sharing heaven with them.

Although St. John is a parish without a Lutheran elementary school, education is not a low priority for the congregation. St. John has resolved to provide full tuition for the children of the congregation who receive Christian education at the primary level, along with a hearty support of Fox Valley Lutheran High School. The congregation has also recently approved scholarship grants for members of the congregation who choose to pursue the full-time ministry at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Pastor Suhr certainly enjoys the opportunity to teach confirmation classes and direct the Sunday School teachers, but sees his top priority as educating the parents and making sure they understand their important role in raising Christian children. He realizes that God instituted the family as the chief means of Christian education. Recalling his experience, Suhr notes that the biggest factor in how children turn out has never been the school they attended (Lutheran or public), but rather the home environment and the parenting. Whether by conscious effort or not, Suhr has employed an approach to educating the youth of the congregation that follows in the footsteps of Martin Luther: every Christian mother and father has the responsibility to bring the child up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

As he looks back on his experience, not every memory Suhr has of his ministry is a fond one. He can recall a number of occasions where he made mistakes that led to unhappy endings. He credits one common denominator for the majority of these failures: allowing people too new to the faith to get involved too deeply in the workings of the church. As he describes such situations, "Almost inevitably I've seen it fail." Unfortunately, in some cases, not only have members fallen from good standing, but they have also taken others with them. Suhr cautions future pastors to be cautious of whom one might authorize to lead Bible studies; such lay leaders must be those who are mature in their faith and "grounded in the Word."

At the same time, Pastor Suhr appreciates every gift God has given through his partnership with St. John, even those mistakes from which he has learned ways to improve the way he does ministry in the future. The blessings for his family have also been multiple, as his wife and children have benefited from the continuity of life in the Appleton area as a result of his lengthy stay. Suhr is thankful that his family will always have a place to call home, because they can look back and see how they enjoyed the stability of coming home to the parsonage of St. John.

Only recently did Pastor and his wife purchase a home, and the two moved for the first time in thirty years. This change took place so that the parsonage could be available for Suhr's new partner in ministry, the newly assigned Pastor Micah Martin. St. John has grown to the point where as a congregation, the consensus was that the ministry of the church could be expanded if the congregation added another called worker. Clearly the addition of a full-time partner will impact Suhr's role as he serves to mentor the new Seminary graduate, although Suhr emphasizes that the partnership will be a success if the two continue to communicate as brothers in Christ for the glory of God and keep the focus on the Savior.

When asked whether he has thought about retirement plans, Pastor Suhr demonstrates his love for God's people in the congregation when he admits that he would love to be a part of the ministry of St. John indefinitely, or at least as long as God gives him the ability. He cannot think of anything else to which he might retire, since, as he quotes Peter in the book of Acts, there is "no other name under heaven by which we must be saved," and he desires to preach that name until he is no longer able.

The observer of this interview cannot help but perceive that this is a man who certainly values the countless ways God has blessed his career thus far; this interview and paper reveal his gratitude toward the ministry God has given him, his partnership with St. John, Center. All credit and glory for past and present success Suhr humbly gives to the Lord of the Church. At the close of the interview session, he voices a prayer that if his future does someday include retirement, there will be no formal farewell, only a chance for him to say, "Thank you, Lord, for giving me this opportunity." St. John is certainly thankful as well for the gift of a faithful pastor, Rev. Jeffrey Suhr.