

St. Matthew's, Benton Harbor, Michigan:  
Following Jesus for Ninety Years

by

Bill Schuerman

Senior Church History

Prof Frederick

05/11/88

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

St. Matthew's, Benton Harbor, Michigan:

Following Jesus for Ninety Years

Every Call Day at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary one particular call arouses the interest of most middlers. This is the call to St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Benton Harbor, MI. There are two aspects to this congregation that make it stand out in the line of churches which receive vicars. One, Benton Harbor is a depressed area of the country to where many blacks migrated shortly after the second world war. Two, St. Matthew's is the one congregation where the vicar is required to preach in the German language. These two make an intriguing combination, and an interesting congregation in which to work.

In the southwestern corner of Michigan, about thirty miles north of the Indiana border, lies the town of Benton Harbor. The congregation of St. Matthew's has played a very important role in God's kingdom here. While at the present time her role seems to be diminishing in scope as this body of Christ on the corner of Colfax and Kline Streets grows older, nevertheless the manner in which God used her in the past should not be forgotten. In Matthew 9 Jesus quietly said to the tax collector: "Follow me." Jesus was not flashy or demanding. Rather he was simple and direct. "Follow me." Throughout its history St. Matthew's has striven to follow Jesus, not with flashiness but with consistency. May she be remembered for this.

The story began in western Russia. Many Germans had been in-

vited there by the Russian leaders in order to help develop the Russian culture and advance her prosperity. Yet when thousands of Germans settled and began to develop the resources of those fertile lands, the natives grew restless and envious of German thriftiness. Upon petitioning their government, the Russians restricted the Germans from holding property rights and conducting schools in their own language. These actions started German immigrations to Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the United States.

Apparently in 1894 the first of such immigrants settled in the Benton Harbor area, specifically in Sodus (a few miles away). This unknown person liked the area so well that he wrote back to his Lutheran friends in Volhynia. Soon many German Lutherans were streaming to the area of southwestern Michigan. Several members of St. Matthew's related their experiences to this writer. Mr. Gustav Klukas said that shortly before the first world war the Russian attitude toward Germans turned from dislike to antagonism. The Russian army would travel around, seeking to either forcibly enlist Germans into their armies or imprison them. Mr. Klukas as a boy had to hide with his family in the forests when the armies came around.

During this time more Germans moved from Volhynia across Europe to America. Immigration was tough, especially for the younger ones. Cornelia Hein, who also had to hide in the forests from the Russians, came over to America as a teenager a few weeks prior to the outbreak of World War I. While en route to western Europe and a ship, she and many people all over Europe saw one day

an ominous hand which wrote in the sky a message about bloodshed and the coming war (it seems that everyone could read this message in his or her own language). This happened around Easter of 1914 (she was in Poland at the time). Mrs. Hein related to this listener (in German) her astonishment at the message that was predicting the war. She was overwhelmed at it. She said that many found it difficult to believe what they saw since it was so amazing.

Another German couple, M/M Henry Altergott, had a rough voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. But their Shepherd was with them. They knew this for during the trip they said that they saw Jesus walking on the ocean a short distance from their ship. It was this kind of Christian people who came from Volhynia and settled in Benton Harbor. These courageous Christians joined a young church, St. Matthew's, so that they could follow Jesus.

These German Lutherans first gathered together as a Christian body in 1894. They sent an earnest appeal to Phillip von Rohr, who was then the president of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other states. The response came in the form of an inexperienced pastor, Rev. A. Cronheim. The people organized under the name of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. Soon afterwards they purchased a building site for their church (two lots on Broadway between Catalpa and Britain Streets). But they lost the land when some unknown disagreement developed between the congregation and the pastor. He left and they dissolved.

But the need for kingdom work was still pressing in Benton Harbor. Those Germans wanted to follow Jesus and so made a second

appeal to Phillip von Rohr for a pastor. On February 15, 1898 graduate H. Peters was installed. Although he served a short time here, the congregation grew spiritually and numerically. At this time the group reorganized and chose the name St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church. The first church building (on the southwestern corner of Harrison and LaVette Streets) seated three hundred and used the basement as a schoolroom. But once again St. Matthew's suffered a setback. When the church was dedicated on August 22, 1898, Pastor Peters resigned.

But the Lord who had led St. Matthew's this far did not leave his flock in Benton Harbor. The newly formed church council (Fred Gleffe, chairman; Emil Nintz, secretary; Gustav Seils, treasurer; August Essig and August Hartman, trustees) met with the Michigan district president, W. Bodamer. Soon afterward they sent a call to August Behrendt. He accepted and was installed in October of 1898. For the next ten years St. Matthew's would put down roots and God's kingdom would advance in the Benton Harbor area under Pastor Behrendt. During these years many immigrants settled some distance from St. Matthew's. Pastor Behrendt would baptize and instruct people who came to St. Matthew's from Coloma, Eau Claire, Sodus, Stevensville, and Watervliet. The group in Stevensville was growing rapidly. They asked Pastor Behrendt for help in organizing a church in 1900. St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Stevensville became the first daughter of St. Matthew's. This plus five other daughter congregations within the next fifty-five years was perhaps the greatest single contribution St. Matthew's has made in following Jesus.

Pastor Behrendt accepted a call to Colby, WI early in the summer of 1908. He was replaced in December of that year by Pastor Henry C. Haase, who served the flock until 1948. Together this body of Christ in Benton Harbor continued the work of building God's kingdom by helping to organize four additional daughter congregations. Soon after Pastor Haase began his work, he was making twenty-five mile trips to Dowagiac to serve the Lutherans living there (some had been coming to St. Matthew's since 1908). In 1910 St. Matthew's helped organize St. John's of Dowagiac.

It was the same story in Sodus, where already in 1908 Pastor Behrendt had been holding worship services in members' homes on Sunday afternoons. So on the advice of St. Matthew's and with the approval of the Mission Board, the Lutherans of Sodus bought a Methodist church in 1912 and formed St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sodus. God was strongly leading St. Matthew's. After formally existing for only two years, God led it to help produce three daughters in the next twelve years.

The next two daughter congregations which were formed under Pastor Haase were spaced out over a greater period of time. Pastor Haase had been serving members in Eau Claire. But since his own growing flock needed more attention, a change was advised. Grace Lutheran Church of Eau Claire was organized in December of 1921. In 1922 they bought an abandoned local church and began to be served by the pastors of St. John's of Dowagiac. Then in 1936 Grace called its first pastor (Norman Engel). During and after the second world war Benton Harbor experienced a surge of growth as did St.

Joseph on the west side of the St. Joseph River. The mission board encouraged St. Matthew's to start a mission on the east side of the business district of Benton Harbor. So several members of St. Matthew's formed Grace Lutheran Church in May, 1945. (Later Grace built its church on the south side of St. Joseph when it became evident that the growth of the Twin Cities had turned from Benton Harbor to St. Joseph.)

The sixth daughter of St. Matthew's came about through a concentration of members in the Fairplain district of Benton Harbor, south of St. Matthew's. Pastor Haase had apparently done some work with these members. Later when E. H. Wendland was St. Matthew's pastor, Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized on December 11, 1955. It dedicated its church building in May of 1959 and continues to enjoy fellowship with St. Matthew's through joint Tre Ore services on Good Friday and joint choral sunrise services on Easter morning. The Michigan District History: 1833-1970 has compared this facet of the kingdom work at St. Matthew's with "a mother hen and her chicks."

St. Matthew's followed Jesus in spreading God's kingdom throughout Benton Harbor and the surrounding areas in spite of its initially shaky start. The congregation has also followed Jesus in training its own flock of believers even though there were some problems here, too. The congregation overcame the loss of the property purchased in 1894. Four years later their new church was built. And under the Lord's guiding hand the flock increased by more than two hundred communicant members between 1908 and 1912.

St. Matthew's soon became overcrowded and on holidays even had to turn some people away.

To remedy the situation a building committee was formed. They bought the present site on April 2, 1916. But the war in Europe interrupted their building program until the spring of 1919 as thirty members joined the armed forces overseas. The congregation engaged Anton Dohman of Milwaukee as the architect and the Singer Chimney Company of Chicago as the contractor for construction. The contract went into effect on June 24, 1919. Matters went well for only two months. At the end of August the company went bankrupt with the building only one-third complete. A local company took over the construction on a percentage basis and finished the church a year later. The building was dedicated on October 24, 1920 with guest pastoral speakers G. E. Bergemann (the synodical president), J. Moussa, and Julius Haase (the pastor's father).

But the change in builders left the congregation with an unexpected debt of \$40,000 (due to increases in material costs and wages). The solution they found was to close the day school for what would be six years (1919-1924). This was a rather sad event because St. Matthew's had always been concerned about her children. This is evident in the fact that as tight as money was in 1898, the members managed to provide a basement in their first church building for use as a one room school. As soon as the debt was reduced, the old church was remodeled into a school house in 1924 and then opened in the fall of 1925 to train children to follow Jesus.



Before this closure Pastors Behrendt and Haase had been the teachers. But St. Matthew's was growing and needed a full time worker in each of the preaching and teaching ministries. They called Arvin Jantz from DMLC who started in 1925 with forty children and continued to be a guide for St. Matthew's lambs until his retirement in 1969. In 1934 the school was remodeled into two rooms with two teachers and then into three rooms with three teachers in 1945. By this time the school had grown to one hundred eight students.

The need to train Jesus' lambs continued to increase. While Pastor Haase had helped establish four daughter congregations, he did not feel capable of overseeing such a large project as building a school. Already in 1943 the lots on McAllister Avenue between Catalpa and Harrison Avenues were purchased for the purpose of a playground and school. After leading St. Matthew's for forty years, he led them once more to see that it was time for new leadership, for a new shepherd.

St. Matthew's then called E. H. Wendland. During his years (1949-1962) the congregation focused on itself, striving to follow Jesus inwardly. The first major event was of course the school, built with four classrooms, a gym and a kitchen in 1950. The new building opened its doors in 1951 to one hundred twenty-nine students and four teachers. Almost immediately it was too small as God blessed and increased the membership in the church under Pastor Wendland. It grew from 780 in 1948 to 1270 in 1962. So in 1955 a section was added on the south end, consisting of four more class-

rooms and a teachers' lounge in order to accommodate five teachers and their two hundred students. By 1962 these figures jumped to eight teachers and 291 students following the Good Shepherd, Jesus. In the 1950's St. Matthew's also had a part in the drive to start a Christian high school. It was in her church that the first meetings were held to discuss the options of where to build a high school.

But then they had to let Pastor Wendland go. For the Lord led him to Africa. James Fricke replaced him in 1962 but was called to Michigan Lutheran Seminary in 1964 in order to help train future pastors and teachers. Sadly, the congregation was without a shepherd for a full year. But her daughter Good Shepherd aided her through its pastor, W. Zarling. Then in July of 1965 Kermit Biedenbender was installed as St. Matthew's new pastor, having accepted the call from South Dakota.

Pastor Biedenbender was not at St. Matthew's very long before the congregation saw that its school needs were changing again. Two classrooms contained over forty students each. In 1968 they built a second addition to relieve the crowding. The north section contained two more classrooms (one for every grade K-8, plus one on the south end converted to a library), a multi-purpose room for meetings of church and school groups, and larger office facilities. Also at this time St. Matthew's became an integral part of the vicar program of WLS. Many vicars have here learned about following Jesus as well as taught this to many children in the rooms of this newest section of the school.

Since this time the story has been a bit rough for St. Matthew's. Her daughters have been increasing while she has been slowly decreasing. City growth has moved away from Benton Harbor, thus some of her members have transferred to her daughters. So she has tried to reach into the black community which has surrounded her since the second world war. This has been difficult due to fears on both sides of the racial fence. But a few black families have learned to follow Jesus. They have joined St. Matthew's and are good witnesses to the community.

School attendance has also dropped (sharply in 1978 when Good Shepherd opened her own Christian day school) due to community changes and a declining birth rate. So after a self-study in 1986-1987, the congregation started a scholarship program for the school. It is now being used as a mission arm to reach into the community (black and white), hoping to arouse parental interest in quality Christian education through increased advertizing. In the current school year the enrollment jumped by more than ten percent.

St. Matthew's also experienced a tragedy in September of 1987. A white man broke into the church late at night to steal a cassette recorder system and a brass cross. He lit fires in an attempt to hide his theft. A policeman who happened to drive by (it wasn't his normal route) noticed the smoke and called the fire department. The brick building was saved (another twenty minutes and all would have been lost), but that brick held in the heat, boiling the paint off the walls and destroying the organ, the pulpit and the piano. (The man was arrested and the property was returned.)

This deeply shook the congregation but it also brought them closer together. Work days provided well the needed fellowship and support for these hurting followers of Jesus. People came to know fellow members they had not previously met. In the spring of 1988 the church was rebuilt and rededicated to following Jesus and teaching its lambs to do the same.

Much has happened to this congregation in the past ninety years. God's kingdom has advanced in many ways in this area of Michigan through St. Matthew's. So it is not with pride but with a sense of deep thankfulness that its members can say that they are a part of the tradition of following Jesus at this congregation. Although she is decreasing, God's kingdom in the area is not. She has taught six daughters to follow Jesus. Her offspring is doing the same. May they all have the same spirit of following Jesus in the future as they have in the past.

## Bibliography

Michigan District History: 1833-1970. Lithocrafters, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI. Copywrite: 1972 by the Michigan District of WELS.

Anniversary Booklets from the following years:

1948: Fifty Years of Grace: Golden Anniversary

1955: Dedication of an Addition to St. Matthew's Lutheran School.

1968: Dedication of a Second Addition to St. Matthew's School.

1980: Receiving God's Children for Seventy-five Years: St. Matthew's Lutheran School.

1983: Following Jesus for Eighty-five Years: St. Matthew's Lutheran Church.

Pictorial Directories :

1982.

1988.

Further Sources:

Oral Histories of Various Members of the Congregation.