

A HISTORY OF ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SCHOOL

NEILLSVILLE, WISCONSIN

With special emphasis on the effects of the
Bennett Law and the Protestant Controversy

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April 15, 1978

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Stephanie Kell for interviewing Prof. Sievert.
I would also like to thank Prof, Sievert for taking time out of his busy
schedule to answer my questions.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to all the teachers and students of St. John's
Evangelical Lutheran School, Neillsville, Wisconsin, past, present, and future.

THE LOCAL SETTING AT THE TIME OF THE FOUNDING OF
ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH AND SCHOOL

Neillsville is located in almost the exact center of the State of Wisconsin, in what is now called, "Beautiful Black River Country."

The humble beginnings of the Christian forefathers in the Neillsville area, were farms being grubbed, hoed, and hacked out of the timber land in the summer months, and logging in the woods during the long and often boring winter months. Chunk wood was hauled into Neillsville on a trip that lasted almost the entire day, and for only a few dollars a cord. The income of the early rural men was just a livelihood, pure and simple, without the benefit of any luxuries. With prices of farm products, that we today cannot fathom, these early pioneer Christians carried on. The following are a few examples of prices these early farmers had to contend with: "eggs at 3¢ per dozen, butter at 5¢ per pound, daily wages of 65¢ per day, and the best bushel of potatoes selling for only 15¢."¹ Oxen were used for power and some days only one stump was removed in the entire day's work.

The few dollars which were handled in those years by these early Christians and what they contributed to the Kingdom of God, may well be an example for all Christians of all times to follow. With a strong and secure faith in God and Jesus Christ His Son who died for their sins, these early Christians were led to establish and build a Christian Day School and then a church with the meagerest of means.

One of the most colorful figures in the founding of any early American Lutheran Church was the circuit rider. The life and work of the circuit rider was one of hardships and many difficulties, with the comparatively small salary of about \$150 per year. These men had to depend upon the good will of the people, whom they ministered unto, for food and a night's rest. What these circuit riders endured gives us some idea of what the Apostles

of Christ also endured as servants of the Lord ministering unto the people of the Lord. The sower, the servant of God, went forth to sow his seed, the Word of God. Some fell by the wayside, some on stoney ground, some among thorns, but some fell on good ground and brought forth fruit, fruit for the Kingdom of God. Villages, isolated farms, and lumber camps were visited in those days by the circuit rider.

The following is a picture of early Lutheranism in America where German immigrants were sought out. When the circuit rider arrived, any hospitable home became a church on a given day. A few boards across chairs and pews were ready. A table against the wall and the altar was installed. A basin somewhere and a font for the rite of Holy Baptism was set up. It is difficult at best to imagine driving a horse and buggy to church in some home in 20 degree below zero weather and the trip taking at least an hour. After arriving at the church-home the horses were put into sheds, covered with blankets, until the church service was completed. The hymns having been sung and the sermon preached, faith in their Savior and the life to come through faith in Christ was renewed within their hearts. This is the setting in which St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church and School was begun. Church records were kept beginning with the year 1886.

THE SYNODICAL SETTING AT THE TIME OF THE FOUNDING OF

A ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH AND SCHOOL

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church and School was founded when the Synod was in a period of church expansion. There was a very large increase in the number of new ^Ncogregations after 1881. This decided jump in the number of new congregations since 1881 may be accounted for "by the greater youth,

uniformity of work, and the 'synodmindedness' of Synod's own sons, who beside were at home in the American environment, and the accord with Missouri by no means eliminated competition for mission fields."³ Couple with this the fact that the mushroom growth of German immigration spelled new mission fields, and also the prospect of a constant supply of pastors by the Seminary; there was no hesitation on Synod's part to establish new missions. Koehler also tells us, "Since 1879 Synod's frontier in the northwestern part of the state moved to Marshfield and Medford."⁴ Neillsville was part of this area. This, then, is the extent of the Synodical setting at the time of the founding of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church and School.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SURVEY OF

ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SCHOOL

A unique plan was followed in establishing a Lutheran congregation in Neillsville. Or as Prof. Sievert put it, "The peculiar circumstances under which the school was founded make its beginning vary from that of many similar types of schools."⁵ In looking at the foundation of the church, "we behold a precious stone upon which the congregation is built up, namely the subject of Christian education, - a Christian Day School."⁶ This wise choice was made by the first called minister and has always proved itself a real strength of the flock at Neillsville.

It was on January 10, 1886, that a little flock of 6 families received the Rev. Adolph Hoyer of Princeton, Wisconsin into its midst to administer the means of grace. The Diamond Jubilee booklet of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rhineland, Wisconsin, sheds some light as to what he was doing in northern and central Wisconsin: "Pastor Adolph Hoyer of Princeton, Wisconsin

surveyed mission possibilities in the mill towns of northern and central Wisconsin, at the request of Rev. E. Mayerhoff, superintendent of missions for the Wisconsin Synod."⁷ The Dedication Booklet of Zion also tells us, "During this time Pastor E. Mayerhoff, chairman of the mission board of upper Wisconsin, would either come himself to look after the spiritual needs of these parishes, or he would send other pastors or students who would administer the Word."⁸ The Christians at Neillsville readily and eagerly followed the plan which Rev. Hoyer suggested, to engage a student to teach and conduct services. Mr. H. H. Ebert of the Theological Seminary at Milwaukee was the first student to serve.

Usually one finds that a congregational school is first organized after the congregation itself is founded. How different was the beginning of St. John's School! Even before the congregation was organized the precious foundation of the same was laid in the form of the Parish School on January 18, 1886.

On that memorable day Mr. Ebert, realizing the need of an institution to train the future members of the church, opened the first Christian Day School in an office building in the heart of the city. The opening enrollment was between 18 and 20 pupils. This soon increased to 30 pupils before the close of the term. The school then occupied a hardware store on the North Side.

The first question which quite naturally comes to mind is: Why did the school come first? To be sure, both Hoyer and Ebert greatly influenced this fledgling group to have a parochial grade school. But before the pile of platitudes becomes too high to handle; there are a few other factors to consider.

First of all the education offered by the area public schools was just not that good. Being at the fringe in a relative frontier area, teachers, and especially good teachers were at a premium. The public school classrooms were overcrowded. School supplies were limited and hard to come by. There was little to no special work or help between individual students and the teacher. If you were having problems it was just too bad for you, you got passed over for the sake of the group. This was a situation that these German immigrants were unaccustomed to. If they had just left Germany, they left an educational system which had developed over centuries. If they had come from eastern parts of the United States, they had also left a better educational system behind. Coupling all these factors together, it is easy to see and to understand why the school came before the church.

The course of study adopted was the same as was used in the public schools of Neillsville at the time. Ebert tells us, "The entire curriculum of the public schools was adopted in the church school and also the text books were used. For religious training and German the text books of our Synod were used."⁹ Here in Neillsville, the Word of God came first and foremost, as it always should. It was the Light midst the darkness of a sin-sick world.

The beginning was humble. There was no special building; no new seats were available; Mr. Ebert, in addition to his many pastoral duties, also took upon himself the duties of teaching. "This may all seem inauspicious, but let us not forget that "the one thing needful," God's Word, was taught to lead the pupils forward to better things."¹⁰

Different paragraphs in the records of the church touch upon matters of Christian education at the time of the schools early years, and one certainly

can safely conclude that there was a great interest manifested for the school by the various members. Noteworthy is the fact that a school board was elected already in 1886.

Another interesting fact is that the school had its first official teacher already in November of 1897. He was Mr. Louis Serrahn, who later was destined to become president of the General Teachers' Conference of the Western Wisconsin District of our Synod. At this time a "Schulordnung" or school constitution was passed. Among its outstanding features was the one point which asked that all the children of the congregation attend the parish school.

The rest of the history of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran School is rather mundane, and typical except for the two incidents already alluded to in the title; the Bennett Law and the Protestant Controversy. Enrollment increased. Teachers came and went. The facilities were improved. The culmination of all this is the fact that in 1978 99% of the congregation's children attend a beautiful 4 room facility built in 1955. Of special interest to this writer is the fact that the grandfather of one of my classmates, David Schultz, served the school for a brief time. Of Synodical interest would be the fact that Prof. Erich Sievert of DMLC received a lot of his practical experience here at Neillsville as a principal of the school.

THE EFFECTS OF THE BENNETT LAW ON
ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SCHOOL

"Perhaps at no time in its history has the Wisconsin Synod participated more extensively in politics than it did from 1889-1891."¹¹ Those were the years in which the so-called Bennett Law was in effect in the State of Wisconsin.

"The Bennett Law came after two centuries of almost complete non-interference into the affairs of the Lutheran school system by local, state, and national legislatures."¹² But with the rapid expansion of the public schools, conflicts between the supports of the parochial schools and the supporters of the public schools were almost inevitable. Basically there were two reasons which stirred up this hornets nest. First of all, in some parts of the country there were various church leaders who demanded that they be given a share of public funding to run their schools. Secondly, was the fact that a lot of people had a hard time accepting a church school which was conducted in a foreign language. "The school issue gave them a chance to couple this prejudice with a cause--preserving their public schools and thereby promoting America."¹³

It was in this spirit that Governor William Hoard, in his address to the state legislature on January 10, 1889, recommended the passing of a law to "make it the duty of county and state superintendents to inspect all schools, for the purpose and with the authority only to require that reading and writing in English be taught daily therein."¹⁴ He based this recommendation on a report which claimed that from 40,000 to 50,000 children of school age were receiving no education whatsoever.

The legislature acted very quickly on the Governor's proposal. About one month later the Pond Bill was introduced at Madison. The Pond Bill asked that all principals or teachers of commercial, parochial, and any other private schools in Wisconsin give a report to the state on all pupils from the age of 2-24. This report was to include their names and ages, the number of days they attended school, the courses they were taught, how many students were in

each course, and whether their classes were taught in German or English.

The Pond Bill died in committee after only two months. The reason it failed can largely be attributed to a petition drawn up by Ernst, Notz, and Koehler, all faculty members of NWC. The 40,000 signatures on this petition were enough to convince the law-makers to let the Pond Bill die quickly and silently.

However, while the opponents of the Pond Bill were still basking in the glorious light of their victory, Micheal Bennett, chairman of the House Comittee on Education, proposed a new Bill. The Bennett Law, passed on April 18, 1889, was rushed through both houses with no real protest.

The following are the educational reforms proposed by the Bennett Law:

Section 1. Every parent or other person having under his control a child between the ages of seven and fourteen years shall annually cause such child to attend some public or private day-school in the city, town, or district in which he resides for a period of not less than twelve weeks in each year, which number of weeks shall be fixed prior to the first day of September in each year by the board of education or board of directors of the city, town, or district, and for a portion or portions thereof, to be so fixed by such boards that the attendance shall be consecutive; and such boards shall, at least ten days prior to the beginning of such period publish the time or times of attendance in such manner as such boards shall direct; provided that such boards shall not fix such compulsory period at more than twenty-four weeks in each year.

Section 2. For every neglect of such duty the person having such control and so offending shall forfeit to the use of the public schools of such city, town, or district a sum not less than three dollars (\$3.00) nor more than twenty dollars (\$20.00), and failure for such week or portion of a week on the part of any such person to comply with the provisions of this act shall constitute a distinct offense; provided that any such child shall be excused from attendance at school required by this act, by the board of education or school directors of the city town, or district, in which such child resides, upon its being shown to their satisfaction that the person so neglecting is not able to send such child to school or that instruction has otherwise been given for a like period of time to such child in the elementary branches commonly taught in the public schools or that such child has already acquired such elementary branches of learning or that his physical or

mental constitution is such as to render attendance inexpedient or impracticable; and in all cases where such child be excused, the penalty herein provided shall not be incurred.

Section 3. Any person having control of a child who, with intent to evade the provisions of the act, shall make a wilfull false statement concerning the age of such child or the time such child has attended school shall, for such offense, forfeit the sum of not less than three dollars (#3.00) nor more than twenty dollars (\$20.00) for the use of the public schools of the city, town, or district.

Section 4. Five days prior to the beginning of any prosecution under this act such board shall cause a written notice to be personally served upon such person having control of any such child, of his duty under this act, and of his default in failing to comply with the provisions hereof; and if, upon the hearing of such prosecution, it shall appear to the satisfaction of the court that before and after the receipt of such notice such person has caused such child to attend as school as provided in this act in good faith and with intent to continue such attendance, then the penalty provided by this act shall not be incurred.

Section 5. No school shall be regarded as a school under this act unless there shall be taught therein as part of the elementary education of the children, reading, writing, arithmetic, and United States History in the English language.

Section 6. Prosecution under this act shall only be instituted and carried on by the authority of such boards and shall be brought in the name of such boards; and all fines and penalties, when collected, shall be paid to the school treasurer of such city, town, or district or other officers entitled to receive school moneys, the same to be held and accounted for as other school moneys received for school purposes.

Section 7. Jurisdiction to enforce the penalties herein described in this act is hereby conferred on justices of the peace and police magistrates within their respective counties. 15

After a great battle this law was fianlly repealed; February, 1891.

Now to the question at hand, what effect did the Bennett Law have on St. John's School? Upon Mr. Ebert's departure in the spring of 1886, Mr. F. Eppling Jr. served as pastor and teacher, and he also continued to teach in the school after he was called as the regular pastor. At this time school was held in a room on the second floor in the North Side Public Grade School.

Prof. Sievert tells us, "Due to the Bennett Law, which tended to suppress parochial schools, our school later found quarters in various other buildings in the city."¹⁶

From what I've been able to garner from local historians this was the only official act that the Neillsville school board imposed on St. John's school in regard to the Bennett Law. Once again that action was in the form of an eviction notice to St. John's congregation to vacate the room they were at that time using for a school in the North Side Public Grade School. The reason the board acted in this manner was because they feared that there might be some sort of state reprisal for the tolerance they were showing a parochial school and also for the negligence they would be showing in not upholding and enforcing the Bennett Law. Their other motive for this action was purely one of selfishness and self-preservation. They were afraid if all the ruckus and rumblings from Madison and Milwaukee over the Bennett Law reached Neillsville in full strength; they just might lose their jobs as a result of their tolerance and negligence in regard to the Bennett Law. And so to cover their tracks as best they could and still keep a relative degree of peace and quiet in the community; they issued the eviction notice.

This eviction caused the members of the congregation a lot of grief. For a while, a ^{an} undetermined period of time, school was canceled until a building could be found. When they finally did find a building, actually a spare room in a hardware store on the North Side, they were only in it a week before the school board officials ^S_A presured the owner into issuing another eviction notice. At this time one of the ^h members of the congregation came to the rescue and offered a shed on his farm which was right outside the city limits

to be used as a temporary school. Needless to say, the congregation accepted his offer.

This hassle over the Bennett Law had a lasting effect that can even be seen to this day upon St. John's congregation. The immediate result was that plans for building a school of their own were quickly put into action. The long range result was that the congregation formed an undying loyalty to their school which sometimes even overrode their loyalty to the church. A good example of this loyalty would be the following. The congregation was completely satisfied to attend services in an overcrowded, delapidated, run-down 1887 version of a church as late as 1963. But this is not the way they felt and feel about their school. After the additions and renovations to the original edifice were no longer satisfactory to the membership, plans were immediately begun to build a new school; which was completed in 1955. Even as recently as March 1977 there is a motion in the church records to withhold mission money from the Synod for two months to pay for a new heating plant for the school. This motion was only defeated by the narrowest of margins. Make no mistake about it, the Bennett Law had a lasting effect upon St. John's congregation.

THE EFFECT OF THE PROTESTANT CONTROVERSY ON

ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SCHOOL

In the year 1928 St. John's congregation passed through a very rough time, "when the seed of strife that the "old evil foe" had sown among the wheat, sprang up and threatened to choke the good seed."¹⁷ It was in the year 1928 that the faction of St. John's congregation which sympathized with the Protestant Conference left St. John's. The group that left the congregation organized the Grace Church of the Protestant Conference and conducted

services in the Norwegian Lutheran Church building on the North Side of the city.

This deplorable affair painfully shocked the old pastor Brandt, who had been the faithful shepherd of the flock for twenty-four years. In a special May meeting of the congregation's voting members, he even tendered his resignation to the congregation because he was convinced he was the cause of the division in the church for the stand he took against the Protestants. However, the congregation voted unanimously to keep him as their leader. Still, in another special meeting in July, the weary leader laid down his staff. This time the congregation accepted his resignation and gave him a vote of thanks as a last act of love.

In all 15 families left the church, of these 15, 12 had children in St. John's school. This decreased the enrollment for a time, but eventually all but one of the 15 families came back to St. John's. Prof. Sievert credits the school for most of these families coming back. It seems between the pressure their children put on them to return to the school where all their friends were, and the better, more individualized education St. John's offered, many of these families saw the light to some degree and came back. Already in 1936, "The Grace Lutheran Church of the Protestant Conference, once a strong and defiant opposition, having its own resident pastor for seven years, is not now active."¹⁸ It might also at this time be mentioned that there are but 3 Protestants left in Neillsville today.

The faction might have and did come back, and the enrollment was back to the numbers it had before the division; but hard feelings were slow in healing. To illustrate this Prof. Sievert tells the following story.

A 7th grade boy from one of the families who had left, caught pneumonia. (Keep in mind that this is before there where antibiotics.) The boy had a very high fever. In his delirium he kept calling for his teacher Mr. Sievert. The parents told this to Mr. Sievert, and he came over and prayed for the boy. The boy recovered and shortly after this the family returned to St. John's and the boy continued his education in the school. J.P. Koehler heard about this and was enraged. Looking like something out ^{of} the Spanish-American war, because of the military hat he always wore, he cornered Mr. Sievert at the school. He accused Mr. Sievert of sheep-stealing, and as he left he shook his finger under Mr. Sievert's nose and said, "You young whipper-snapper!" So once again St. John's Evangelical School played a very influential role in the history of the church.

CONCLUSION

The story of St. John's Lutheran School shows God as its head, built upon Christ the chief corner stone and God's people, believing, worshipping, working, and giving, as the great family of the Triune God.

At the end of their course may all those who passed through its doors be permitted to hear His gracious words; "Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."

ENDNOTES

- ¹Seventy-Fifth Anniversary 1886-1961. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Neillsville, Wisconsin. June 11, 1961. p. 2.
- ²Ibid., p. 2.
- ³Koehler, John. The History of the Wisconsin Synod. (St. Cloud: Sentinel Publishing Company, 1970), p. 194.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 195.
- ⁵Golden Anniversary Jubilee 1886-1936. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Neillsville, Wisconsin. Sept. 6, 1936. p. 25.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 4.
- ⁷Our Diamond Jubilee. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Oct. 16, 1960. p. 5.
- ⁸Dedication Booklet. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Feb. 3, 1929.
- ⁹A letter of Rev. H.H. Ebert to the Golden Jubilee Committee. May, 1936. p. 2.
- ¹⁰Seventy-Fifth Anniversary 1886-1961. op. cit., p. 26.
- ¹¹Schroeder, Joel. "Wisconsin Synod: right or wrong in handling the Bennett Law? p. 1
- ¹²Beck, Walter. Lutheran Elementary Schools in the United States. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), p. 225.
- ¹³Schroeder, op. cit., p. 2.
- ¹⁴Beck, op. cit., p. 227.
- ¹⁵Wisconsin Statutes, 1889. chapter 519.
- ¹⁶Golden Anniversary Booklet 1886-1936. op. cit., p. 26.
- ¹⁷Golden Anniversary Booklet 1886-1936. op. cit., p. 11.
- ¹⁸Golden Anniversary Booklet 1886-1936. op. cit., p. 12.

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The church records of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Neillsville, Wisconsin.