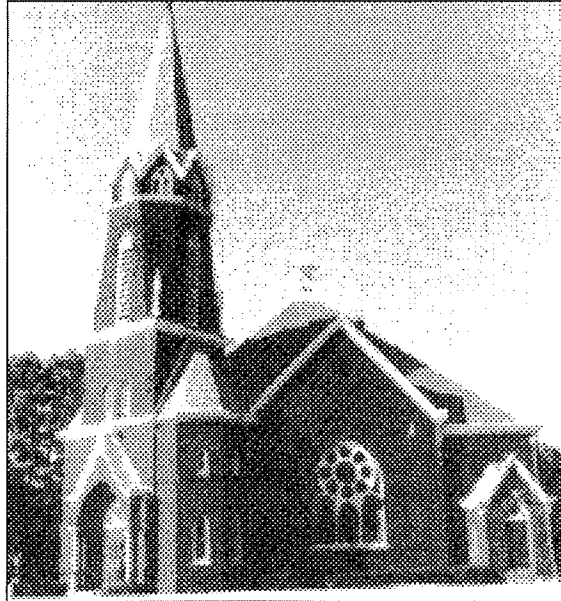


"Like a steady rain..."



Changes in the community and in
church membership in the last
quarter century of

**St. Matthew's Evangelical
Lutheran Church,
Benton Harbor, Michigan**

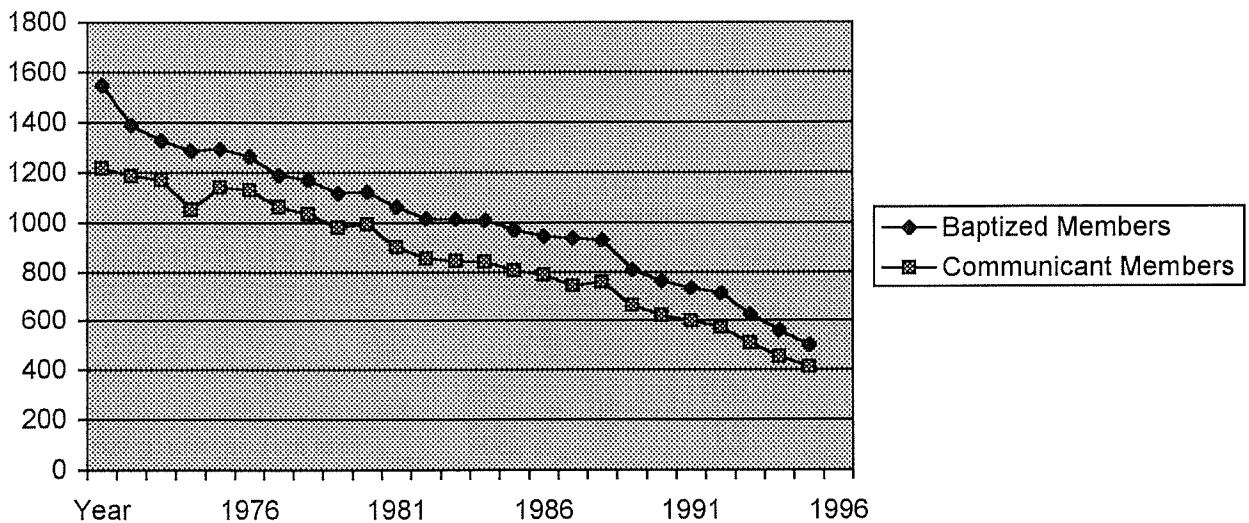
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Spring 1998

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Introduction

St. Matthew's Membership 1972-1996



(Source: WELS Statistical Reports, 1972-1996)

Even before I had arrived in Benton Harbor I began to wonder. It was the late summer of 1996, and I was about to begin my vicar year at St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church. I knew only a few basic things. I knew that St. Matthew's had at one time been a much larger congregation than it presently was. I knew that its expansive nine-classroom school had once been nearly filled with students and that now many of those rooms stood unused most of the time. And so, naturally, I wondered. I wondered why so many people had left. And when I learned how large the drop was (over 1000 members in 25 years — about a 66 percent loss) I wondered even more. Why had this drastic decrease in membership taken place?

During my year there I tried – informally and when I was able – to answer my question. Various answers began to form from bits of information I gleaned from various conversations. This paper is a continuation of my quest to flesh out those answers, or to test their veracity. What follows is my attempt to learn more of the history of this fascinating body of believers and to understand some of the changes it has endured in the last quarter century.

I do not mean to provide a definitive history of the congregation. Let this rather be the beginning of a new study of this facet of St. Matthew's history. I intend to trace and study some of the factors which brought about the decline in membership in the last 25 years of St. Matthew's history. Specifically, I will show how a number of developments in the community of Benton Harbor had effects on the congregation. Several people have already compiled histories of St. Matthew's that cover the main facts and events in her century of existence. I hope to add to that body of work. On this base, someone will perhaps wish to continue building in the future – someone who is able to explore avenues I could not or did not.

My material is not necessarily arranged chronologically. Usually I address one topic at a time, exploring how a certain factor made its impact on the membership of St. Matthew's. My sources are both written and oral. Statistics, written history and oral history are included. Some oral history is from documented interviews, while other parts are based on my whole year's experience as vicar there. I thank Jill Rauh, Elli Maas and Shirley Akright especially for taking time compiling statistics and records for me. I truly am thankful for their work.

I pray that this effort will prove useful for God's dear people at St. Matthew's and ultimately for all those to whom they will extend the gracious promises of our Savior. It is my hope to assist the ministry of St. Matthew's future by setting down in written form part of her past.

A sketch of the church

In general, things still seemed to be going well in the early 1970s. St. Matthew's was large and bustling with activity. Sunday attendance was well over 600, with about 150 of those attending the 9:30 German service. The school enrollment exceeded 200 students, and the faculty numbered nine—as high as it had ever been. Over thirty children were still being confirmed yearly, and the average number of marriages per year was usually around twenty. With 1548 baptized souls and 1218 communicants, St. Matthew's in 1972 was a large, vibrant community.

Granted, the numbers were going down a little year by year. Membership had peaked in the early 1960s, especially after the wave of German immigrants found their way to southwestern Michigan in the mid and late 1950s. Most of these were people who had lived in the area that became part of the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Evicted from their homes—often more than once—they moved to the United States. By the early 1970s St. Matthew's, which had been behind the formation of several new area congregations throughout her history, had daughtered two congregations in the last two decades: Grace and Good Shepherd. Grace began east and north of downtown Benton Harbor (St. Matthew's is a few blocks south of downtown) and then had relocated to St. Joseph. Grace had outgrown its facilities and elected to move south to the edges of St. Joseph where plenty of land was available. Good Shepherd was located in Fairplain, a mile or so south of Benton Harbor proper, a now well established residential area. As it is supposed to go with daughter congregations, people began to

transfer out of St. Matthew's, the mother congregation. They also went to St. Paul's in Stevensville, several miles to the southwest of Benton Harbor. St. Paul's was closer to the growing subdivisions of south St. Joseph and the Stevensville area.¹

Nevertheless, St. Matthew's was still going strong. But changes were beginning to take place in her community. These changes would eventually have a substantial impact on the people of St. Matthew's.

¹ I've provided only a sketch of St. Matthew's in the early 1970s here. For a full history of the congregation, contact St. Matthew's to obtain a copy of their 100th anniversary booklet, which includes a complete history. The anniversary booklet history on that written by former St. Matthew's vicar Bill Schuermann's in 1988. Schuermann's history is on file at the library of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

A sketch of the city

Benton Harbor proper is 4.4 square miles and unfurls along the St. Joseph River like a flag in the wind, so the town is bordered by the waterway to the south and to the east. As the river curls south, so does the town. Benton Harbor took full advantage of its access to the river, and in 1858 dredged a shipping canal, which extends like a finger into the downtown. Fruit-growers and foundries could now easily load boats and ship their goods to Chicago and other cities along the Great Lakes.

Fruit was for many years the area's sustenance. The region's raw, ragged hills and proximity to Lake Michigan makes it prime terrain for growing fruit. The hills allow the cold air to drain away from the trees, and the lake moderates the climate in the spring and fall, when there might otherwise be false warmings or early freezes. For many years, Benton Harbor boasted the world's largest outdoor non-citrus fruit market; area farmers sold their cherries, apples, peaches, grapes, and apricots there. Fresh produce is still so large a commodity that the local newspaper carries weekly bushel prices.

Benton Harbor also became home to a flurry of manufacturing activity, most of it centered on the automobile – foundries and parts plants, primarily. Heath Company made its do-it-yourself radio kits here, and Whirlpool, the nation's premier maker of washing machines, began here and still maintains its international corporate headquarters just north of the town.

The town prospered, too, as a vacation destination for Chicagoans looking to escape the hot, sticky urban summers. The *Roosevelt*, a steamer, made daily voyages from Chicago to Benton Harbor; most people came to visit the House of David, a quasi-religious cult, which had built an amusement park and an elaborate miniature railroad. They also came to watch the House of David's semiprofessional baseball team, whose members sported waist-length beards and were nationally renowned for their extraordinary talent. The town also boasted a number of splendid downtown hotels, including the Vincent, where Al Capone and his henchmen would hole up, renting an entire floor. Residents still tell stories of Capone motoring down the town's streets, his bodyguards riding shotgun, as he waved to passersby.²

Members of St. Matthew's still fondly recall the days of the 1950s and 1960s, when St. Matthew's membership level was at its peak. The church was booming along with the city. From 1948-1962, St. Matthew's gained some 500 members. Even considering the slight declines in population as people began to move to the suburbs, in the late 1960s the church was solid, and so was the city.

² Alex Kotlowitz, *The Other Side of the River: A Story of a Death, Two Towns and America's Dilemma* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1998), pp. 29,30.

Benton Harbor, though, has a dynamic history. It has a history filled with new developments, most of which, until the last thirty years or so, have been positive. In the 1960s, things began to change. The boomtown of Benton Harbor was beginning to undergo some changes that would alter its identity. The size of its population would begin to decrease³, and the city would soon be very different than it had been.

Several of these changes impacted St. Matthew's and her membership. Most notable among those changes are the following three:

- ◆ Increased crime and safety concerns
- ◆ An economic downturn
- ◆ A changing racial composition

It must be noted from the outset that not all the changes were negative.⁴ The Lord's hand is still at work in Benton Harbor, despite many who will say otherwise. And the Lord of the church knows best how to fulfill his promise to make all things work for the good of those who love him. These developments in the community of Benton Harbor, however, did lead to a great many members' departing St. Matthew's.

The changing circumstances are interrelated. In many cases, one cannot be completely separated from another. This grouping is an attempt to get behind the changes that took place in St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

³ From a 1960 high of 19,136, the population would eventually drop to 12,818 in 1990 (*United States Census Bureau Reports, 1960-1990*).

⁴ For example, it is clearly counter to Scripture to imply that God would rather have one race or ethnic group to another living in a given area. Let the reader not misunderstand; I listed changes in the racial composition of the city not as a negative development, but simply as a development that led, in part, to some members leaving St. Matthew's.

Pastor Kermit Biedenbender, pastor of St. Matthew's from 1965 to 1994, described those changes in St. Matthew's community as "a steady rain, wearing away at something."⁵ That phrase aptly describes the relationship between the community of Benton Harbor and the decline in membership of "St. Matt's".

⁵ From a telephone interview conducted April 20, 1998. All quotations of Pastor Biedenbender are from this telephone interview.

Increased crime and safety concerns

Situated halfway between Chicago and Detroit, Benton Harbor has become a refuge for young men and women running from troubled families, gangs, and the law in these larger cities. It is also an obvious business expansion site for drug lords, who despite the city's small size, can retain some anonymity. It's common knowledge that the Benton Harbor police department is so understaffed that its officers have little time to investigate anything other than the most heinous crimes, usually murders. During one of my visits, I learned that the department's lone detective barely had enough time to pursue the city's recent homicide, the eighth in as many months. The three hundred cases on backlog included alleged rapes, shootings, and petty larcenies. Property crimes, the lowest priority, weren't even included. "If you ain't bleeding," the detective told me, "you ain't going to make it on the list."⁶

As *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet* notes, "During that time [late 1960s and early 1970s] Benton Harbor was developing a reputation throughout Michigan and even around the country for crime and safety concerns."⁷ It was true; crime was on the increase. The growing drug problem could not be ignored, nor could the gang graffiti spray painted on vacant buildings. Particularly noticeable was the growth of violent crime. Gunshots became commonplace, and news of murders was increasingly common to see on the pages of the *Herald-Palladium*, the local newspaper. Most of the crime revolved around either domestic violence or drugs.⁸

When asked about the reasons people cited for transferring out of St. Matthew's, Tim Buelow, pastor of St. Matthew's since 1994, who served also as vicar in 1984-1985,

⁶ Kotlowitz, op.cit., p. 32.

⁷ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet*. As of the writing of this paper, the booklet has not been published. The quotations are from an advance copy of that section of the booklet, received via e-mail December 19, 1997 from Pastor Timothy Buelow of St. Matthew's, who updated Bill Schuermann's 90-year history.

⁸ Much of the information about general crime trends was gathered informally from conversations with St. Matthew's members. Statistics regarding crime are here absent; several attempts to contact acting Benton Harbor safety director Milt Agay were unsuccessful. Other attempts with various demographic research agencies also proved unsuccessful in obtaining crime statistics.

replied that crime was the “absolute number one thing.”⁹ Concern for safety, probably more than any other single reason, was the motive for leaving St. Matthew’s in the last quarter century. Many people were simply afraid to live in the area around the church or the school or to regularly attend activities taking place there. They chose to transfer to an area congregation where such a threat of crime did not exist.

This prompts a question: were these concerns well founded? The best answer to that question is this: to some degree. There was a high incidence of crime in Benton Harbor, and one incident in particular touched St. Matthew’s directly. However, there were details about the crime and its aftermath that warrant special consideration.

The Donald Habeck Incident

On the evening of 9 November 1981, Donald Habeck, a 35 year-old fifth and sixth grade teacher at St. Matthew’s, was leaving the school after an evening of parent-teacher conferences. Mr. Habeck’s last conference had been scheduled for 9:15 p.m. After leaving the south entrance of the school at approximately 9:30, he was attacked and hit over the head several times with a piece of wood. His watch, wallet and car were stolen. Mr. Habeck then somehow walked two blocks to the parsonage and entered it. “We had our front door open and he came in and collapsed,” said Rev.

⁹ From a telephone interview conducted April 22, 1998. All quotations of Pastor Buelow are from this telephone interview.

Biedenbender, who is pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church and also teaches at the school."¹⁰

The *Herald-Palladium* continued with more information about the crime and the suspect:

[Benton Harbor Patrolman Edward] Siedenstrang said he traced Habeck's steps back to the school, where he found a large piece of wood believed to be the robber's weapon and a pair of broken glasses believed to belong to the victim. Habeck's car was gone, but minutes later a man was seen parked in the car on Broadway [two blocks east of the school]. Siedenstrang said the man ran and escaped from officers but the car was recovered.¹¹

Mr. Habeck was taken to Mercy Hospital, and then to Borgess Hospital in Kalamazoo when his injuries were determined to be too severe to be treated properly by the limited staff and facilities in Benton Harbor. "Biedenbender said he underwent surgery for a fractured skull and to repair a broken artery. The minister said that blood from the artery was putting pressure on the section of Habeck's brain that controls his breathing, and surgery saved his life."¹²

For members of St. Matthew's, the crime they had grown to fear now had a face. The public safety problem now meant more than mere newspaper reports. This attack had been on one of their own. For people already afraid of criminal activity possibly happening near the church, this served as indisputable proof that their fears were well grounded.

The tragic incident involving Donald Habeck seems to have been perceived — at least initially — as a random act of violence. The *Herald-Palladium* reports

¹⁰ "School Teacher Beaten, Robbed". *Herald-Palladium*, 10 November 1981.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "BH Church Posts \$500 Reward". *Herald-Palladium*, 25 November 1981.

Benton Harbor police have called the attack a senseless crime. The robber apparently knocked Habeck over the head, stole his wallet and drove off in his car, police said. The auto was recovered several blocks away that same night, and Rev. Biedenbender said Habeck probably had less than \$10 with him during the robbery because he completed all his transactions with checks...

"The saddest thing is that here is a man who was not afraid to be here at night," Rev. Biedenbender said. "He was not afraid of the neighborhood. There aren't very many people like that in this area."

St. Matthew's, with a largely white membership, is located in an area of the city that now is predominantly black, and has been marked by increasing crime problems.

Rev. Biedenbender said Habeck, a fifth and sixth grade teacher, enjoyed working with young people and was a "doer" in the community. He said Habeck enjoyed pulling the Benton Harbor community together.

"Maybe this will all work out for the best," Rev. Biedenbender said. "Someone has to work and make this a community where people know each other and give a hoot. We're losing an important man. But there are others who feel the same way he has, and maybe they will act now. There is always hope for this area."¹³

Mr. Habeck lapsed into a coma after his surgery, and remained in the coma for approximately three months. His parents then moved him into the Americana Health Care Center in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, near their home. "He has continued to make a slow recovery and still resides in a nursing home in Wisconsin. Through the years his faith has shown through brightly, as he continues to contribute offerings to St. Matthew's and convey warm greetings to our members."¹⁴

Other factors that contributed to the severity of Mr. Habeck's condition, however, were not prominent in the newspaper reports, and perhaps some members of St. Matthew's overlooked them. The first of these factors is the treatment of the injuries. Pastor Biedenbender said that the damage only began with the attack, and then virtually everything that could have gone wrong did.

¹³ "The Special Season He May Not Know". *Herald-Palladium*, 24 December 1981.

¹⁴ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet*.

After being taken to Mercy Hospital in Benton Harbor, the medical staff did not immediately assess the severe nature of the injuries to Mr. Habeck's head. There was no CAT scan available, nor was a neurologist present. It was not until he began to exhibit symptoms of severe head trauma that the determination to transport him to Kalamazoo was made. By the time he arrived in Kalamazoo (a drive of approximately one hour in normal circumstances) the pressure of the bleeding caused by the ruptured artery was intense. Doctors operated immediately, but damage had been done by the bleeding and the pressure it had caused. In addition, Pastor Biedenbender reported that after the operation the surgeon was "pessimistic", and he did not begin rehabilitation as quickly as some wished.

Complications ensuing from the initial beating were "much more contributing factors" to the seriousness of his condition, according to Pastor Biedenbender. Pastor tried to explain this as often as he could to those who came to visit Mr. Habeck.

The second factor relates to what prompted the beating and robbery. The incident was probably not a random act of violence as many assumed. Earlier in the evening of 9 November a man had wandered into St. Matthew's school building while the parent-teacher conferences were taking place. The man had gone into the gym and was looking at various objects, among which was a broken skateboard. Mr. Habeck noticed the man in the gym and suspected that he might try to steal the skateboard. Mr. Habeck confronted the man verbally with somewhat heated words. Mr. Habeck then got Pastor Biedenbender, who was leading a Bible class in the school that night, to assist him in the situation. The man insisted that he had business there and therefore would not leave.

Pastor Biedenbender reported that Mr. Habeck was clearly very upset. The man eventually left, but the situation was not over. That man, whom Mr. Habeck confronted in the gym, was one of his attackers. "He happened to be a very violent young man," said Pastor Biedenbender.

No one will dispute the fact that this tragedy was senseless. But was it a random act of violence? In one sense that may be said; there was no specific cause for Mr. Habeck's attacker to come into the school gymnasium. However, given the somewhat heated nature of the confrontation in the gym between Mr. Habeck and the man who would attack him, it would not be completely accurate to say that this crime was something that was entirely random in nature.

Many people assumed that it was a random crime. They concluded that if something like this could happen to one of their teachers – getting beaten and robbed on the way out of school one night – then the same thing could happen to them. It seems that many were not aware of the confrontation in the gym. This encounter was doubtlessly a factor that prompted the attack perpetrated specifically against Mr. Habeck, who had told the man to leave. Therefore in order to assume that this was a crime that could just as easily have happened to anyone, one would have to have been unaware of all the details or chosen to ignore them. Pastor Buelow commented that part of prejudice is choosing to ignore certain facts before making a judgment. It seems that some people did just that.¹⁵

¹⁵This verbal confrontation is never mentioned in eight articles from the *Herald-Palladium* regarding the crime, though Pastor Biedenbender says that he spoke about it in his courtroom testimony. In addition, I never heard of the confrontation between Mr. Habeck and his attacker during my year in Benton Harbor. Not until I spoke with Pastor Biedenbender did I learn about it, though I had heard several times about the crime itself. Perhaps these facts are telling.

The immediate effects of this tragedy in terms of membership were not dramatic. But before long, the congregation's roster began to indicate that the incident had had an effect on many members. "The incident in 1981 made quite an impact on our membership. The pace of transfers to our daughter congregations increased."¹⁶

To some degree, then, people's fears about crime in Benton Harbor were justifiable—but only to a certain degree. No incidents of random violent crime had happened to St. Matthew's members in the area around the church and school, and only serious crime that had taken place there was the tragedy involving Mr. Habeck. In general, for those involved in church activities the neighborhood was safe. Security guards were hired to patrol the parking lots during midweek services, but they never had anything significant to report. Pastor Biedenbender recalled walking throughout the neighborhood and even east as far as Mercy Hospital as part of his rehabilitation after heart surgery in 1978. He remembered that he never experienced any threat of violence from anyone. In fact, he said that "people [were] watching me for good." Once as he was walking near dusk, a black man in a car recognized him and offered him a ride home. On another occasion, Biedenbenders' neighbors thwarted a late night plan by some Michigan Lutheran High School students to toilet paper the parsonage. "They scared the bejeebers out of them."

¹⁶ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet*. This comment is curious; there was no drastic decrease in membership at this time—no more than had been occurring (see the chart on page one). Perhaps this comment refers to people citing crime as their reason for leaving more loudly and specifically than they had in the past.

"People should have been happy to hear it's not dangerous to live in the parsonage. No! People *told* you it was dangerous... They don't *ask* you, they *tell* you," said Biedenbender. Adding fuel was the media, including at times the *Herald-Palladium*, who often painted Benton Harbor as a den of criminals. Biedenbender said that crimes that happened in Benton Harbor received more attention than crimes that happened in surrounding communities. He felt that St. Matthew's neighborhood was largely safe, but he recalled, "People didn't want to be convinced."

Pastor Biedenbender said he didn't argue with people, but he let them leave St. Matthew's, and he took whatever reasons they offered at face value. He theorizes that many who left citing crime as their reason actually knew that they were exaggerating the severity of the threat. These people then felt some measure of guilt, and after they transferred to other congregations they sought to justify their leaving St. Matthew's. They brought up crimes that had occurred in Benton Harbor, spreading the word about the danger they perceived. They would then ask those still at St. Matthew's, "Are you still going there?" It was, as Pastor Biedenbender termed it, a "negative evangelism" program.

While increased crime in the city caused some to leave, it had a different effect on others. Those who stayed became more determined to remain in Benton Harbor. Another incident exemplifies this.

The Fire

At about 2:00 a.m. on Monday, 5 October 1987, Benton Harbor Patrolman Ron Singleton was driving north on Colfax Avenue past St. Matthew's when he saw smoke coming from a vent in the church. He stopped and woke Pastor Biedenbender. The inside of the church was engulfed in flames when firefighters arrived.¹⁷

Fire Capt. Larry Hill said the fire destroyed the piano and pulpit in the church sanctuary and the pastor's office adjacent to the sanctuary. Hill said heat from the fire cracked two small stained-glass windows and peeled paint from the ceiling. The blaze, which started in or near the pastor's office [north sacristy], burned a hole in the floor of the sanctuary and extended into the basement, Hill said...

Hill said the fire was probably set to cover up a burglary, and an investigation is continuing. Firefighters left about 4:30 a.m., according to the captain...

Rev. Kermit Biedenbender, pastor of the church at 121 Kline Ave., told *The Herald-Palladium* this morning the only item known to be missing is and approximately 30-inch-tall brass cross from the altar...¹⁸

Biedenbender said there have been no fires at the church since he became pastor in 1965. He added that he recalled only one burglary at the church in the same period.¹⁹

Pastor Biedenbender said that there was little structural damage to the church, but the damage to the interior done by smoke and heat was severe. Paint fell off the walls, varnish on the pews bubbled, and the organ was assessed as 90 percent destroyed. He said that materials whose melting point was 420 degrees Fahrenheit had melted. The final cost to restore the church exceeded \$250,000.²⁰

Richard Kauska, a 36-year-old white Benton Harbor man who was arrested for setting fire to a former furniture store, was charged with setting fire to St. Matthew's.²¹

¹⁷ "Fire damages Lutheran church in BH". *Herald-Palladium*, 5 October 1987.

¹⁸ Pastor Biedenbender said that there was also a small tape recorder missing from the sacristy.

¹⁹ "Fire damages Lutheran church in BH". *Herald-Palladium*, 5 October 1987.

²⁰ "...Schedule restoration celebration". *Herald-Palladium*, 12 March 1988.

²¹ "Man arraigned in store arson also suspect in BH church fire". *Herald-Palladium*, 9 October 1987.

He was convicted in December of 1987 and sentenced to prison for 80-120 months for setting both fires.²²

St. Matthew's members came to help clean up their church after the fire. Pastor Biedenbender said that "you could have just bawled" to see the wonderful spirit of such dedicated members. The congregation worshiped in the school gymnasium while the church was being restored. Before each Sunday service folding chairs had to be set up, and they had to be taken down afterwards. Biedenbender said that such cooperation, necessitated by the fire, strengthened the congregation.

In the aftermath of the fire, there was some dissension, though.

With the insurance company ready to pay the costs of rebuilding, the congregation had to decide whether to remain in its present location, or use the money as the beginning of a building fund for a new location. The people of St. Matthew's decided to stay and regard it as their ongoing mission from God of to reach out to the people of Benton Harbor. Of course, not everyone saw it that way, and people continued to transfer out to our daughter congregations in the greener pastures around our city.²³

There remains some question as to whether it was actually an option to use the insurance money for the beginnings of a building fund rather than using it to restore the church. Some were in favor of the idea of relocating, and it is rumored that some even offered to donate land outside of the city for the construction of a new church building. Pastor Biedenbender said that if moving was, in fact, a viable option, it was never discussed openly in any meeting. In the main, people wanted to stay, and the fire strengthened their resolve to do so.

²² "Grateful Church slates rededication on March 13". *Herald-Palladium*, 2 March 1988.

²³ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet*.

Many left because of increased crime and safety concerns, but many stayed in spite of them. Crime in Benton Harbor had a weeding effect on St. Matthew's.

Economic downturn

In the 1960s and 1970s, a combination of forces not at all unique to Benton Harbor drained the town of its prosperity: a newly constructed mall lured clothiers and department stores from the downtown; global competition killed off many of the foundries and auto parts plants; urban renewal scattered the black populace, which, for the most part, had remained in a low-lying area by the river called the Flats; and, finally, whites, uneasy with their new neighbors, fled, many of them skipping over the river to St. Joseph. Institutions followed, including the newspaper, the YMCA, the hospital, even the local FBI offices. Each had its own reason for moving, which at the time made sense, but in the end, after they'd drifted off, like geese going south, the reasons sounded more like excuses.²⁴

The "combination of forces" spoken of by Alex Kotlowitz affected the city of Benton Harbor, and the city in turn affected St. Matthew's. Many St. Matthew's members were employed at the factories and foundries in the city. The Whirlpool Corporation employed dozens of members. In Whirlpool's heyday, every washing machine that came off its line was spoken for by an advance order. Now, however, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the company was not as prosperous, and it began to downsize its factory operation until finally, in 1987, the Benton Harbor factory was phased out completely. With fewer jobs available, people who had worked in the city had less reason to remain. And those who already had relocated south had weaker connections to the city now that they did not have to come in for work every day. Listen to the litany of some major factories that either moved or closed:

In the 1970s and 1980s, the factories fell like dominoes. In 1977, the V-M Corporation, maker of record changers, closed. The next year, the Superior Steel Castings Company filed for bankruptcy. In 1979, Michigan Standard alloys shut its doors, as did Clark Equipment's Benton Township plant three years later. In 1985, after a lengthy strike, Auto Specialties shut down. And by 1987, the Whirlpool Corporation, provider of over two thousand blue-collar jobs at its peak, closed the last of its assembly plants.²⁵

²⁴ Kotlowitz, *op.cit.*, p.31.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.259.

A general economic downturn affected Benton Harbor, and the city that at one time had drawn people to itself no longer could do so.

The demolition of the Flats is also significant. The Flats was an area of housing located within a half-mile of St. Matthew's, west of the church at the bottom of the hill on which it rests.

Benton Harbor's black population lived on the swampland along the river. The wooden shanties, many with dirt floors, housed families recently from the South. The neighborhood was like a town to itself. The Flats had its own stores, its own churches, its own leaders, and its own gambling.²⁶

When the Flats was demolished in the early 1970s, a concerted effort was made by local politicians to prevent racial segregation from occurring as the residents of the Flats moved up the hill into the rest of Benton Harbor. They presumably did not want another section of town to become a largely black subsection of the city as the Flats had been. When blacks moved into homes in the rest of the city, though, their white neighbors became nervous, associating potential problems with their new neighbors, as Kotlowitz said. Whites then began to sell their homes, wanting to leave as soon as possible. The number of homes on sale increased, and property values dropped. Enterprising landlords, often ones who did not live in Benton Harbor itself, bought up whatever properties they could. Many whites' fears continued to grow, and people became more eager to sell. Many landlords were willing to help them leave the area. Pastor Biedenbender recalled seeing a placard on the side of a truck reading, "We buy up property." He said that property values in Benton Harbor were dropping

²⁶ Ibid, p.261.

“precipitously”. Matters continued to snowball; every quick sale devalued property more, which made it easier for landlords to buy more property. Biedenbender commented that people were scared, and they often didn’t act rationally.

The landlords who were quick enough to buy property when it was cheap could now convert the typically large homes into several apartments. Since there was a wave of people coming up from the Flats, there was a good supply of renters. Sadly, many of the absentee landlords did not care for what they had purchased, but raked in rental income without spending much of it on improving their property. Pastor Biedenbender’s children had a paper route in Benton Harbor, and consequently he observed the condition of many Benton Harbor properties as he traveled around the city. He called the condition of many houses “abominable”. Compounding the problems were instability in local government and an increasing crime problem, which made it possible for such careless landlords to get away with owning deteriorating property. There was no time for to enforce housing codes. As a result, many landlords were content to let things crumble as long as they received their rental income.

In 1950, 45 percent of residences in Benton Harbor were renter occupied.²⁷ In the early 1990s, Pastor Buelow estimated that approximately 70 percent were renter occupied. Therefore, more homes fell victim to neglect of careless landlords and tenants, and property values continued to decline. This led more to move out of the vicinity of St. Matthew’s.

²⁷ *United States Census Bureau Report*, 1950.

The departure of industry and jobs also removed the source of income for many of the families who were at a lower economic level already. "The very industries that had once lured Southern blacks were now gone, and many families had no option but the public dole."²⁸ Pastor Buelow notes that St. Matthew's has experienced what other WELS urban churches have: it is more difficult to reach out to lower or under class blacks than to middle class blacks. Surrounded by people of a lower economic level, the middle class members of St. Matthew's had one more difference between them and their new neighbors to deal with. The economic downturn of Benton Harbor caused many to leave St. Matthew's, and it created obstacles for new people to come in.

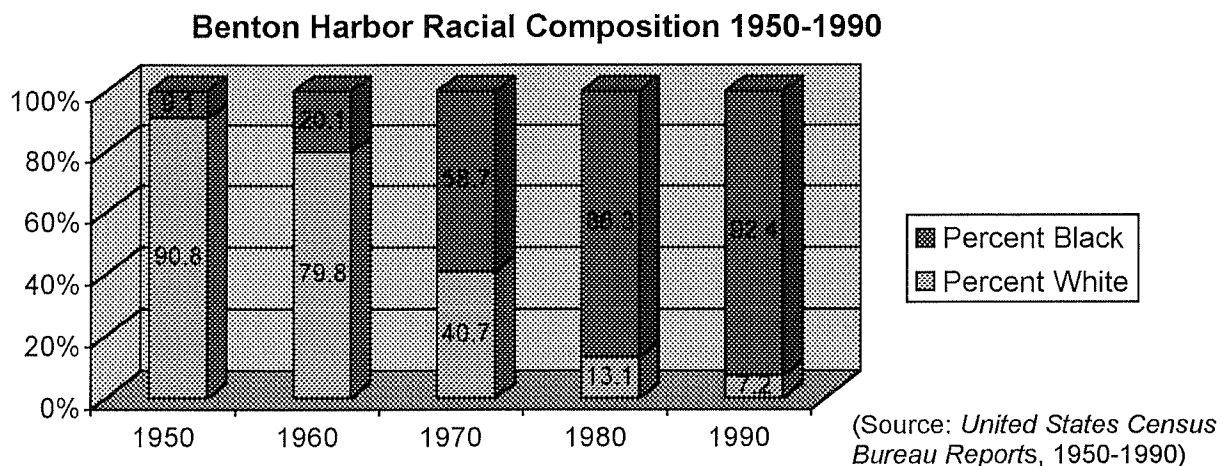
²⁸ Kotlowitz, *op.cit.*, p.259.

Changing racial composition

Many blacks came to Benton Harbor for work beginning around the time of the Second World War.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the factories advertised in the South, particularly in Arkansas, for workers. Some Benton Harbor old-timers say that employers sent trucks to pick up prospective laborers. A few remember railroad cars arriving in town, filled with Southerners who'd been promised jobs.²⁹

St. Matthew's member Ed Lange³⁰ recalled that his former employer, Auto Specialties, was among the first companies in the area to actively recruit workers from the South during the War. Word of plentiful jobs spread quickly, and a steady flow of blacks coming from the South into Benton Harbor began. In 1970, of those who reported a state of origin in the census, 53 percent of blacks in Benton Harbor were born in another state. Of all those who reported their state of origin, 39.75 percent were born in the South. As more blacks moved in, more and more whites were moving out. Consider the changes in the racial composition of Benton Harbor.



²⁹ Ibid., p.258.

³⁰ Mr. Lange was called to his heavenly home in the fall of 1997.

As crime increased and the racial complexion of the city changed, many people constructed a faulty argument. In the parlance of logic, it would be termed a false syllogism combined with a generalization: "crime increased, the number of blacks in Benton Harbor increased, therefore all blacks must be predisposed to committing crimes." Perhaps such a statement was never uttered, but to a degree that mentality began to creep into the thinking of many whites in Benton Harbor. A "we-they" mindset still permeates the thinking of many who were raised making the assumption that there is an essential difference between white people and black people.

Racial tensions exacerbated the crime problem. Racial misunderstandings and generalizations were present already, and each crime committed by blacks served to reinforce stereotypes. An example can be found in the epilogue of the Donald Habeck case. Mr. Habeck's assailants were charged and convicted of "armed robbery and assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder."³¹ Charles E. Haynes and Robert K. Johnson, both 19 years old, were sentenced to life in prison in connection with the attack on Habeck. Both appealed. Haynes' conviction was upheld; Johnson's was overturned when the appeals court decided that testimony given by a police officer was inadmissible and had prejudiced the jury.

In ordering a new trial for Johnson, the appeals court held that the jury might have been prejudiced by testimony from Benton Harbor Detective Robert Massengale, who mistakenly testified to the contents of a statement given by Haynes to police as that of a statement given by Johnson. Haynes had claimed in his statement that both he and Johnson had beaten Habeck with "clubs," while Johnson had admitted being at scene, but denied any involvement in the attack.³²

³¹ "Convicted Attacker of Teacher Gets Life Term". *Herald-Palladium*, 15 March 1983.

³² "New Trial Ordered For One In Teacher-Robbery Case". *Herald-Palladium*, 29 November 1984.

Both men had been arrested for involvement in other crimes. A jury convicted Johnson of a manslaughter stabbing death committed five days after the attack on Mr. Habeck. Pastor Biedenbender said that Johnson incriminated Haynes in one crime, so Haynes retaliated by involving Johnson in the Habeck beating.

Both Haynes and Johnson were black.

A decisive episode involving race occurred in St. Matthew's in the late 1960s. Pearl Mosby, a black, single mother who resided two blocks from St. Matthew's school, wanted to remove her two daughters from the public elementary school they were attending out of concern for their safety. The appearance and demeanor of St. Matthew's students impressed Ms. Mosby, and she inquired about enrolling her daughters there. The matter of allowing black students to enroll in the school was discussed in the church council and then brought up for discussion in a special voters' meeting which was quite well attended. Pastor Biedenbender reported that there were a few people who tried to frighten people with their arguments against allowing Ms. Mosby's children to attend St. Matthew's. He said that the chairman perhaps gave these people too free a rein to speak during the meeting. But when the congregation voted on whether to let the Mosby's enroll, there were no dissenting votes heard.

This episode shows that there were fears regarding race among members of St. Matthew's. It also shows, though, the desire by most members to have children of color as students of the school. Pastor Biedenbender's voice takes on an excited tone when he recalls that for a time, blacks made up about ten percent of St. Matthew's and the German service was still happening every Sunday.

Other challenges posed by a changing racial makeup involved cultural issues. When blacks moved from the South, they brought their churches. And more than that—they brought the concept of the grassroots or “storefront” church. The number of small churches grew, until in the 1990s the number of churches in Benton Harbor, a city of about 13,000, reached over 240, according to Pastor Buelow. This proliferation of churches made finding unchurched in the city much more difficult. In addition, Pastor Buelow has noticed an inclination of black families to go to predominantly black churches. There seems to be almost a stigma attached to a predominantly white church.

Biedenbender said that mutual respect is key in the matter of cross-cultural ministry and race relations. If one wants to receive respect, he said, then one must give it. This must first be done, he said, if members of urban churches want people in their neighborhoods to give a hearing to what the purpose and mission of the church is.

The change in the racial composition of Benton Harbor and people’s attitudes and ways of thinking about race played an important role in St. Matthew’s membership losses.

Evangelism efforts

When asked about evangelism efforts at St. Matthew's in the last quarter century, Pastor Biedenbender spoke in a very positive way. He noted something that had happened at St. Matthew's before it happened in any other neighboring WELS congregation: black adults attended a Bible information class. It was the Lord's work that that happened, and he deserves thanks for it. It must be remembered that the Lord of the church acts in his own time, for the work of outreach at St. Matthew's has been slow from a human standpoint.

After the declining membership throughout the 1970s, St. Matthew's joined with other WELS churches in 1980 in a countywide telephone canvass. Pastor Biedenbender recalled that the canvass yielded a strange result. None of the other congregations got any significant numbers of prospects; only St. Matthew's did – about 120! An evangelism committee was formed to follow up on these names, making personal contact with those in the Benton Harbor area who expressed interest in the church. Thomas Nass, St. Matthew's vicar at the time, headed the committee. John Hartwig, the next vicar, continued the work of following up, aided by several St. Matthew's members.

The work did not produce many visible fruits, however. The evangelism committee members soon experienced another effect of the various changes in the city's demographics.

Once the largest WELS congregation in the area, the years of growth gave way to decades of declining membership. In the mean time, efforts were more and more made to reach out to our neighbors. Canvasses of the area were conducted. Unfortunately, the changes in Benton Harbor also included the transition from family-owned homes to a large number of rental units. It was difficult to establish long term contacts with people who moved with frequency as high as even every four months.³³

The farthest progress that was made with any of the prospective members was an agreement to receive mailings from the church. Those members who had worked to do the personal follow-up work became frustrated when they saw that their labors had produced little result. Many members then drew the conclusion that traditional mission work in the neighborhood of the church and school was futile. Evangelism efforts consequently were not vigorous in the following years. Vacation Bible School drew many children who were then able to hear the gospel. Not many prospects were found through Bible School contacts, though.

Members recognized the Lutheran elementary school as the greatest evangelism asset of St. Matthew's. People had already begun to take a close look at St. Matthew's School as an alternative to public education. St. Matthew's School was the only Christian elementary school in Benton Harbor proper, and it was earning a reputation for providing a moral and safe learning environment. Plans were made to encourage new families to try St. Matthew's School. In 1987 St. Matthew's announced a scholarship program.

Principal Hans Johannsen said the scholarships for a full year's tuition are aimed at making it easier for parents and students to become acquainted with the school and St. Matthew's Church. Each scholarship is worth about \$900, and it is the intent to award 15-20 scholarships, he said.

Terms and conditions will be announced at the open houses...³⁴

³³ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet.*

³⁴ "St. Matthew's School Announces Scholarships". *Herald-Palladium*, 4 April 1987.

A scholarship was given if the parent agreed to take the Bible information class. This practice was continued for the next several years, and many parents joined St. Matthew's Church. The Board of Education soon found a few rocks along this path too, though.

Some joined, entitling them to reduced tuition. It became apparent that many who came in this way, came only to find good schooling at a good price, and rarely if ever attended church services. The scholarship program was modified to offer one free semester, and then finally to a discount of about 25%.³⁵

The school came on hard times in the early 1990s, and it seemed as if the years of declining membership would continue unabated, with no school to assist in outreach. The Lord stepped in, however, and took control of the situation. "During the summer of 1994, having lost some young families through transfers, some in the congregation were worried that the school would not be able to continue." In fact, in the 1995-1996 school year, St. Matthew's operated without a seventh or eighth grade. Instead, the three St. Matthew's seventh and eighth graders were sent to Good Shepherd's school in Fairplain, with their tuition paid by St. Matthew's congregation.

But the Lord restored calm. Soon things were moving forward again and plans were made to open a preschool and daycare to help introduce people to our school and church. Then, in October 1995, the Lord unexpectedly called our principal and long time teacher Mr. Hans Johannsen home to himself in heaven. With daycare plans in the works, and the school beginning to stabilize, we were once again scrambling to restore order. The Assignment Committee of the synod provided us with a mid-year graduate, Mr. Paul Hoffmann, as our upper-grades teacher. Mr. Otto Bufe, a retired public school administrator and member of Grace Lutheran came on board after Christmas 1995 to serve for a semester as "administrator" and help our young principal ease into his new position.³⁶

The new preschool and childcare mentioned above certainly proved to be tools

³⁵ *St. Matthew's 100th Anniversary Booklet.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

useful in making contacts with families in St. Matthew's community. Many single mothers needing childcare during the day have found St. Matthew's, and many of these mothers receive subsidy from Michigan's Family Independence Agency (formerly the Department of Social Services) to send their children to St. Matthew's childcare. St. Matthew's is certified by the state to provide care for children as young as six weeks old.

One of the objectives of the daycare project from its inception was evangelism. Specifically, the aim was to reach out to children and funnel them into St. Matthew's School. It has succeeded in this with the gracious blessing of the Lord. In the 1997-1998 school year there were two kindergartners in St. Matthew's School. Eight kindergartners are projected for the 1998-1999 school year, thanks in large part to Lord blessing the daycare. The success of the St. Matthew's Daycare is perhaps a hint that years of declining membership in church and school have come to a halt.

Other factors

Only those factors in St. Matthew's membership decline directly relating to the city have been mentioned thus far, since that was the stated aim of this work. Of course, many other factors played in. As a supplement, and to give the reader a more rounded perspective on the membership decline, provided here are a few additional trends or happenings that influenced the membership rolls throughout the years.

As with many other congregations, *aging* has had an effect on St. Matthew's. The number of child confirmations per year was in the upper twenties or low thirties in the early 1970s; in the mid 1990s the number was usually one or two per year. The number of marriages per year was in the mid teens in the early 1970s; in the mid 1990s the number was usually one per year. The number of burials per year, however, has remained steady in the last quarter century. This trend also is related to changes in the city. Because of the declining economy, children who grew up in Benton Harbor usually did not stay there as adults, but instead they went where the economic climate was more favorable and jobs were more plentiful.

St. Matthew's members who were contemplating a transfer had *many options*. Good Shepherd was located in Fairplain, where many St. Matthew's members owned homes.

In addition to this, Good Shepherd began an elementary school in 1978.³⁷ Grace was a thriving congregation and was located near many members who had relocated to St. Joseph. The same was true for St. Paul's and Stevensville.

One can sometimes detect in some remaining St. Matthew's members a hint of resentment toward these other congregations for stealing members. There may be reasons to warrant such resentment. On the other hand, one can be thankful that the Lord provided confessionally sound sister and daughter churches to which people could go if they did not wish to stay at St. Matthew's.

As is inevitable in the life of any congregation, *personalities* often were a decisive factor in people coming and going. Some examples follow.

Pastor Biedenbender remembered a dispute in the school regarding discipline problems among some students and how their teachers dealt with those problems. In the end some left after disagreeing sharply with Pastor Biedenbender and other members of the faculty.

A number of people left after Pastor Biedenbender did in 1994, when he accepted a call to serve two rural congregations in Sterling and Standish, Michigan on a semi-retired basis.

During the summer following the pastor's move, another group of communicants transferred out. These were mainly folks who had dedicated themselves to sticking it out as long as "Pastor B" stayed. Their children and grandchildren were attending sister churches, and now they elected to join them.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Pastor Buelow sensed when he was a vicar a slight competitiveness among St. Matthew's and other congregations. If someone wanted to join St. Paul's, St. Paul's encouraged people to remain at St. Matthew's. According to Pastor Buelow, that courtesy was not always practiced at other congregations, even at Grace. He sensed a competitiveness between Pastor Biedenbender and Pastor Ronald Freier of Grace. Whatever the case might have been, Pastor Buelow added another comment: "I don't think any of our churches have ever prayed for mission work in Benton Harbor." Those prayers were much needed, and one cannot tell the effects they could have had.

Finally, as Pastor Buelow said, "It's simply *easier to be somewhere else.*" People came to the United States and to Benton Harbor to find an easier, better life. After the changes in the city, though, other communities in the area looked as if they could provide an easier life. As a result, many moved and left the city behind.

Conclusion

I confess that I had preconceived notions about the reasons for St. Matthew's membership decline. I expected to find sharp declines following major events like the attack on Mr. Habeck or the fire. But that is not what I found. The decline did not take place in sharp decrements. There are no large spikes on the membership graph's trend line. Rather, the decline was the result of a combination of many factors. The gradual nature of St. Matthew's drop in membership brings to mind the words of Pastor Biedenbender: "It's like a steady rain wearing away at something." We have examined three major changes in the city of Benton Harbor — three things that comprised the "steady rain", as it were — that affected the church.

- ◆ An increase in crime and perceived danger of being near St. Matthew's prompted many to leave.
- ◆ An economic downturn in the city prompted many to break connections with Benton Harbor.
- ◆ The perceptions accompanying a changing racial composition of the city exacerbated other problems and hastened the departure of many.

The danger of a paper like this is that it may come across as wholly negative.³⁹ I regret if it has done so. My intent was to assist people in remembering and understanding a crucial period of time in the history of St. Matthew's. Hopefully this will be of some use in the future.

³⁹ Many in Benton Harbor have said that Alex Kotlowitz's *The Other Side of the River* came across that way. The book deals primarily with the topic of race and recounts events in which race played a major part. Many feel that the book inaccurately reflects life in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph by ascribing too great a role to race and racial issues in people's everyday lives.

Though the story of St. Matthew's in the last years may seem depressing, I would argue that when all the promises of our God are considered there is no reason to be depressed. Yes, we have our Lord's own guarantee that life and ministry in these last days will be filled with many hardships. The members of St. Matthew's can testify to the truth of that. But our Savior has given us his promise that not even the gates of hell will prevail against his church. That is also a guarantee.

In spite of all the changes that have occurred, one thing has remained the same. The word of the Lord has been proclaimed. Through faithful workers and dedicated members, the gospel has continually been preached and the promises of the Savior have been repeated. The word of the Lord is what has preserved St. Matthew's in the past. It is the only thing that is strong enough to carry her into the future. It is the only thing that can transform lives from the inside out, as when it changed the heart of a lowly and despised tax collector named Matthew long ago. The word remains St. Matthew's strength. Jesus grant that she proclaim the word loudly in her city till he comes again.

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