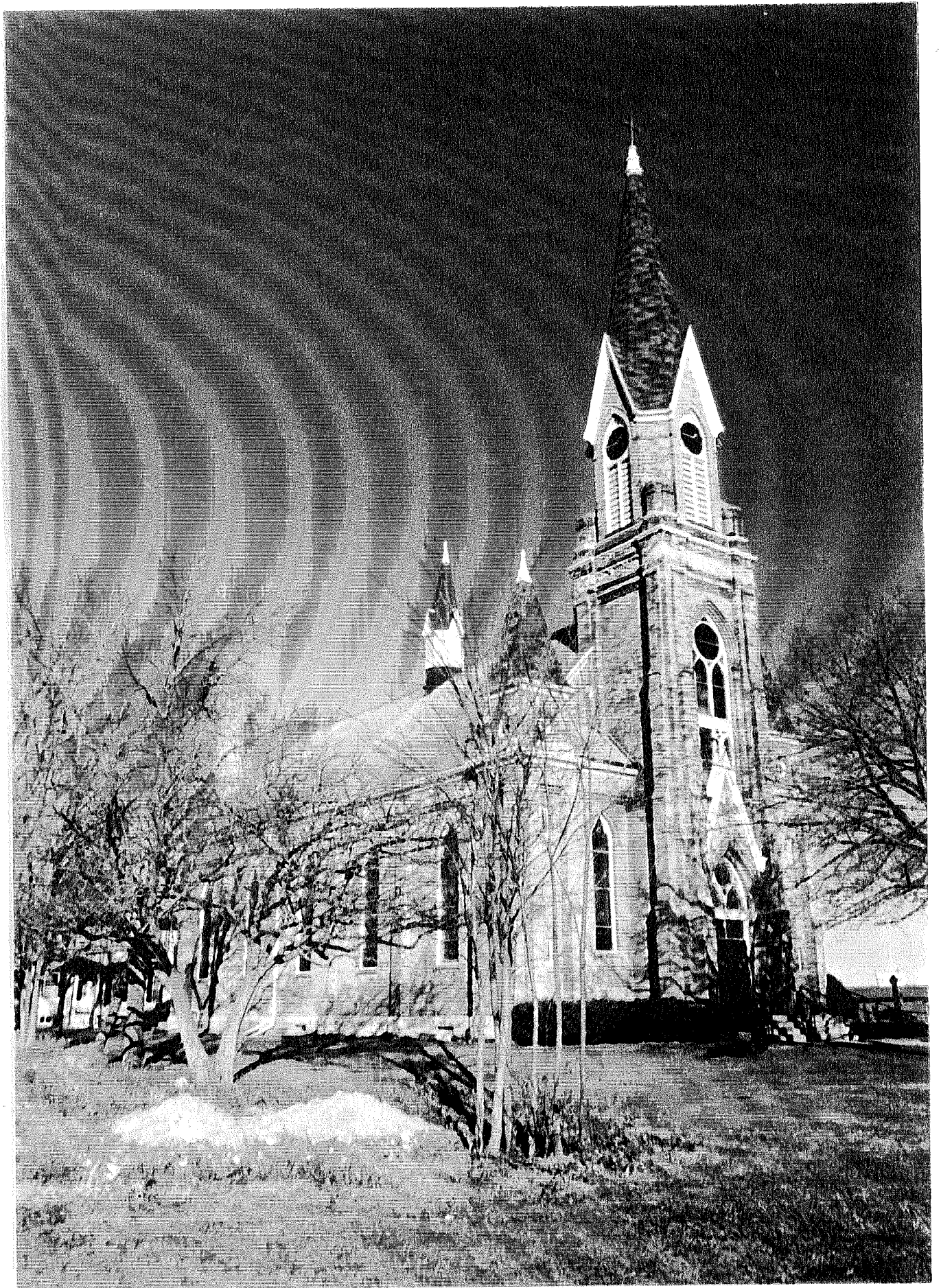


St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church
*A Piece of History at the Corner of
68th Street & Forest Home Avenue*

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The year was 1852. The location was a tiny farming outpost called Root Creek. The congregation was a German-speaking protestant one. It had no specific ties to a Lutheran denomination. This all changed in the year 1852 when the congregation called a certain Lutheran pastor – the Reverend Johannes Muehlhauser. “The people asked him [Muelhauser] in 1852 to serve them, and he gladly consented to do so. He soon persuaded them to join the Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. They reorganized themselves as a Lutheran congregation, St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church of Root Creek, Wisconsin, to be precise.”¹

Not long after Muehlhauser worked with this congregation, and by God’s grace, their first permanent church was dedicated on November 7, 1852. It was a rather modest building that took two years to build. And as the years went on the congregation continued to grow. While there were many bumps along the way, the Lord continued to bless St. John’s with steady growth. “The congregation grew steadily during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many of the parishioners were farmers from the surrounding town of Greenfield. The area around the church, which was the tiny hamlet of Root Creek, became a modest node with a few stores that catered to the day to day needs of the surrounding farm community.”²

As one can certainly imagine, as the number of members continues to increase, so does the need for larger worship facilities. Larger facilities were

¹ St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church 150th Anniversary book, p. 6.

² City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Preliminary Report, p. 8.

what St. John's needed, and larger facilities were what they received. "In April of 1896, an article appeared in Milwaukee's German newspaper, The Germania. Accompanied by a beautiful line drawing, it heralded the construction of a new church in the Greenfield area...The building was dedicated to the service of Christ on November 1 of that year [1896]."³

Since that date there have been only a few changes to the structure. "In 1921 electric lights were installed in the church. At about the same time a clock was installed in the church tower. It is one of the few weight-powered tower clocks remaining in Milwaukee...The interior of the church has remained substantially intact over the years...One of the significant post-World War II changes to the interior was recently reversed. A pair of Victorian-era stained glass windows flanking the altar that had been plastered over in the 1940s were uncovered and restored in 1995."⁴

That church building still stands to this day at the corner of 68th and Forest Home Avenue.⁵ The church has seen the surrounding area change dramatically. The view from the steeple in 1896 saw farmland, and for the most part that was it. What is the view from the steeple like today, in the year 2001? "The original settlement [Root Creek] has vanished and in its place today is a suburban community of ranch style and bungalow houses on South 68th Street and a mixture of bungalows and mid-twentieth century commercial buildings on West

³ St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church 150th Anniversary book, p. 9.

⁴ City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Preliminary Report, p. 8.

⁵ Forest Home was known as Janesville Plank Road – the principal route between Milwaukee and Janesville during the middle of the nineteenth century. It was paved with hardwood planks that came from the forests that once covered the area.

Forest Home Avenue.”⁶ It is bordered by Forest Home Avenue and the business of cars and city buses. It is surrounded by homes, muffler shops, gas stations and taverns. Only a block away there are two large grocery stores. If one takes the city bus a short drive down 68th street, the other street bordering the church, there that person will find Southridge, one of Wisconsin’s largest shopping malls. Off in the distance stand the First Wisconsin building and the other buildings of downtown Milwaukee. The scene keeps changing from the view in the steeple of the church. Even the new Miller Park is visible from the steeple.

Things keep changing, but not St. John’s – the structure at least. She stands tall and proud, having survived for so long. She gains the attention of many passers-by, wishing to be married in the beautiful structure. That should not come as a surprise considering her structural beauty, but that is only if one quickly glances at her. Yes, she stand tall and proud, but she also stands bruised by time. She stands much less sturdy than 1896. One only needs to look at the four-sided clock to see that time has taken its toll. So what’s next? Could the structure be refurbished? Can one even suggest what the members of the congregation suggested in the 1890’s – a new church?

This decision may be one that is decided not by the members and pastors of St. John’s. It is a decision that may be made by the City of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission. At a meeting that took place on Monday, February 19, 2001, the following was included in the Agenda under new business. “Preliminary review of an application to designate St. John’s Evangelical

⁶ Preliminary Historic Designation Study Report, p. 3.

Lutheran Church at 6802 W. Forest Home Avenue (a.k.a. 4001 S. 68th Street)."⁷

What role does the Historic Preservation Commission play in the decision of whether or not the members of St. John's build a new church? If the Commission labels St. John's as an official historic building, then there is the whole issue of financing the upkeep of the old building. If St. John's is considered an historic building, then the members are financially responsible for its upkeep. Can they afford to do that and pay for the construction of a new worship facility? While that is an interesting question in itself, and one on which a Seminarian could write about in future years, it is not the focus of this paper. The focus is on the existing church structure. Really, what's so special about it? What is the historical significance of it?

There are several criteria that need to be met in order for a building to be considered an historical site. There are four areas in particular that have been addressed as the Historic Preservation Commission determines St. John's fate. They have asked several key questions. Is St. John's a portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style? Is St. John's the embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen? Does St. John's identify the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman, or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or the United States? Is St. John's a unique

⁷ Historic Preservation Commission Meeting Agenda.

location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Milwaukee?⁸

Douglas Quigley, a former member of St. John's, presented the Historic Preservation Committee with a paper attempting to answer the aforementioned questions by citing the historical significance of St. John's. In his paper he considers the architectural history, the congregational history, and also includes a "significance statement." In his introduction to the Historic Preservation Committee he says, "St. John's Lutheran Church is an impressive example of Milwaukee's German-inspired Gothic Revival Style architecture and it is the most important remaining structure associated with the pioneer farming community of Root Creek that thrived around it during the nineteenth century. The church's soaring tower is the most prominent architectural feature of the city's far southwest side...This study report focuses on the historic features of the complex, which are the church building and the pioneer cemetery on the lawn in front of it."⁹

So far it has been noted that the historical significance of the building is that it is the only building in the area that represents the late nineteenth century. This most definitely interests the Historic Preservation Commission. It was built for a rural farming community, but is now located within Milwaukee City limits. But this is not the only reason, or only factor that is considered in designating a structure as an historical site. Another determining factor, at least in the case of

⁸ Fulfillment of certain criteria of the Historic Preservation Ordinance need to be met before it can be considered an historical site.

⁹ City of Milwaukee Preliminary Historic Designation Report, p.3.

St. John's, is the architectural firm hired to handle the task of building a new church in the 1890's.

The architects were Herman Paul Schnetzky and Eugene R. Liebert. Schnetzky has been labeled as one of Milwaukee's most prominent Victorian-era architects. After working for the architectural firm of H.C. Koch and Co., he began his own firm in 1887. It was then that Schnetzky joined forces with Liebert. Some of their work, besides St. John's, is St. John's Lutheran Church (804 W. Vliet St.), St. Martini Lutheran Church (1520 S. 16th St.), and even the Blatz Brewing Office Building (1120 N. Broadway).¹⁰ One can see that the architects involved do add to historical importance.

What exactly was it that Schnetzky and Liebert included in their design that makes St. John's so special? St. John's was identified in the City of Milwaukee's 1996 report *City of Steeples* as a top priority for preservation. "For more than a century the soaring steeple of St. John's Lutheran Church has been one of the most prominent architectural features on Milwaukee county's southwest side."¹¹ It is a prominent feature. One can see it from far distances depending upon which direction one approaches it. It's not just one steeple though. It is actually a tri-tower design. "The design and construction of Tri-tower churches is almost uniquely associated with German and German-American architecture of the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century in Germany a renewed interest in Gothic architecture brought about a significant

¹⁰ *History of Milwaukee, City and County*. Vol. III Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co. 1922.

¹¹ Jakubovich and Hatala. *City of Steeples*. City of Milwaukee, Department of Development, 1996. A 94 page published report on preservation priorities for Milwaukee's historic churches.

wave of church building that, in turn, influenced the design of many churches constructed in America for German-American congregations.”¹²

While the steeple is one of the most distinctive characteristics for the many who drive past it each day, there is another part of the structure that, even though it usually goes unnoticed, adds great historical significance. It adds historical significance because it is a feature that has given Milwaukee the “Cream City” nickname. It is the particular type of brick used. “St. John’s Lutheran Church is one of a dwindling number of structures made from Milwaukee’s unique cream-colored brick that is an inseparable part of the city’s history. In the late nineteenth century, the large numbers of buildings in Milwaukee made from the impressive, golden-colored brick earned the city its ‘Cream City’ nickname. Cream brick, however, has not been manufactured since the 1920s making the remaining structures made of this material an increasingly valuable part of the city’s architectural history and its civic pride.”¹³

So what is the answer to the four questions that the Historic Preservation Commission asked? Is St. John’s a portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style? The answer, according to the application submitted to the Commission by Douglas Quigley, is yes. Yes, because the church recalls some of the architectural traditions of Germany that, in turn, reflect the ethnicity of the congregation’s

¹² Preliminary Historic Designation Study Report, p.5. Other tri-tower designs in Milwaukee – Zion Lutheran (2030 W. North Ave.). St. Lucas Lutheran (2605 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.)

¹³ Preliminary Historic Designation Study Report, p.5. The popularity of Milwaukee cream brick was reflected by the fact that as late as the 1920s, Pittsburgh Paint and Glass, headquartered in the east, sold ready-mixed house paint in a creamy color called “Milwaukee Brick.”

founders. Is St. John's the embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen? Yes, because the church is an outstanding example of German-influenced, Victorian Gothic revival design. Does St. John's identify the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsman, or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or the United States? Yes, because the designers of the church, Herman Paul Schnetzky and Eugene R. Liebert were some of the city's best architects during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their work has contributed significantly to the architectural character of the city as it stands today. Is St. John's a unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Milwaukee? Yes it is, because the church is one of the most prominent structures on the city's far southwest side and is the most prominent structure ever built in the tiny hamlet of Root Creek.¹⁴

There is no question that St. John's has a great deal of history attached to it – that is why the writer of this paper chose to write about it. While this is a history paper about St. John's it also has included some current events. It has not been decided yet, whether or not the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission will label St. John's as an historic site. Since it has not been decided yet, the writer of this paper thought it would be wise to contact the pastor of St. John's for his input.

¹⁴ Historic Preservation Commission Meeting, p.12.

Pastor Martin Schulz has been the pastor at St. John's since 1977. In his twenty-four years of service, St. John's (the structure) has left him with quite an impression. "The church building has served its members very well. Those who made the plans for this church planned it well. They probably never thought it would last so long. There is no doubt that there is a lot of history that goes along with this building. To think that these stained glass windows were made so many years ago is amazing, because they cast such a beautiful light as the sun shines through them on Sunday mornings. There is no doubt, this is a beautiful structure, and it is at a location where we have been blessed with so much property to park so many cars on Sundays."¹⁵

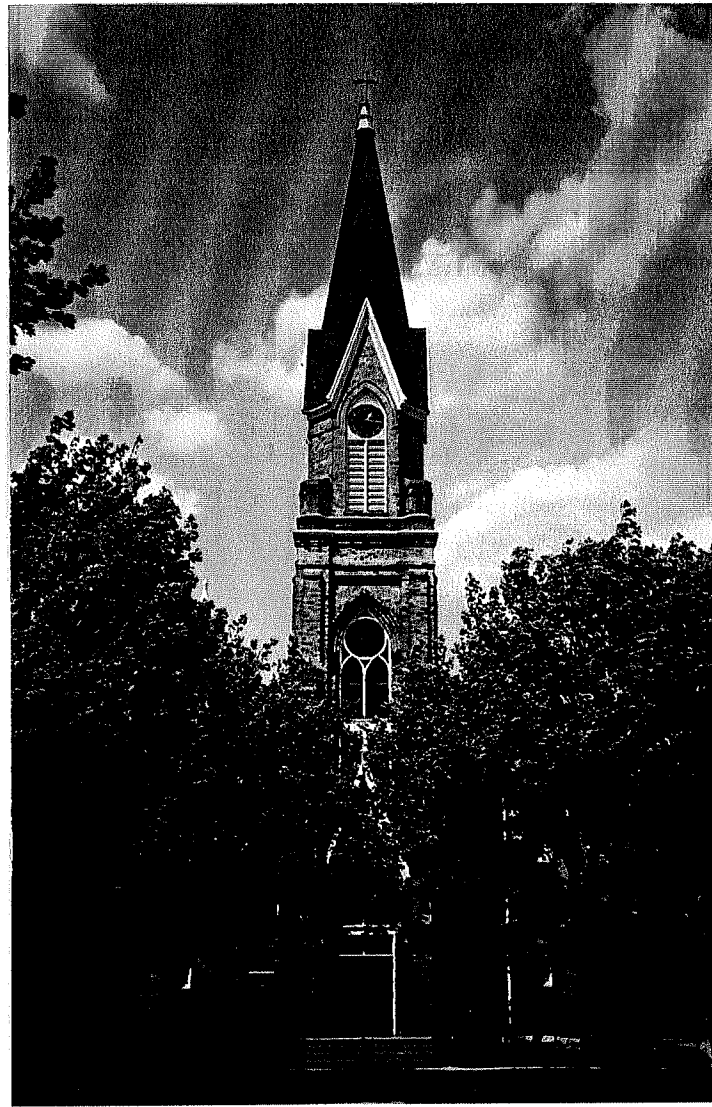
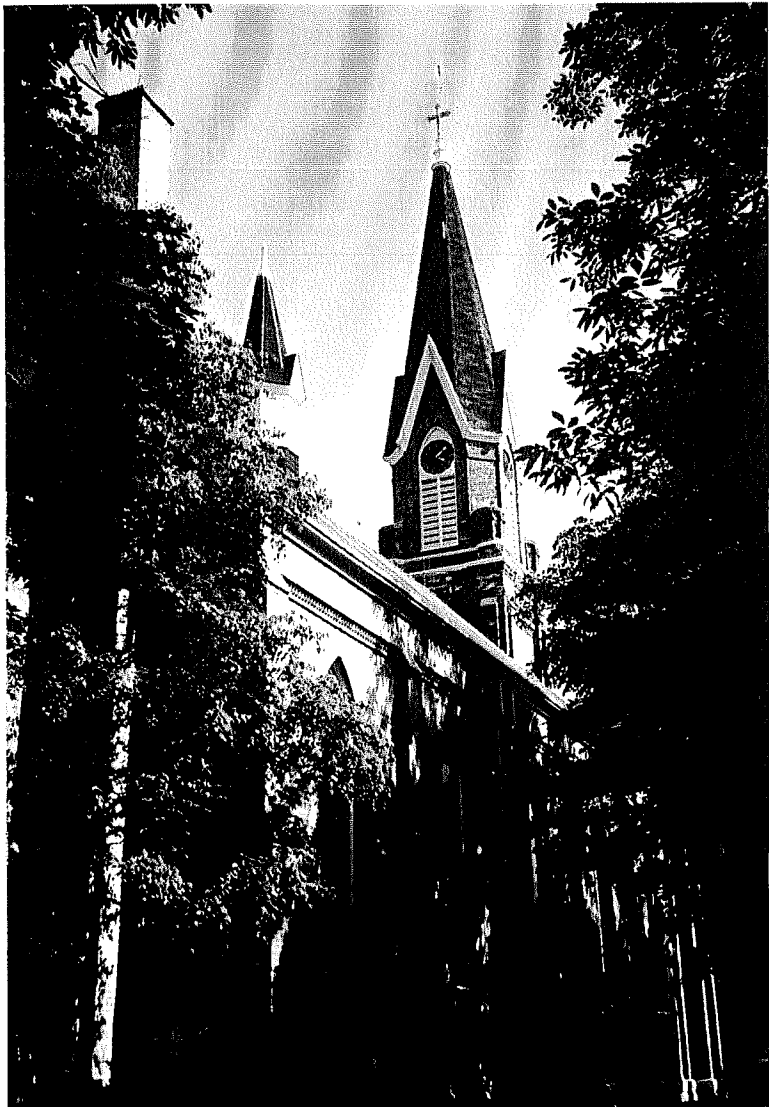
As Pastor Schulz went on describing the church's beauty, it was as if he was holding something back. He went on. "It has served us so well over the years, but there are some real concerns we face today. There are many older members who have a hard time with the stairs, which lead to the only restroom. There really is no place for fellowship in winter do to a lack of space in the narthex. If anyone takes a close look at the structure they will see many cracks. Whether, or not, it can continue to best serve our members and outreach to others remains to be seen. We look to the Lord for guidance as some very big decisions will need to be made in the very near future."¹⁶

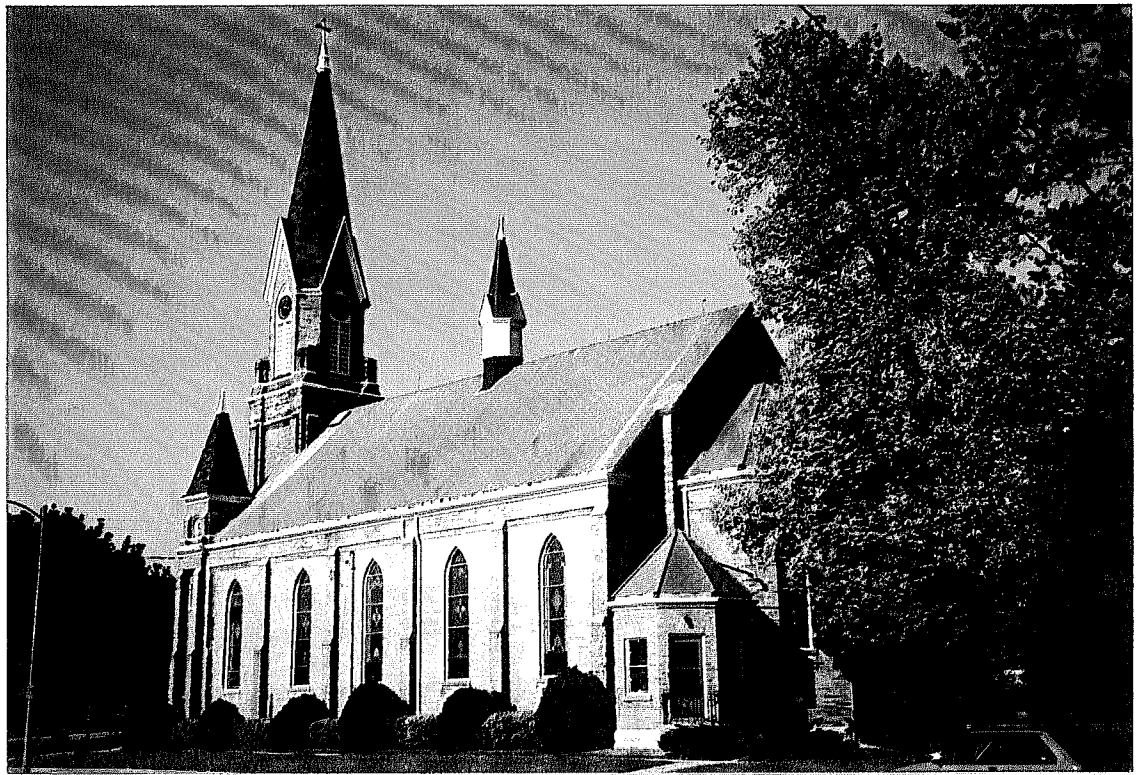
It goes without saying that opinions do vary regarding the future of St. John's. Should the existing structure be torn down to make room for a new one? Should there be an addition to the existing structure? Should the old structure

¹⁵ From an interview with Pastor Schulz on April 23rd, 2001.

¹⁶ From an interview with Pastor Schulz on April 23rd, 2001.

remain standing next to a new facility? There sure are a lot of varying opinions as to what would be best. There is one thing that all members of St. John's can agree with. The existing facility is filled with so much history – the many baptisms, weddings and confirmations that took place there. All members can agree that there is so much impressive history that took place inside the structure. As for the bricks, steeple, and overall design all members can agree that there is historical significance as well. It really has served its members well for over a century. What should be done? This paper does not serve as a place for opinions to be made. Its purpose is to simply record the historical significance of St. John's so that others may appreciate it. As far as what happens in the near future, may the Lord guide the members to do what is right for God's kingdom.





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