

CHANGING TIMES  
CHANGING CULTURES:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH  
PASTOR MARK JESKE

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Today is call day. You are about to receive your full-time call into the office of the public ministry. You are excited, scared, and curious as well as a whole slew of other emotions. When your name is finally called, you realize that you know absolutely nothing about the congregation. When you are shuttled off to your meeting with your district president, you find out that you have been called to a congregation that is currently doing cross or multi cultural work. What do you do?

This very situation could happen to anyone who is graduating from the Seminary and receiving a full-time call into the public ministry. Several questions would rush through the individual's mind after receiving a call similar to the one that I have just described. There are several concerns as well as goals and warnings to be made known to the ripe new pastor who has grown up in a traditional WELS church.

For this paper I interviewed Pastor Mark Jeske, who currently is serving the congregation of St. Marcus Lutheran Church. St. Marcus is located at 2215 North Palmer Street, which is in Milwaukee's Central City. This paper is based on and is accompanied by the video of our interview. The format I will use is as follows: the question will be in bold type followed by Pastor Jeske's response (or an accurate summary of his answer). After that there may be some comments from me that may follow. My

intent for this interview is to shine some light on what it is like to do the Lord's work in areas where a different culture is dominant. I pray that you find this interview enlightening and helpful.

## WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE HISTORY OF SAINT MARCUS?

*Jeske:* St. Marcus has gone through a number of changes in the 125 years that it has been around. It originated as a splinter group from St. John's on Vliet Street. (St. John's on Vliet Street is no longer a member of, or in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod.) St. John's school was so huge that it began a branch school on Palmer Street. This was possible because St. John's purchased a two-story house on Palmer Street, which served as the school. They also called a teacher to serve. After two years around a dozen families from the branch school decided that they wanted to start their own congregation. So they began a congregation in the late 1870's around the school. After St. Marcus was founded, St. John's sold the house to St. Marcus on the condition that they would join the Wisconsin Synod.

Immigration was booming during that time period. The congregation on Palmer Street took off. Not necessarily because of their great evangelism methods or techniques, but more because they were just there. The 1880's

were some of the heaviest times of German immigration, and it was around that time that St. Marcus got started. After about fifteen years the school's enrollment ballooned to around 200 children. In twenty years they were pushing 300 children. At this time St. Marcus' population was made up of "Germans who were residing in America." The feeling among the parents was that they didn't want their children in the public school system because they would get "yankeeized." But by sending them to St. Marcus School, their children would be kept in God's language and would continue to be brought up as God's people. (Jeske feels that was one of the biggest reasons for the school's success.)

Between 1920 and 1950 the church peaked and outgrew its facilities. So the congregation built a new church. The school also continued to grow. Around the same time period the school had grown on to average about 400 children who were being served by four teachers. This would not last very long, though. It would not take long before other churches began to spring up in the surrounding area. For about a decade, St. Marcus ranked as the third or fourth largest church in the Synod.

The First World War would change everything. When Germany became the enemy, St. Marcus began to change. In 1914, St. Marcus had its first English service. Later in 1914, Sunday school also began to be taught

in English. Then in 1925, the unthinkable happened. Catechism was taught in English. During the early middle years of the century, St. Marcus was a bilingual congregation. But as time went on, the people began being waned from the German. Then Pastor Dornfeldt, who had served faithfully for 45 years, retired in 1955.

A transition time for St. Marcus was marked by Dornfeldt's retirement. The bowling alleys that were in the school basement that had served as a meeting place for so many members were cemented and bricked up, and the basement became a fellowship hall. To this day if you go to the fellowship hall and look at the floor you can see that there used to be bowling alleys in the basement. People also began to move out of the neighborhoods, and were replaced by non-Lutherans who were moving in.

In the 50's the central city began to thin out and the church was down to about 1200 communicants. Basically, the 50's blew the old immigrant base away. Housing stock began to plummet and people began to move out for bigger lots. Another keep factor in the decline was the fact that in 1914 most if not all, German immigration had stopped and would not resume; except for a few after World War II. That steady stream of immigrants declined and no real evangelism was done. School enrollment began to slip a little also. The school always had accepted children whose parents were

not members. The school was used in a way that would help to make connections, a way to get into people's homes and then tell the Good News of Jesus. Quite simply, the school was an early evangelism tool.

Milwaukee changed drastically again during the Second World War. When the industry shifted to go into war production, something happened. You see, the primary work force was already off at war. So the question was who was going to work? The answer was women. Women began to make up the work force as well as support their families. The second big change was the mass migration of African Americans from the south coming to the north to find work. Many of these jobs were hard, long, and loud factory jobs, and yet the pay was better than trying to scratch out a living in the south.

African Americans began to settle around Walnut Street where there was no place to expand except to the north up Martin Luther King Drive, which is St. Marcus' backyard. So another major question presented itself. What are we, as a congregation, going to do? Is the congregation going to uproot and follow suit like many of the other WELS churches, and head out to the suburbs? Or should the congregation stay? The debate became quite heated in the 1960's. The congregation stayed for many reasons, but one of the main reasons was the pastor. Pastor Paul Knickelbein followed Pastor

Dornfeldt, who was not able to follow up on the multi cultural opportunity that had opened up. Pastor Knickelbein had multi-cultural experience; he was one of the organizers of St. Phillips (Milwaukee). St. Phillips is a congregation that was begun for the “colored” people. This congregation was designed and set up to be exclusively a Black congregation. So St. Marcus extended a call to Pastor Knickelbein. Was it because St. Marcus wanted to call a pastor who had a clue in doing multi-cultural work? Knickelbein says, “No, I was just there and they thought that I was a nice guy who didn’t have enough to do with my dinky little group of colored folks.” The congregation was not totally in favor of integrating and during his time the congregation lost over half of its White members. The upside was that connections were constantly being established between the African Americans that lived in the surrounding neighborhoods. In 1967, Knickelbein received a call and he moved on. When he left there were close to a dozen Black families who were members of St. Marcus. St. Marcus was the first WELS congregation to integrate. The congregation remained without a pastor for the remainder of 1967.

The school also began to suffer difficulties. Teachers no longer wanted to come to the “urban jungle” to spread God’s Word. The “White Flight” (migration of whites out of the city) was incredible.

Everything that had been going on seemed to culminate in 1967 when the riots hit Milwaukee. Martin Luther King Drive was the center of the riots. (Remember that this is in the backyard of St. Marcus.) For a couple of days vandalism, looting, bombing and other acts of violence went on. One of the buildings that were vandalized was the parsonage of the congregation. After that the congregation decided that it was unreasonable to ask a pastor to live in that parsonage's location. So the congregation sold the parsonage.

A missionary from Japan, Richard Seeger, was then called to St. Marcus. He was a big man with a loud voice and a missionary's attitude and he came in like Big Daddy and cleaned things up. Seeger got the congregation calmed down, and he began to do extensive evangelism.

Not too long after Seeger's arrival, Fred Hagedorn and his wife came to the school and stabilized it and even saved the school. Unfortunately, it was at this time that St. Marcus' final white children graduated. Now the school boasted an enrollment that was 100% African American.

Following the Hagedorns were the Gartners. Neither the Seegers nor the Gartners really understood the whole mission. Both lived in Wauwatosa and sent their own children to schools out there. St. Marcus School was still not being viewed as a school for all families, but rather a mission school for the "colored". Pastor Seeger then left for another world mission call, one to



the Caribbean. His heart was really always in world missions. And soon after that the Gartners left with a call to Florida.

Pastor Jeske arrived on the scene in 1980. He was single and moved around the neighborhood freely without a family. The neighborhood bottomed out around 1985. Houses began to come down either by demolition or arson at a rate of about two per week.

A couple of key events happened around the neighborhood in the 80's. The local Nine Union went on strike and the Schlitz Brewery locked them out and sold the Brewery to Stroh's. By doing that they hung the Union out to dry. Suddenly there were 8,000 people out of work. But within a year, an organization known as the Grin Developers came and they turn that Brewery into what is modern day Schlitz Park. By doing this they provided jobs for more than 10,000 people. Now more people were employed at Schlitz Park than the Brewery had ever employed, even when it was the number one Brewery in the country.

Another major event that occurred was that some slightly crazy gentlemen came in and began to buy up houses in the surrounding area. These men named this area Brewer's Hill (after the Schlitz Brewery) and they began to renovate the homes. Then they began to get people to come buy these houses and the erosion of the neighborhood began to slow down.

The final big factor was Pastor Jeske's commitment to integrate the school. He realized that the school would not survive as simply something that the congregation was doing for someone else. But instead they had to make it their own. Making the school their own as well as making it for others reduced many of the rifts in the congregation. The school would no longer be a battle of us versus them, but rather we are in this together.

In 1982, white children began to return to St. Marcus for education. They "took a chance" on the school and enrolled their kids. After that more white children began to come to St. Marcus School. Confidence began to build in a school that was for everyone. In 1981, concerns that the school might have to close grew. Enrollment had dropped to around fifty students and the faculty felt as though they were looking at the end. But they stuck it out. By the early 90's when the Gartners left and Paul and Karen Jacobs arrived, the enrollment increased to the high eighties. The school had another growth spurt. Today St. Marcus School is about 80% African American and 20% White.

Another big way in which St. Marcus began to reach out to the African Americans in the surrounding area was to try to adopt some of their culture. One of the ways that the congregation did this was to start a Gospel Choir. It began as a quartet and slowly grew. Today the Gospel Choir is

known as the United Voices of Praise. This mass choir is made up from several of the central city congregations.

**COMMENTS:**

To most people all of this history may seem like it doesn't fit with the cross cultural theme of the paper. I, however, would disagree. I think that it is important to see the changes that St. Marcus has gone through since it was founded in the late 1800's. The United States has always been called a melting pot for different cultures. I think this is a false label. The United States is more like a stew pot. In this pot we have many different cultures and each culture tends to keep itself together with cultures that are the same or similar. As a church body we want to reach all people. Currently, we, as a Synod, are working harder to become more multi-cultural. I think that looking at the history of St. Marcus can help us to better understand the changing process that we are going through as a Synod and need to continue to encourage.

**DO YOU THINK IT IS  
MORE DIFFICULT FOR AN  
AFRICAN AMERICAN TO BE  
A LUTHERAN?**

Jeske: Absolutely! There are a whole bunch of barriers that need to be addressed. For one, no matter what we do, think, or say, St. Marcus is still the Man's church. (For all of you non-city speaking people, the Man is a reference to the White man in general.) So, if you are Black, you have to make an effort and go against the norm to attend worship at St. Marcus. Oddly enough, if you are White you have to make similar efforts to attend worship at St. Marcus. It has often been overheard, "Why would you want to go to church down there?" As if St. Marcus was in Africa or something. If we have to drive through that area, we will roll up our windows and pray that we can make it to the eastside before we get raped or mugged. So both cultures make efforts and we all just kind of meet in the middle.

African Americans don't just slide in to St. Marcus. Our style of worship is still very strange to them. Just as it would be strange for a White person to go to a storefront Inner City Pentecostal church service. You would just feel strange, awkward, and uncomfortable. Some thoughts would be: What is going to happen next? What songs are these? What kind of music is this? And who is in charge here? These thoughts are some of the same thoughts African Americans have when they begin worshipping in WELS churches.

**COMMENTS:**

Are there ways that we can make compromises that will in no way hurt or hinder the Gospel? Could making these compromise in fact take out some obstacles and in turn further advance the Gospel? These are questions that people in multi-cultural settings struggle with every day. I think that often we take for granted the fact that many of our members have just grown up being WELS. Therefore we don't understand what it is like for someone who is from a totally different culture who is trying to become a Lutheran. In order to reach these people we need to become more culturally sensitive.

**REACT TO THIS STATEMENT:  
MARK JESKE PREACHES LIKE  
A BAPTIST  
(NOT DOCTRINAL CONTENT, JUST PREACHING  
STYLE).**

*Jeske:* Well, I don't get around much anymore and I pretty much just have to listen to myself every Sunday. I guess that I have been changed over the years and adapted some. One thing that has changed me is what I learned from the African Americans. We are not just here for the poor folk. You know, to let some crumbs fall from the table. But we are here to learn and receive as much as we teach and give. And one of the things that I've learned and that I am convinced of is that the WELS traditions don't have it

all. We have a piece, we know some things about ministry, but there are some big gaps. When I got started here, lay people didn't like to pray in public. African Americans on other hand allowed their faith to just bubble to the surface and loved to let their faith out. And faith is more integrated into the every day life of the African American. Where as my people's culture is like you should be done talking about Jesus at 11:00 (which is exactly one hour after church began) and don't bring Him up again until 10:00 AM next Sunday. Maybe the super religious members read *Little Visits with God* or have a private devotion during the week. Religion was much more personal; where as the Black culture it is much more open. St. Marcus had to reach out or die. Something had to change or we were going to disappear. So I did a lot of looking and listening, and my African American brothers and sisters did a lot of teaching to me, too. One change I made is that I began to accept the legitimacy of emotions. The way that I was brought up was that religion was a very sound or serious business. It was very formal. The sermon was really just a polished speech, and although we were encouraged to write like we talk, it ended up that we were talking like we wrote. The preaching style I watched my peers develop, and maybe I did it, too, (I don't remember what I sounded like) was really just

the reciting of a manuscript. It felt stiff, and the African American people don't want it to be stiff. They don't need to be jumping or rolling on the carpet or screaming "Hallelujah," but they do need to feel something. Then I started to watch some of the good Black preachers and how they interacted with their congregations and that kind of loosened me up a little in my preaching. And that got me to work some personal experiences into my sermons. It let the people see that I was human and that I was not just up on some pedestal. Here at St. Marcus we applaud after the various groups sing in church (school children, Gospel Choir, etc...). This is really just an extension of the emotions. We are nowhere close to a sanctified church, it wasn't planned, and it just came out of people. On Good Friday when the Gospel choir sang, they didn't clap. It depends on the mood of the song. When the Seminary Choir comes, they usually don't clap because the music is more structured. When the Gospel Choir sings and the choir gets moving, people just respond. It is just the people's way of saying, 'thank you.' Yes, my body also wants to say thank you. Think about it this way. The Lutheran Chorale is music for the mind, while Gospel music is music for the body. Both kinds of music are for the soul.

## HOW DIFFICULT IS IT TO MAINTAIN A BALANCE BETWEEN THE LUTHERAN TRADITIONS AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE?

*Jeske:* Very. It is unnatural. Your culture is what you do when you are not thinking about it. And in Sunday worship it is so much effort to think of something new and you tend to slide back into what your patterns were. And that is not our pattern that we would have something different in the service. I would say it takes some skill to pull it off and not look stupid. The key is to find a proper combination of the two. Gospel music and energetic preaching are wonderful things! But so is the Lutheran liturgy, which has many beautiful parts to it. The liturgy is not something that you just want to punt. Take the Lord's Supper for instance. The songs that go with that service bring something special to the service. The form of that service is special. In fact, people who have moved on from St. Marcus and returned to their Baptist roots have commented to me that they kind of miss that communion service. That is something that when you are informal and used to being informal, just doesn't compare to the service or the doctrine that we have in the WELS.



Comments:

Again a question is asked that is struggled with daily. How do we integrate another culture into our worship services without losing our Lutheran heritage and tradition that we are so proud of? Jeske has done an excellent job of blending the two. He has however, been doing it for years and has become good at it. It definitely does take skill. If you are put in this kind of situation, experimentation may be the only way to find out what works and what doesn't.

**WHAT WAS THE ATTITUDE OF YOUR CLASSMATES  
WHEN YOU RECEIVED THE CALL TO  
ST. MARCUS?**

*Jeske:* Well, back in the early 80's this place was viewed as exile. I would say, "Yeah, I'm at St. Marcus." And they would respond with "oh, you poor bugger!" Usually white people respond saying, "Oh, that must be a challenge!" Which is white people's way of saying, "Thank God it is you and not me!" Or they say, "I'd come and visit you but I like the windows in my car intact!" People always assume that I have some good urban violence stories, but I am almost embarrassed to say I don't. I would love to tell people what a patient cool stud I am to put up with all of this personal abuse.

**COMMENTS:**

The “scared of the city” attitude is one that we need to constantly fight against. Upon talking with Pastor Jeske it is easy to see that he has no fear of working in the city. It is definitely an ethnocentric attitude and it has plagued us. This is our Old Adam telling us that our culture is better than another culture. God wants all people to be saved. Notice that His Word doesn’t say, “God wants to save only the people who are like us.”

**DO YOU THINK THE RECENT PUSH TO DO  
MULTI-CULTURAL WORK IN OUR SYNOD IS  
SIMPLY BECAUSE RIGHT NOW IT IS  
FASHIONABLE TO BE MULTI-CULTURAL?**

*Jeske:* I hope so. I hope that our Synod is finally getting it. And I hope that the stuff that we are doing in the central city is being made known so that people can begin to see that it is fun and exciting to work in the city. We are not just slogging away and putting in our time and doing our dreadful duty for God. But rather it is a lot of fun to be here. There are some awesome possibilities that God has for the cities; an urban vision instead of our Synod’s agricultural vision. You know, we will go find some German farmers instead of going to the cities. You know Paul went to the cities.

And if this thought is starting to catch on, then I would like to be here to do my little part to help people believe that this can happen in our Synod.

**COMMENTS:**

There is really not a lot that needs to be said on this question. Jeske does an excellent job of laying it all out on the table. Slowly, but surely we as a Synod, are starting to catch on and understand the need of doing multi-cultural work. And if fashion is the means that God is using right now, then great!

**DO YOU FEEL THERE IS A BENEFIT TO  
LIVING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?**

*Jeske:* It has got to happen. It sends a powerful message, both ways. One way if you don't live in the city. Or the other way if you do live in the city. There aren't a whole lot of people who are with me. I wouldn't go as far as saying that you have to live on the campus, because then your family is exposed to people coming to the door all the time asking for money and help. That can really wear on you. But you need to live near the place you serve to understand the city and to send a crucial message. Are you the Man who is coming in to use the city? Or are you here to be in the city? I choose to be in the city.

**COMMENTS:**

There are varying lines of thought on this point. I personally feel the same way Pastor Jeske does. I feel it does send a powerful message. Are you there only to do your job? Or are you there because you care about the individuals you are serving and you want to understand their culture and be a part of them? It will vary from individual to individual.

**AS AN INDIVIDUAL WHO IS SERVING AS A CALLED  
WORKER AT A SCHOOL, IS IT IMPORTANT  
TO SEND YOUR CHILDREN TO THAT SCHOOL?**

*Jeske:* Absolutely. If you have kids and you don't want to send them to a central city school, then don't serve there, as a pastor or a teacher. Stay where you are and don't get involved.

**COMMENTS:**

It is quite obvious how Jeske feels on this subject. I do fully agree with him. It can send a very destructive message if you are a called worker to a congregation, and choose to send your children elsewhere to school. This could, although not intentionally, hinder the Gospel message of our Savior.

## DO YOU EVER GET TO A POINT WHERE YOU DON'T SEE COLOR ANYMORE?

*Jeske:* It fades in and out like a bad TV picture. Sometimes I am very aware of it. There still some very instinctive patterns that people have, especially those whom are very poor. When I move among people who are very poor, and are Black, there's a different value system and a different way of making decisions. And then I am aware of it because it's so foreign to me. But other times, when the Gospel Choir sings on tour, I almost kind of think that this is my music, too. When the Gospel Choir is going full tilt we kind of fuse and blend. We kind of forget about race. We are just spreading God's Word. That's our ministry. We are in this together.

### **COMMENTS:**

There is truly only one thing that has the power to break down racial, cultural, and basically any kind of barriers. That one thing is the Gospel. What a cool and tremendously neat thing it is to see groups of people from different cultures coming together to listen to and spread God's Word.

## WHERE DO YOU SEE ST. MARCUS IN FUTURE YEARS?

Jeske: It is my hope and prayer that this church and school remain multi-cultural. My dreams would be that we have a much more active lay ministry going on here; so that we can penetrate the neighborhood more. I think that I am still trying to combine the strengths of the tradition of the WELS with some of the new modern day ideas, new ways to get God's Word out to people (Gospel music, Contemporary music, etc...). Not pitting it against the chorales, but instead using the entire perspective.

### **DO YOU HAVE ANY FINAL THOUGHTS OR COMMENTS THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?**

Jeske: Well, I guess, I would say just read the book of Acts back to back about five times. Not that Paul's methods have to become law, but he went where the people were. He went to the cities. He moved around the different groups of people fearlessly. He adjusted himself constantly so that the Lord could use him to reach people. And this is really our struggle as an immigrant church body, and those are our roots, and we will never lose those roots completely. We do however have to constantly challenge our thinking and extend our goals to go everywhere. The WELS has lost enough churches in the city and we need to say, 'That is enough, no more.' We don't want to move out of the cities. We need to accept that. If we don't, it is because we don't want to, not because we can't. This can be done. This

is not just a grim duty but it is a whole lot of fun. Well, if you don't know anything about this go check it out while you can. Listen and learn and let them teach you. Have some fun with it. I think this is going to make the WELS a whole lot better Synod and its going to be something that we are going to be proud to give the Lord on the Day of Judgement.

**WRAP UP AND FINAL COMMENTS:**

We are in a neat position right now as a church body. We are undergoing a change. The door to do multi-cultural work is opening, as slowly as it may seem, we now have an incredible opportunity to do work in areas that we never dreamed. Yes, there are definite barriers that stand before us. But the Gospel can break down those cultural barriers and clear the paths so that everyone, all people, can hear the Good News that Jesus died for all of our sins. The change needs to start with us. We cannot expect the people that we are taking the message to do the changing. The task is ours. The challenge is ours. It is truly an outstanding task that God has given us. And it is only through Him that this change in us can happen.

WORKS CITED

See enclosed video interview



