

EARLY LIFE IN
ST. JOHN'S EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH,
NEWTONBURG, WISCONSIN

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The wilderness of northern Wisconsin was virtually untouched by settlers in the early 1800's and up until 1825 there were still only Indians around present day Manitowoc. This changed, however, in 1836 when there was a report of a gold strike near Kewaunee. Two Rivers and Manitowoc were settled in the same year, in the same manner. First came the loggers and then as forests were cleared, settlers moved in and turned to agriculture.

In the years between 1848 and 1850 there was a large influx of German immigrants into the area of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin. Many of these immigrants were refugees fleeing from the German revolution of 1848. For them immigration came as a direct result of religious and political persecution in their homeland. Many of these early Lutheran pioneers came to America from Mecklenburg and Hanover in Germany.

The fact of this large German immigration into Manitowoc County is noted in the 1860 census which lists nearly 2400 Germans in this county out of a total population of about 4,200. Since the Germans had a tendency to stick together, their greatest numbers settled in Centerville, Newton and Manitowoc.

Already in the late 1840's there grew up an important settlement along the old Green Bay road. Thus Newtonburg was founded as a stopping place for travelers and a post office along military roads between Milwaukee and Green Bay. It was here that in the years between 1847 and 1851 a ten family group of Lutherans came and established a home. The names of these early settlers were H. Baryenbruch, H. Carstens, L. Kieselhorst, H. Meyer, J. Roepke, A. Wernecke, C. Uilharms, F. Hoefner and C. Ewald.

With diligent hands and a great trust in God these men cleared the forestland, cleared the fields, planted and cultivated. They had left the comforts of Germany only to find that in America they had to work very hard or starve to death. These pioneers worked with their hands to provide daily bread, but they were also aware that all their work and sorrow would be wasted effort if the blessing of God was withheld. They were a very religious people and were conscious of the fact that when the Lord does not build a house and preserve a city it isn't worth building. They knew that they should not neglect to request blessings for the body and soul from above. Thus it was decided that they would find the ways and means not only to build an earthly field which would give life and bread, but also to begin to build a spiritual field for the needed bread for their souls.

This spiritual need led to the establishment of Lutheran divine services. The first divine services were held in the house of Mr. Dietrich Barnstein. Since this group had no pastor, as yet, the work was carried out by various members. Early records, for example, show that oftentimes the father officiated at the baptism of his child.

As the congregation began to grow the need for a larger worship facility followed. From the home of Mr. Barnstein services were transferred to the district school house.

While these services were being held here a new missionary from Germany arrived in Manitowoc County in 1850. His name was C. F. Goldammer. Goldammer was from Ursperg in the Province of Saxony and had been trained by the Langenburg Mission Society. He had entered the Rhine Mission House in 1846, but after two years

he withdrew because he couldn't master the foreign languages. He was trained further, however, examined and given a good report. Upon arrival in Milwaukee he was licensed by the newly founded Wisconsin Synod and sent to Manitowoc County. President Muelhaeuser of the Wisconsin Synod had sent Goldammer to canvass the territory around Newtonburg.

When Pastor Goldammer met with the group of Lutherans at Newtonburg he saw their need for a pastor. The congregation also saw the need for a full-time pastor and rejoiced over Goldammer's coming. Although at times he lived in great poverty while he was among them, it was decided to ask Pastor Goldammer to remain and found a congregation. Among the stipulations was one regarding the Pastor's salary. Each one of the fifteen to twenty heads of families agreed to pay to the pastor the sum of \$1.50 to \$2.00 per family, per year and whatever extra one could spare or do without.

Thus Pastor Goldammer organized the congregation of St. John's, Newtonburg in 1851. Other than the organization, little can be found about the establishment of the congregation. One point worth noting, however, is that the confessional stand of the congregation wasn't too firm at first. This allowed people to be received into membership who belonged to other confessions. Since there weren't many pastors in the wilderness regions of Wisconsin at this time people were ready to go to any church which had an ordained pastor, no matter what his denomination was.

The church services, which were still being held in the district school house, might have remained here for some time if it hadn't been for the generous gift of a member of the congregation. Mr. J. Roepke purchased eight acres of land at the junction of

Green Bay and English Lake Roads. This land was to be a gift to the congregation, but only on the condition that Roepke did not have to contribute his money share toward the pastor's salary.

It was resolved by the congregation that on this piece of land a school and a parsonage were to be constructed. This is where the divine services would be held on Sundays. In 1852 the congregation held a church-raising bee in which a loghouse fifteen feet by thirty feet was erected for the pastor and his family.

Pastor Goldammer wasn't satisfied with having only one Lutheran church in the area, so he began doing mission work in the township of Liberty and the village of Manitowoc. Goldammer walked the six miles to Manitowoc to hold services every second Tuesday in the district school house. These mission efforts led to the organization of Trinity Church of Liberty in 1853 and of First German Congregation of Manitowoc in 1854.

In order to make St. John's a truly confessional church, Pastor Goldammer wrote a constitution in 1854. This constitution was based on the Lutheran Confessions and Scripture and was signed and adopted by the congregation. This helped eliminate members who were not truly Lutheran.

It was also in 1854 that St. John's of Newtonburg became a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin. One thing worth noting about its synodical membership is that in the synod convention of 1855 the synod proceedings state that after a discussion the congregation of St. John Newton was acceptable and retained in the synod. Since the congregation had already been accepted in 1854 we could only guess as to what the discussion in 1855 regarding synodical membership could have involved.

Whatever it was the synod decided that it wasn't enough to warrant dismissal from membership in the synod.

Things seemed to be moving along smoothly for the new, young congregation, but then in 1854 Pastor Goldammer decided to resign his county missions, which included his pastorate at Newtonburg. He decided that he would devote more time to the newly organized congregation in Manitowoc, First German. This Manitowoc congregation had been established chiefly because of his missionary work.

The Newtonburg congregation wasn't without a pastor for very long, however. In 1854 W. Streissguth had been introduced to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin and was assigned to St. John's. Streissguth had trained at Basel and in 1848 he was commissioned by the mission house at the Elsass so he could join the colony of the Swiss around New Glarus, Wisconsin. After five years he left here, since he couldn't cope with the decline. This led to his application for membership in the Wisconsin Synod and his assignment to Newtonburg.

Not much is known of Pastor Streissguth's pastorate at St. John's probably because he was only there for a little more than one year. At this time the congregation at Newtonburg was slowly growing, but Pastor Streissguth also worked as a mission extension of the synod. He traveled between Milwaukee and Algoma working with German Lutherans.

After one year Pastor Streissguth took a call to Milwaukee where he also served as an official of the Wisconsin Synod. Thus St. John's was again without a pastor. It wasn't long, however, before Rev. Philipp Sprengling took the call and assumed his duties as pastor of the Newtonburg parish. Sprengling had been sent over

from Germany late in 1856 by the Langenberg Mission House. He had been a cobbler by trade and had studied at Barmen. After staying with two pastors, Philip Koehler and John Bading, to become acquainted with American customs, he was ordained and placed in charge of St. John's congregation of Newtonburg.

It was during Pastor Sprengling's time that some major changes came about at St. John's. In 1857 the day school was begun on a part-time basis. What this meant was that Christian day school was held after the public school had finished its term.

In 1860 a major construction project was undertaken. It was decided by the congregation that a new church building was needed. Thus the structure of logs built in 1852 was replaced by a frame structure. It was also decided that Sunday services would be held at 9 A.M. from Easter to September and at 10 A.M. from September to Easter. This shows how the congregational life was influenced by the main occupation of its members, farming.

Rev. Sprengling remained with St. John's until 1861 when Rev. P. Niedmann arrived. Niedmann had been a teacher in a Greenfield, Wisconsin congregation. When this congregation's call for a pastor couldn't be filled for a long time, Niedmann made application for the job. At the 1859 synod convention, the synod, at the congregation's urging, granted Niedmann a preaching license. Niedmann was ordained in 1860 and moved on to Newtonburg in 1861.

While at Newtonburg the congregation planned a new parsonage which was erected during the summer months. At the same time the old log house was remodeled for a school.

The congregation of St. John's seemed to be prospering quite well and really didn't seem to have any problems. Then

suddenly the congregation was shocked. It was discovered that Pastor Niedmann had been a thief in Germany and also in Wisconsin. Pastor Niedmann made a full confession of his guilt and the synod took quick action and suspended him from the ministry in 1863. Needless to say he was released from the congregation at Newtonburg.

Niedmann, however, did manage to work his way into the Golden Lake parish and was accepted despite the warnings of the synod. This led to the suspension of the Golden Lake church from the synod. Up to the 1880's Niedmann continually victimized congregations around Sheboygan and Kewaunee which showed how desperate people were for pastors at this time.

Rev. F. H. Warnke took the call vacated by Niedmann in 1863. He only served part of a year. The congregation was then served by Rev. Koehler from Manitowoc who served as vacancy pastor. He would come out to Newtonburg on every fourth Sunday and was paid three dollars for his transportation.

After this vacancy the people of St. John's were overjoyed when Rev. F. A. Kleinert accepted their call in 1864. As in many congregations at this time a great emphasis was placed on the stewardship of God's people. For example, if people didn't pay for their share of the parsonage fund set up under Pastor Niedmann, as they had pledged, membership cancellation was threatened. It was also stated that anyone who hadn't donated his share of wood for the church was to have his name read in a regular service.

Finances seemed to be an important issue during Pastor Kleinert's stay. From these monies a steeple was added to the church. The church also proposed to buy an organ, but that idea

was probably never carried out, since at a later date Mr. E. Carstens was instructed to accompany the congregational singing in the worship service with a violin. The pastor's salary was also set at not less than \$300.00 per year.

In 1866 a major decision was also reached regarding the school. They decided that they should either combine the parochial and district schools or close the district school. The final decision came in 1867 when it was decided to call a Lutheran teacher who would teach half year at the parochial and half year at the district school.

It was also at this time that the church and parsonage were renovated. Thus St. John's of Newtonburg seemed quite far removed from the turmoil of the Civil War which had enveloped a major portion of the country.

Pastor Kleinert took a call in 1868, which led to the arrival of Pastor Wagner. It was during this pastorate that a school building committee was appointed. The congregation felt that it was time to replace the old log house school building. It had served well as a parsonage, place of worship and school building, but now it was time for a change. A new school building was erected in 1870. It was also voted that those who didn't pay for the school house by May had to pay the 10 per cent interest on the ten dollar investment. Thus we can see how each member had a definite part in the church finances.

In order to modernize the church even more a stone foundation was put under the church. So that everyone could have an equal part in paying for this addition, as well as any future financial undertaking, the congregation passed a law saying that when a

majority agrees on a sum of money, each individual must pay it by a certain date or forfeit membership.

This type of law gave rise to the idea of church dues. Every member had to pay a certain amount of money or lose membership. There is no stipulation whether or not the person had to come to church, but as long as he would pay his money he could remain as a member. Such a practice wasn't restricted to St. John's, however. For the church goers of this day it seemed like the only way to insure continuance of their church.

Pastor Wagner also insisted that young people still had to attend at least two years of instruction before they would be confirmed. Pastor Sprengling had begun this practice much earlier, but evidently some of the pastors in between had been somewhat lax in this area. What this meant now for St. John's was that their children would have a better background in confessional Lutheranism. These children would some day be the leaders in the church and if they had a thorough understanding of Scripture and Lutheranism there would be less of a chance for the church to fall away. These young people could also make certain that in future years what they heard was the true word of God.

In 1874 Pastor Wagner took a call elsewhere. This paved the way for Pastor E. Strube. Pastor Strube was a very devout leader. His first major decision was a declaration against lodge members. He saw that the lodge was anti-Scriptural, so he dismissed members who refused to conform. This might not have set too well with many people, but it made certain that St. John's would remain true to the word of God.

As the silver anniversary of the congregation drew near, a

fund for a new church building was begun. The congregation knew that it would take a number of years for such a building project to become a reality, but as the congregation was growing they wanted a fitting place for worship.

In twenty-five years of existence from 1851-1876 St. John's of Newtonburg had grown from a small group of families into a congregation that was ready to build a third church building. They had begun church services in a home, without a pastor, but had now moved from a school building to a log house to a frame building and now to plans for a real church building with the spiritual assistance of eight pastors. Their beginning years certainly were not without problems. There was a constant concern for finances even to the extent that church membership depended on church dues. There were also discipline problems, but at least this congregation was spared from a major schism. Many other congregations had split apart on various issues, but St. John's family stayed united according to the words of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The next 100 years from 1876-1976 saw the growth of St. John's congregation. The third church was dedicated in 1888 at a cost of \$8,300, but was destroyed by fire in 1922. This led to the building of a fourth building which was dedicated in 1923. This fourth building is the present building and still stands on the land purchased by J. Roepke back in 1851.

The members of St. John's also showed continual concern for Christian education during this 100 year period. In 1879 the first teacher was called who taught the German school for four months, and in 1903 the Christian day school became full-time.

By God's grace St. John's of Newtonburg made it through some difficult times in its first twenty-five years. Times may have been rough, but the German Lutheran settlers never lost sight of the importance of religion and the church for their lives. In the past all things were entrusted to the Lord and in the future all things depend on the Lord. By God's grace St. John's of Newtonburg will remain true to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions as it has done in the past.

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