

GREAT IS THE LORD AND GREATLY TO BE PRAISED

St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, 1876 - 1960

By

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Senior Church History
April 27, 1987

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"Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised." (Ps 48:1) The Holy Spirit inspired the sons of Korah to write these words of praise and thanks to God for his grace and mercy. They thanked God for his unfailing love demonstrated in his Word and Church. The same spirit of thankfulness and praise have guided the members of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye, Minnesota. During the celebration of 100 years of grace and mercy in 1976 these words of praise were painted above the lectern and pulpit. God has been gracious to this congregation and has been and continues to be praised by them.

This paper will trace the history of St. John's congregation from its founding in 1876 through 1960. As it does we will notice God's grace to the congregation and how it returned praise to God for this grace. We will view the founding of the congregation; the beginning of St. John's Lutheran School; and the split of the congregation in 1959. We will also look at the ministry of its pastors and how God blessed the congregation, the Synod and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary through them. (Two full time pastors and one vacancy pastor of this period went on to the Seminary to serve the Lord in the training of future pastors.) In all the areas of the congregation's history we will see the hand of God blessing and preserving the congregation.

St. John's is a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. As such it bases its work, teaching and practice on the

motto of Dr. Martin Luther: sola gratia; sola fide; sola scriptura - we are saved alone by faith in Jesus' atonement for our sins; alone by his grace; alone through the Holy Scriptures. This means that St. John's stands apart for the ecumenical and unionistic churches today. It teaches with uncompromising zeal the Biblical doctrines of the ex nihilo six day creation, the virgin birth, the vicarious atonement, the Trinity, and the verbal inspiration of Scriptures. It uses the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments, according to God's command for the bringing to faith and the preservation of faith. By means of its affiliation with the WELS God has blessed the congregation with the truth of his Word.

God showed his love for the congregation by leading it into the fellowship of the WELS. Before that could happen the congregation had to be gathered and formed. God also guided this part of St. John's history.

There were few settlers in the area of Sleepy Eye in the late 1850's. The first white settler to the area was a French-Canadian known as "French Cap." He settled on the east edge of Sleepy Eye lake near the summer camp of Chief Ish-tak-ha-ba (Sleepy Eyes).

(100th Anniv., p.3) The presence of the Sioux Indians and the Indian Uprising of 1862 kept settlement of the area to a minimum. However, in 1866 Home township, in which Sleepy Eye is located, was formally organized. (ibid)

The development of the area did not come until 1872 when the the first train came from the east. Sleepy Eye was surveyed and plotted

*most of endnotes
are more appropriate!*

and the first store was built. In 1873 the post office was opened. (op. cit., p. 5) At this time Pastor Gottlieb Riem and Pastor J. Hunziker began searching for German Lutherans in the Sleepy Eye area. (op. cit., p.4) Rev. Riem was the pastor of Ev. Lutherische St. Paulus Gemeinde, New Ulm and a member of the Minnesota Synod. Rev. Hunziker was a missionary, known as the "traveling preacher."

*to former
Walt
Synod
President*

During their efforts at organizing a congregation the Sleepy Eye area experienced some new problems. A grasshopper plague devastated the area between 1873 and 1877. Flocks of blackbirds ravaged the crops. ~~the~~ situation became so bad that the legislature offered \$1.00 per bushel of dead grasshoppers and 40 cents per 100 dead blackbirds. (op. cit. p.5) Despite this aid some farmers sold out for what they could get.

During these stressful times Pastors Riem and Hunziker labored to gather a flock. Their labors were blessed by God and services were held in homes.

Early in 1876 enough families were gathered to hold an organizational meeting. A meeting was held on February 19 in the Sleepy Eye public school. The congregation was organized on March 11, 1876 with 20 families participating. The congregation was called the Deutsche Lutherische St. Johannis Gemeinde. (ibid)

Rev. Christian Frederick Meyer came from Pine Island parish, Goodhue County, and presided over the organizational meeting. He became the first resident pastor of St. John's. (ibid)

The first church was also built by the same congregation in its

first year of existence. It was a small frame building measuring 50' x 28'. It cost \$1766.99. This is not much by present values, but one must remember that this was done in a time of economic depression and agricultural failures. (op. cit. p.6) On October 22, 1876 the building was dedicated to glory of God. The pastor's quarters were located in the rear of the church.

St. Johannis Gemeinde was not to enjoy the services of its first pastor for long. On August 19, 1877 the Rev. C. Oerding took over the pastorate. (ibid)

Rev. Oerding drew up the first "Gemeind Ordnung." He wrote these rules in German script and recorded them in first statistical records of the congregation. These rules were adopted by the congregation on March 12, 1879 and affiliated St. John's with the Minnesota Synod. These rules are now known as the Constitution and By-Laws. (ibid)

In 1880 the third resident pastor came to St. John's. Rev. Simeon Deuber became pastor.

During this time the crops became more productive and the members of St. John's prospered. In 1881 the congregation purchased pews for the church and built a barn. This enabled Pastor Deuber to become more mobile since he could keep a horse and buggy. He was able to visit more of the new immigrants to the area. The congregation grew so that by mid 1881 the congregation grew to 40 families. (ibid)

At this time the foundations were laid for St. John's Elementary

School. On February 7, 1880 the congregational minutes referred to money being allocated for the establishment of a Christian School. Facilities for this school were provided in 1885 when the first parsonage was built. The former living quarters of the pastor were then converted into a school. These facilities served as the school until 1891 when a unit of the local public school was purchased for \$220 and moved to a lot south of the church. In 1898 the upper room of this building was made into the confirmation class room. This building served the congregation until 1926. (Children, p.5)

In 1896 Pastor Deuber retired from the ministry after serving St. John's for 17 years. Loss of hearing had become a problem. He and his family moved to Mankato where he passed away on April 12, 1912 at the age of 77 years. (100th Anniv., p.7)

Rev. August F. Zich accepted the call to become St. John's fourth pastor. He moved to Sleepy Eye from Dexter, Mower County in 1896. He served as both pastor of the congregation and teacher in the school until 1898. On January 5, 1898 the congregation resolved to call its first full time teacher. A call was extended to candidate John Jaeger who became the first teacher in September of 1898. (Children, p. 5). To help finance the school the congregation resolved that "each child would be charged fifty cents per month." (100th Anniv., p. 8) This allowed Pastor Zich to devote all his time and efforts to the pastoral ministry of St. John's.

In 1897 a well was dug for the church facilities. Increases in church attendance required the addition of a balcony in the church.

(ibid)

The first church building built in 1876 was no longer able to provide enough room for the worshipers. Even the balcony added in 1897 did not provide enough room. So in 1901 the congregation resolved to build a new church. The cornerstone of the new building was laid on July 20, 1902. The building was dedicated on December 14, 1902. The cost was \$20,000 which was double the original estimate. (ibid)

Guest speakers for the dedication were Prof. John Schaller of Doctor Martin Luther College in New Ulm and Rev. W. Schulze, pastor of Zion in Sanborn. The first church building was sold and later destroyed in a fire. (ibid)

Rev. Zich, pastor at that time, had a talent for church history. In 1909 he was moved to help compile and write the preface to the "Geschichte der Minnesota Synode und ihrer Einzelnen Gemeinden." This book covered the history of the old Minnesota Synod from 1860 to 1910. (ibid)

On January 11, 1911 Rev. Zich was granted a release so that he could accept a call to St. Paul's Church in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Rev. Zich served St. John's for 15 years. Later he became a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Theinsville, Wisconsin. He died there on June 24, 1939. (op. cit., pp.8,9)

St. John's then extended a divine call to Pastor William C. Albrecht, White, South Dakota. Rev. Albrecht began 35 years of faithful service on April 11, 1911. (op. cit. p.9)

In 1916 a decision was reached to hold voters' meetings in English. This was precipitated by many newcomers who could not speak nor understand German. This meant that they could not participate in the meetings. (ibid)

In 1923 the voters decided to read the names of all members who had paid their dues and those who had not. The minutes list 201 names with their dues. The receipts for the year were \$5,089.30 while the amount paid out was \$4,735.24. (ibid)

Meanwhile, the elementary school had been served by John Jaeger until 1906. He was followed by student S. Duin who served one year. William Hellermann the served as teacher from 1907 to 1909 and was followed by John Pelzl who served from 1909 to 1918. (ibid)

Teacher Paul Hippauf came to St. John's in 1918. In the fall of 1919 the number of pupils in the lower grades swelled and an additional teacher was called. Miss Emma Offermann, a High School graduate from St. John's, was prevailed upon to teach for one year. Since 1920 St. John's has been able to secure lady teacher candidates from D.M.L.C. or from call lists provided by the District President. (Children, p.5)

The enrollment in the school continued to grow. The school outgrew the first school building. On June 21, 1925 the congregation resolved to build a new school building by a large majority. The cornerstone was laid at a special service on Sunday, September 12, 1925. The dedication of the new school was held on January 10, 1926. The total cost of the project was \$21,000 and was secured

through cash and subscriptions. Alfred Goeglein was teacher at the time. (op. cit. p.6)

At the 50th anniversary in 1926 the congregation numbered 750 souls, 550 communicants and 138 voting members. Eighty-eight children were attending the school. (100th Anniv., p. 10)

Pastor Albrecht led the congregation to change the way it collected funds. In 1923 the envelopes were introduced for Synodical collections. The following year the congregation adopted the envelope system for general use. (ibid)

After fifty years the congregation as a whole was still accustomed to speaking German. Although voters' meetings were being held in English many members still felt that worship was "echt" only when held in German. English services were tried and dropped. However, in July 1919 it was decided to hold English services once a month. In 1927 English services were held alternately on Sunday mornings and evenings. Eventually an English service was held every Sunday morning after the German service.

In 1940 the Lenten services were held in English. Starting in 1943 German services were held twice a month. After 1946 the practice was established to hold a German communion service four times a year. (ibid)

In October of 1946 Rev. Albrecht was compelled to resign because of ill health. On December 8, 1946 he conducted his farwell service. On the following Sunday Rev. Gerald Hoenecke of Cudahy, Wisconsin was installed as St. John's sixth pastor. He served

St. John's faithfully and fruitfully until May 5, 1952 when he was granted a release to accept a call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

St. John's then called its seventh pastor, Rev. Paul F. Nolting. Rev. Nolting served as pastor until November 24, 1959 when his call was terminated. The reason was the role Pastor Nolting played in the movement to break with the Wisconsin Synod and the Synodical conference. Indeed Pastor Nolting was so active in the CLC movement and its organization that a meeting in Sleepy Eye is considered the formal beginning of the CLC. (Your Church, p.18)

The full and complete history of the beginnings of the CLC is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the actions of Pastor Nolting in regard to St. John's must be looked at.

As far as this author can determine Pastor Nolting did not begin an all-out campaign for discontinuing fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and the Synodical conference until after the Saginaw convention of 1959. At that convention Rev. Nolting was a co-author of a memorial to the convention called "A Call for Decision." (Issue, p.1)

The memorial basically stated that the Synod should sever fellowship with the Missouri Synod because of Romans 16:17. It calls for the WELS to repent of its sin of continuing fellowship with the LC-MS. These statements from the document demonstrate this:

We reject as unscriptural any interpretation or application of Romans 16:17-18 which expressly or by implication equates the action required by this passage with ... any other passage of Holy Writ dealing with excommunication...

In consequence, we also reject the principle which accords to human judgment the task of determining when Romans 16:17-18 applies "conclusively" to an individual or a church body, ...

We reject the notion that the action required by Romans 16:17 depends upon clairvoyance, namely the ability to determine the future fate of admonition...

Through a series of nine bulletin inserts beginning August 23, 1959 and running through October 18, 1959 Rev. Nolting presented his point of view to the congregation. These inserts along with some addenda were compiled into a booklet entitled "The Issue Before Us." This booklet was mailed out to each family unit of the congregation. This was done in keeping with the wishes of the Church Council. (History of Grace, p.3)

In the insert of August 23, 1959 Pastor Nolting states, "What happened to the memorial? Sufficient time to discuss the issue thoroughly was not granted." (Issue, p.1) The rest of the inserts gave a history of the issue with the Missouri Synod and Pastor Nolting's exegesis of Romans 16:17-18.

In insert number 8 dated October 11, 1959 Pastor Nolting answered some questions that were raised. The fourth question a answer went like this: ul

QUESTION: Isn't it possible for a pastor to keep on teaching as he believes right - testifying against the position of the synod - but still remain in the synod?

ANSWER: That question has been partly answered above. As soon as it becomes evident that a church body is continuing in its error despite admonition, that church body is guilty of causing divisions and offences in the church. Then God says, "Avoid them." Admonition continues in the form of testimony against errorists. To remain in fellowship with errorists for the very purpose of admonishing them would be to make oneself guilty of the very errors against which one is admonishing. In brief, if I remain in the synod, I would become a false teacher

and if the congregation remains in the synod, I would become a heterodox (false teaching) church. (Issue, p. 13)(Emphasis mine.)

By this statement Pastor Nolting said that the congregation either gets out of synod or else. If it doesn't then he could no longer be its pastor. Rev. Nolting said this plainly when he wrote:

If the congregation decides on this course (staying with the synod), then it is telling the pastor that his services are no longer desired or wanted, for your pastor cannot continue to serve a congregation that after thorough instruction still chooses the broad path of unionism that leads to the loss of the Truth. (Issue, p. 17) (Emphasis mine)

On November 3, 1959 the Church Council agreed to call a special voters' meeting for the express purpose of voting on "The Issue Before Us." (Minutes, p. 2) This was to be done after two successive Sundays upon which both sides of the issue would be presented. On November 15 Pastor Nolting presented his side. On November 22 District President Lenz presented the "synod side." Then the final vote was held on November 24. (History of Grace, p.3)

Before the meeting on November 24, an anonymous letter was circulated among some of the members of St. John's. It was in rebuttal to "The Issue Before Us" distributed by the pastor. In it Pastor Nolting was accused of not publishing a presentation by Pastor Schmidt defending the synod action on the memorial written by the pastor. (Yes!, p.1) The paper said that the pastor was in error when he said that the memorial was not given sufficient consideration. Pastor Schmidt demonstrated a stack of reports given on the memorial. (ibid) It also stated that the Congregation was

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not consulted before the pastor presented the memorial. (op. cit., p.2)

All in all I must say that this paper was rather inflammatory and not conducive to harmony within the Congregation.

The night for the meeting came. Some men from a Lutheran Church in Nicollet, MN were asked to leave before the meeting began. It was also passed that there would be no acceptance of new members at this meeting. This was to decide "The Issue Before Us." However, these men were allowed to remain but not allowed to vote. (Minutes, pp.1,2)

A motion was then made and seconded to remain in the Wisconsin Synod and the Synodical Conference. (op. cit., p.2) During the discussion a substitute motion to the effect that St. John's enter into a strong confessional position over against the synod, but delay final action until July of 1960. (History of Grace, p.3)

The ensuing discussion was very heated. It was at times unChristian in tone. But this ~~is~~ can be understood when one considers the passions involved.

A vote was taken. The results were 102 to 44 to stay with the synod. (Minutes, p.3)

The pastor was then confronted with his statements, as cited above, in which he said that he could not remain as pastor. The pastor replied that he could not terminate his call and would not consider resigning. (ibid)

Passions flared. A vote was taken. The congregation by a vote

of 81 to 36 terminated Pastor Nolting's call. The pastor replied that they had sinned against the Word of God and violated the Constitution of the Congregation. He announced that he would hold services for all who wished to follow him on Thanksgiving Day. (op. cit., p.4)

For Pastor Nolting not to resign after the vote to stay with the synod was dishonest. He had made clear statements threatening this. He forced the congregation into the termination of the call. He and St. John's were at loggerheads.

The vacancy pastor, Prof. Martin Albrecht noted in a letter to a delinquent that others had been honest enough to take that action. He wrote, "Pastor Rollin Reim of New Ulm went through the same procedure, but when he announced in the newspaper what had happened, he stated that he terminated his call as a result of the congregation's actions to remain with Synod. That was honest."

Despite his convictions and statements, Pastor Nolting is still considered the legitimate pastor of St. John's. All the rest are hirelings. In the 25th anniversary booklet of Grace Lutheran Church (GLC) the pastor wrote, "As of today, Pastor Nolting before God's throne is still pastor of St. John's and will be vindicated before the Great Judge on the Last Day." (List, p.3) A few lines later Pastor Nolting is noted as accepting the call to be the pastor of Grace.

Prof. Albrecht wrote in the pastor's report of 1959 that there was confusion on who indeed had left St. John's with Pastor

by [unclear]

Nolting. People noticed who was or was not in attendance at church and speculated on their status. (Bartz, p.7)

But then the issue was gradually resolved when letters of resignation came to St. John's. They said:

Since St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye at a Special Voters' Meeting on November 24, 1959 rejected the Scriptural testimony of its pastor in THE ISSUE BEFORE US by voting to remain in the Wisconsin Synod and so has made itself a false church, and since it also terminated the call of its pastor contrary to the Scriptures and its own Constitution, I herewith withdraw my membership from said congregation.

I herewith also apply for membership in Grace Ev. Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye. I believe that in this church the doctrines of Church fellowship and of the Divine Call, as well as all other doctrines are being taught and practiced according to the Holy Scriptures.

Into this boiling pot stepped Pastor Waldemar Hoyer. He was God's man for this troubled congregation. One member who lived through these times wrote:

Rev. Hoyer accepted the call and came to still the troubled waters. He was not a dynamic personality but was slow to anger; very comforting to the sick and troubled; sound in doctrine and practice; had the ability to remain calm in trying situations; didn't go looking for trouble; excellent with the sick, shut-ins with his bedside manner and could see the the good that could come out of any dark situation. (Bartz, p.5)

The good that came out of this dark situation was this. There were two pastors serving the community instead of one. There were more people attending services and going to communion. The stewardship effort of St. John's produced a rise in average giving. All in all the "Members have generally cooperated with their pastor and have worked harmoniously together." (Hoyer)

This paper began with the words of Psalm 48:1, "Great is the

Lord and greatly to be praised." Therefore it is appropriate to end this paper with the last verse of that Psalm, "For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end." The Lord has guided and continues to guide St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church of Sleepy Eye. In all that has happened to the congregation the Lord has proven himself to be God. And the Church has shown that he is their God.

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