

Early History of St. John's Lutheran Church 1882 – 2007

The history of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church at Yankton, South Dakota, began as an outgrowth of traveling missionaries' work performed among settlers of German descent, beginning as early as 1875.

Rosenberg Parish near Mission Hill, SD, was organized in the year 1877. The name at that time was Immanuel Lutheran Church and their first pastor was P. Doescher. Martinus and Yankton were mentioned at that time, and after the founding of these three congregations, they had to be served several years from Centerville, which seemed to have taken the leading role at that time. Pastor Doescher did not serve long, and then Pastor Friedrich became pastor. We do not know where he was stationed at that time.

In the year 1879 we find a Pastor Andrew Mueller of Centerville who then preached at Rosenberg, Schmidtgal, and Martinus. He also conducted services in a private home in Yankton.

In 1880, Pastor J. Bernthal served these places. St. John's Lutheran Church was formally organized by Pastor G. Rumsch in 1882. He served this large parish for four years, when in 1886 he accepted a call to Claremont, MN.

In the same year, Martinus Lutheran Church near Utica was organized, and early services were conducted in the home of a certain Kietzmann. Pastor Rumsch still served the same congregations and mission places, but he lived in Rosenberg. He also served Centerville since they were vacant. When Rev. Rumsch accepted a call in 1886, they called Pastor Runge from Sioux City, IA for an interim period. In 1888, Pastor William Licht accepted the call and was installed on September 2, 1888, in Rosenberg and Yankton ----being installed at Martinus later in the week.

During Pastor Licht's service, the Martinus House of Worship was built and dedicated on the seventh Sunday after Trinity in 1894 and Pastor P. Zebel was the speaker. Besides regular services, the following places had to be served: Jacob Schmidtgal, Andreas Voll, the school near the Philip Rempp place, and sometimes in the home of Mr. Ganske if services were conducted west of the hill, and in the Andrew Braunschroeder home if conducted east of the hills.

Pastor Martin Waechter was called to serve Rosenberg, Martinus, Yankton, and Schmidtgal and was installed on April 1, 1900. During these early years many members moved away from Rosenberg and the church became much smaller – which was also true of the Schmidtgal preaching station. For two years things went well in Yankton; then it was found many of the

members had joined a secret organization – which meant long, bitter years of meetings. True members became strongly united; others soon left and organized their own church.

In spite of the troubles, Pastor Waechter conducted regular school and confirmation at Rosenberg; oftentimes it would be necessary to keep the children overnight. In July 1904, Pastor Waechter accepted a call to Appleton, MN so Candidate Paul Hempel of St. Louis, was called and he came at once. Pastor Hempel was installed at Rosenberg and Martinus (Yankton did not call him.) but after a few years he accepted a call to Parkston (having been called there three times.)

From 1909 to 1912 Pastor F. von Brauchitsch served the congregations. He retired and then Rev. J.A. Schamber of Centerville served Rosenberg and Rev. E.P. Beyer served Yankton and Martinus. On August 12, 1912, Candidate Richard Schamber was installed at Rosenberg and St. John's the next Sunday; the parish included Yankton, Martinus, Rosenberg, and the Remp School. The parsonage was three miles north of Mission Hill since Rosenberg was the largest congregation. Because of ill health, Rev. Schamber retired from the ministry and moved to Freeman in July 1916.

Pastor H.F.W. Gerike served the vacancy (pastor at Tripp) until Pastor Carl Mueller was installed on October 14, 1917. Pastor Gerike had told Martinus they should begin a Christian Day School so they started school in the church and engaged Walter Gerth of River Forest, IL to teach. The members built a school building but Mr. Gerth could not get a State Teaching certificate so the school closed. Since Rosenberg became smaller, Yankton purchased a home on Locust Street for Pastor Mueller and his family. At that time Yankton's congregation had seven voting members and their families, plus a few widows. Martinus built a beautiful church but Rev. Mueller had to resign in 1924 because of ill health. The Rosenberg Church closed and members attended Yankton. In 1921, St. John's and Martinus became affiliated with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Rev. Tr. Rehwaldt accepted a call in 1925 and served until 1943. Up to this time, the congregation had worshipped in the little white frame church at 408 W. Sixth Street. In 1925, the pastor served Yankton, Martinus, and Mission Hill, where services were conducted in both German and English. A Walther League was organized and sponsored monthly services on WNAX. Since the little frame church no longer served the needs of a growing congregation, a new church was located at 8th and Locust. The church cost was not to exceed \$7000 and members helped with the work; the new church was dedicated on December 13, 1942. Pastor Rehwaldt accepted a call in 1943 to Granite Falls, MN.

Pastor Brammeier came in 1944 (the year the parsonage at 700 Green was bought) but only served a few months as he passed away suddenly as a result of a ruptured appendix on February 13, 1945. Pastor W.P. Haak became the pastor in 1945 and served until May, 1954 serving Martinus, Yankton, and the State Hospital Chaplaincy. In 1946 these two

congregations became separate parishes, with Pastor Haak serving St. John's. During this time the first part of the parish hall was built, and a Christian Day School was started in 1947. Later the old Lincoln school at 6th and Locust was bought for the school. Pastor Haak accepted a call in 1954 to Sioux City, IA, as Chaplain.

Rev. Walter E. Buss was then installed on December 5, 1954. Because the parish hall as well as the church became too small, in 1955 the congregation decided to enlarge the basement, parish hall, and the entrance way. New desks were bought for the school and about \$25,000 was spent. Our congregation numbered 330 communicant members and more than 500 souls. There was an active L.L.L., Ladies Aid, Mary and Martha (evening society), Walther League, Fellowship Club, P.T.A. and a Scout troop. The Sunday School had 200 enrolled and the Day School had 50 children attending. Pastor Buss served until 1964, when he took a call to Pierce, NE.

Pastor Lloyd Weiland was installed at St. John's on June 13, 1965, and served seven years. He accepted a call in 1972 to Higginsville, MO, and Rev. Robert Hackler of Vermillion was our vacancy pastor until 1973 when Pastor James F. Hawley was installed on April 1, 1973. During his service, a "Church Mortgage Burning" ceremony was held in 1987 as the final payment on the new church was paid.

Pastor Hawley continued his ministry until 1989 when he took a call to Mandan, ND. During his tenure, the voters decided to help prepare men for the ministry by participating in Synod's vicarage program. Mark Halvorson was the first vicar, followed by Kelly Bedard, Brad Cusson, William Wagner, Ken Hopkins (deceased – in motorcycle accident) Mike Heidle, Scott Spiehs (who also helped out while we were vacant in 1989-90) and Mike Kettner. Rev. Lehmkuhl (Vermillion) served us in vacancy until Rev. David Gunderson (Deadwood) came and was installed on May 13, 1990.

In 1991, St. John's decided to call an assistant pastor and Rev. Greg Sawyer came that year and stayed until 1995. Following him was Rev. Paul Wenz (1995-2001). When he left, we went back to Vicars, hosting C.J. Ransdell, Adam Harvala, Eric Schoech, and Matthew Priem.

The church went to two services (8:00 and 10:30) in April of 1991. The Preschool was started in 1992 (Mrs. Cyndi Sawyer, teacher) and we went to the new hymnal, Lutheran Worship.

"To God's Greater Glory", a stewardship emphasis, resulted in a paved parking lot, air conditioning, and a new roof and sound system. A part-time music director was hired (Sheila Peterson) and was then filled by Phyllis Nielsen. In 1998 we accepted a DCE intern from Concordia, St. Paul, and then in 1999, Elizabeth Granzow (Peters) was called to serve us. Two sons of the congregation were ordained, Mike Zwemke in 1999 and Brian Idt in 2001.

About 1999 the congregation decided we needed extra room for the Preschool and Sunday School and another stewardship emphasis, "*Growing Together in Christ*" was started. The

addition was dedicated in the fall of 2001. That year the parsonage was sold. Andy Gates became our parish nurse. Rev. Jim and Mona Mueller retired from the ministry and moved to the Yankton area in 2002. Since then, Pastor Mueller has helped with church activities.

St. John's Radio Broadcast over KYNT radio, Yankton, SD from 1968 to the present day.

From David Wright:

My earliest memories of the Sunday morning broadcasts are from shortly after St. John's moved to our present location in 1968. The broadcast was initiated from the sacristy. I got involved in wiring the microphones. I crawled all around the sacristy and the altar area to wire microphones. It was ultimately decided to move the equipment and the announcer area to the balcony. This was quite a task, but I worked on stretching wires from the sacristy to the balcony.

Slim Fowler was the original announcer with David Wright and Tom Merrill joining in announcing the broadcast.

Since we only had one service at St. John's at that time, the broadcast was sent live to KYNT over the telephone at 9:30 am.

From Tom Merrill:

As times changed and St. John's grew, a second service was added. We had an 8:00 am and 10:30 am service but kept the 9:30 time slot at KYNT. We still sent the service by dial-up telephone line to KYNT at 8:00 where it was recorded and played back at 9:30.

Over the years, the service was also recorded on cassette tape, thus the pastors could make the service available to shut-ins and confirmands as needed.

As technology changed over the years, new equipment was installed for better sound quality and recording. CDs were used for recording, and these were taken to the KYNT studio for playback.

The new equipment in use today records on a flash drive and then is downloaded to KYNT through the computer.

St. John's Lutheran Church is the longest running program that is aired over KYNT. The KYNT Management Team recognized this fact with a presentation of a 50-year plaque at one of our services in 2018.

The broadcast started in 1968 at a cost of \$15.00 per week. Over the years, many people contributed to the broadcast by sending money to memorialize the broadcast in honor of special occasions. It is now funded by the church budget.

St. John's Fundraising Campaigns

1968: A decision was made to build a new church at 1009 Jackson Street. A loan of \$300,000 was received from South Dakota District Extension Fund. Cost of the church was \$400,000.

1991: To Gods Greater Glory Campaign was for roof repair, to pave the parking lot, add air conditioning, and provide a sound system. \$450,000 was raised.

2000: Growing Together in Christ: to add a wing for two preschool rooms, three classrooms, a meeting room, restrooms, a janitorial room and repair the dormer windows above the organ.

2006: Christian Debt of Love: to reduce the debt of Growing Together in Christ Campaign. According to Roger Gregg's financial records, \$758,627 was raised during the years 2006 through 2009.

The Renewed in Christ Campaign, to restore the fire damaged church, brought \$329,056.42 during the years 2011 through 2017.

2021 – August 2022, the Refreshed in Christ Campaign was for the purpose of replacing computers, improving the sound and video system and roof repair. Financial reports show that \$112,000 has been received through August 2022 with a goal of \$200,000.

Hurricane Katrina Mission Work

In early 2006, Pastor Jim Mueller and wife Mona were part of a team of volunteers working in New Orleans and surrounding areas to clean up damage caused by Hurricane Katrina. The team helped 43 homeowners with roof repairs and downed tree debris. The team was composed of five couples called together by "Laborers for Christ," Synod's retiree volunteering organization with the average age of 70. They were able to clean out four of our Lutheran churches.

The volunteer's home base was at Trinity Lutheran Church in Covington, Louisiana. Mona Mueller was able to console women who were devastated by their losses.

The Living Last Supper

The “Living Last Supper” was the idea of DW and Nancy Duhacek who had seen a performance of this play in Seward, Nebraska. They were so inspired that they wanted St. John’s congregation to share this wonderful story of Christ and the Last Supper to our congregation and the Yankton community. Pastor Dave Gunderson shared this idea with our congregational members and on Maundy Thursday, 2007, we had our first performance.

The devotional choral numbers interspersed with the spoken drama gave a feeling of self-reproach to Christ’s words of being betrayed and the disciples asking, “Is it I, Lord?”

The inspiring gospel story of Holy Week was performed annually for our Yankton community as we witnessed the Last Supper and thoughts of Christ’s disciples on the night of His betrayal and His journey to the cross. Due to the covid pandemic, our last performance of the “Living Last Supper” was in 2019. It will be our joy, as we prepare for Easter, to again share this special story of our Lord’s Last Supper in the near future.

Virgil Buxcel and Corrine Casey



From Left to Right: Jorgen Wadkins, Elmer Fischer, Todd Woods, Joel Merkwan, Scott Pospishil, Jim Kinsley, Marc Merrill, Darrell Kirchner, DW Duhacek, Steve Rokahr, Virgil Buxcell, Roger Greg, Al Ulmer

Stephen Ministry Program

In 2008 Pastor Gunderson began the Stephen Ministry Program with training sessions for volunteers who would reach out to those facing challenges in their lives due to illness, death, divorce, loneliness, etc.

Pastor Steve Comes to Serve

In 2008 Pastor Steven Weispfennig accepted the call to St. John's and joined Pastor Gunderson in shepherding the flock. Pastor Weispfennig was ordained and installed at St. John's on July 27, 2008. He shared some thoughts and memories of his first year with us:

"My first year in ministry is kind of a blur. Along with just getting settled into St. John's and the Yankton community, I was trying to learn what it all means and how to be a pastor. Seminary and vicarage certainly prepare pastors well, but can only provide so much preparation. (My list of "Things They Don't Teach You at Seminary" is continually expanding). I am very grateful for Pastor Gunderson's mentorship. Then there was the fire after only 8 months into my ministry here, which was the first of my "Things They Don't Teach You at Seminary" – how to deal with an arson fire.

Some memories: Even though Hannah and I grew up in smaller towns than Yankton, it was still a bit of a culture shock and an adjustment to small town life after living in cities of at least 125,000+ for 8 consecutive years, including the metro areas of the Twin Cities and St. Louis. When we were about 5 miles out, driving into Yankton for the first time looking around the rural setting, Hannah's reaction was, "This is where we're going to live?!" When we were attending New Pastor Orientation at the District Office, we were telling about our adjustment back to living in a small town. The District President's wife said, "Oh, Yankton's a big city" – by South Dakota standards!

I think it was my 2nd or 3rd day here, when Pastor Dave, who was a chaplain in the National Guard, sat me down in his office and said "Let me explain how this military thing all works. I'm gone one weekend a month, and two weeks a year. And by the way, there's a chance that I could get deployed." Less than 2 years later, Pastor Dave was deploying to Afghanistan for a year.

Just days after my ordination, I was asked to be a chaperone for the annual Wild Water West youth event. I felt like the worst chaperone ever – out of like 75 kids, the only three I knew were the three that rode with me to the water park. When it was time to leave and gather kids, I was like, "Is that one of ours? Do we want them to be? As long as we come back with 75 kids, we're good, right?"

On the Saturday morning before Palm Sunday, Hannah was in Phoenix, AZ, visiting her family and Pastor Dave and Connie were in Sioux Falls for his weekend at guards. Congregation President, Matt Stone, called me at about 5:00 am. As calm as calm can be, Matt said, "This is Matt Stone. I'm just calling you to tell you that there was a fire in Luther Lounge this morning. Thought you should know." I groggily thanked him and went back to bed, thinking it must have been a small garbage can fire and that Luther Lounge wouldn't be available for a week or two. After about 15 minutes, I decided that maybe I should get up, get dressed, and go check it out. When I turned the corner onto 10th St and saw the red and blue flashing lights, I realized that it was a much bigger deal than I thought – we were not going to be out of the building for only a couple weeks, maybe a few months – but it wasn't until we were able to get inside the building to secure a few items for worship that the realization set in that it was going to be a long time before we would be back. The church's leadership was amazing – by the grace of God, we had a place to worship by like 11:00 am that same morning. After a long day, Pastor Dave, Connie, and I closed out Charlie's Pizza with a P&D interview with Randy Dockendorf. Despite the devastation, it brought the congregation together. It helped strengthen Pastor Dave's and my partnership in ministry, as we now had a shared experience. We were impressed by the Voters Meeting to remodel and expand, as the only words that Pastor Dave and I said, were the opening devotion and closing prayer.



*Front: Rev. Bob Mundahl, Rev. Steve Weispfennig, SD District Pres. Rev. Dale Sattgast
Middle: Rev. Richard Lutmann, Rev. Dave Gunderson, Rev. Gene Haug
Back: Rev. Dan Redhage, Rev. David Otten, Rev. Jim Mueller*

St. John's History Continues 2009 – 2022

On April 4, 2009, St. John's members were without a spiritual home as an interior fire caused over two million dollars in damage. The fire caused significant structural damage to part of the building with severe smoke and soot damage to the interior. Mount Marty (a college at that time) offered space for worship in their Marian Auditorium until the fall session and then in a library space on campus. Our congregation was able to hold Christmas Eve Services in the auditorium for an expected capacity crowd.

The fire was ruled as arson by a juvenile and by May of 2009, rebuilding, restoring, and expansion were options being considered.

In a 2009 congregational letter, Matt Stone, president of St. John's wrote:

"On July 15th, the members of St. John's, overwhelmingly, voted for option C proposed by the building committee. Option C was projected to cost \$2.2 million, of which \$882,000 was not covered by insurance and would need to be borrowed. Option C called for the removal of walls creating a large gathering area and enlarging the area destroyed by the fire, creating additional and larger classrooms. From the old building, we now have a new building. Below is a breakdown of the above numbers:

Total cost of restoration, remodel, and building project	\$2,600,000
Mortgage remaining on addition prior to the fire and paid off	<u>\$ 146,000</u>
	\$2,746,000
Proceeds from insurance company	\$1,946,000
Building project in excess of insurance coverage	\$ 800,000
Funds on hand at St. John's for building project	\$ 142,000

The actual amount estimated to be borrowed has come in considerably lower than what was estimated. St. John's does have \$142,000 which will be applied against the \$800,000. This leaves a total of \$658,000 to be borrowed."

The Restoration Begins

A Yankton Press and Dakotan newspaper reported that David Mueller, a construction project manager was chairman of the St. John's Board of Trustees and volunteered full time on the restoration, assisting Harvard Schulz of Welfl Construction. These two members were a blessing and kept the congregation apprised on the progress as the days and months went by.

Tom Merrill, a St. John's Elder in 2009 said, *"We built this church in 1968 and had a \$50,000 budget. We started worship with 400 members and now it's up to 1200. You don't build a facility for today; you build it for tomorrow. The congregation saw fit to build for the next generation. We are upgrading for those who will be here 40 years from now."*

During 2009, office space was provided on Locust Street for the pastors and secretary by the Swift family. The pews were removed for professional cleaning; the organ was disassembled and taken to the Hendrickson Shop at St. Peter, Minnesota, the handbells were packed and sent for restoration.

On April 4, 2010, one year to the date of the fire, the congregation was able to attend Easter Morning Worship Services with tears in their eyes and smiles on their faces.

The baldachin (sound board) above the pulpit was replaced by a large, illuminated cross constructed by Kevin Schulz. Kevin also adorned the baptismal font with symbolic side panels. The previous pit style font with railings had been converted into a level floor area which made it possible to move the font for funerals and weddings.

The southeast entrance included a covered drive through portico for handicap access and weather protection. A large gathering area replaced the narrow hallways and coat rooms, offering a welcoming space to meet and greet. The rooms on the south side were expanded, allowing space for the Luther Lounge, classrooms, two pastors offices, a secure money counting room, a copy/supply room, a secretary's office, and a new entrance for the preschool. A state-of-the-art kitchen was refurbished with new cupboards, appliances, a commercial dishwasher, and a coffee brewing station.

On Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010, Pastor Gunderson compared the fear and despair of Jesus' death on Good Friday to the fire and then to the joy of His Easter Resurrection. He said the eternal candle over the baptismal font should have gone out during the fire, but it kept burning, reminding us of Jesus' victorious light to the world.

Pastor Weispfennig commented, *"As we celebrate Christ's resurrection from the grave, we are celebrating our resurrection from the ashes!"*

Chaplain Gunderson Leaves for Duty

On May 9, 2010, Pastor Gunderson was honored with special worship services and a congregational meal with a full Fellowship Hall attendance. He left the next day for Chaplain duties with the 196th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade of the SD National Guard. He would be stationed at Camp Phoenix in Kabul, Afghanistan.

On June 13, 2010, St. John's Church, and its contents to serve the Lord was rededicated under the theme "Renewed in Christ."

Mission Central Bus Trip June 25, 2010



Organ Restoration

In the fall of 2011, the organ damaged by heat and soot was returned to St. John's from St. Peter, Minnesota where it was restored by the Hendrickson Company. An organ concert and hymn festival was held November 13 by guest organist Dr. Jeffrey Blersch, Professor of Music at Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska.

Awards Received by St. John's

February 10, 2011, St. John's received the Defense Pro Patria Award from the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve at Pierre, South Dakota. Pastor Gunderson was kept as a pastor at St. John's during his tenure in Afghanistan but elected not to accept his pay. The church decided to use this money to support Chaplain Gunderson's military mission in Afghanistan. St. John's also supported Operation Outreach there with shipments of hymnals, school supplies, clothing, shoes, blankets, and personal items.

On September 22, 2011, St. John's was honored by the Department of Defense with the 2011 Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award in Washington DC. This award was accepted by John Marquardt, President of the St. John's Congregation.



Stan Cap, Norma Cap, Gale Marquardt, John Marquardt,

Rev. Dave Gunderson, Connie Gunderson, Hannah Weispfennig, Rev. Steve Weispfennig

Pastor Weispfennig's Explanation to the 2014 change to Family Discipleship Training

The process began a few years earlier when Pastor Dave and I were reviewing the Confirmation ministry. Some of our observations included:

- *The more parents were involved in church; the more likely students would remain active following Confirmation
- *Adult guides were learning and growing in their faith
- *Students who did not attend Sunday School regularly, had little Biblical knowledge making it difficult to teach
- *The variety of teaching techniques helped keep students more engaged
- *Some families just “checked off” the minimum requirements for their students to be confirmed
- *The Lord’s Supper was treated as the “reward” for the Rite of Confirmation
- *Confirmation was often treated like a “graduation” from Christian Education

We then began discussing our observations and concerns with the Elders, along with potential changes. In the summer of 2014, I was discussing Confirmation with another pastor at Lutheran Island Camp during a youth servant event. He shared his church’s Confirmation format, which seemed to fit well with the changes we wanted to make. So, we adapted their format, which included:

- *Expanding instruction from 6th – 8th grade to 1st – 10th grade (with intensive classes from 4th – 9th grade with 4-week session, twice/year)
- *Expecting parents to attend classes with their students and becoming the primary teachers for faith formation.
- *Preparing for Early Communion in 5th grade so the Lord’s Supper could be a gift for strengthening faith
- *Holding the Rite of Confirmation in the Fall of 10th grade to separate it from graduation and allowing for more maturity to confirm their faith

*The Family Discipleship ministry really begins at baptism, which is the foundation of our discipleship in Christ, as Jesus instructed in Matthew 28: “Go, therefore, and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Discipling involves baptizing and teaching the Christian faith from cradle to grave.*

Josh Joins St. John's

Joshua Schmitt answered our call to be Director of Christian Education in August 2017 and came with his wife, Ellen. He said, *"I feel that I have been blessed with my time at St. John's. There has been a culmination of many experiences over the years that remind me of the blessings of St. John's and at the center of all these experiences are the people of St. John's. May God continue to bless this congregation into the future."*

Josh is gifted to inspire preschool students, present children's messages in worship services, lead the youth in God's Word and activities, and lead all ages in Bible Study and Lutheran Doctrine.

Sunday School is a complimentary educational ministry that teaches kids and youth about God's Word. St. John's has been blessed with many wonderful Sunday School teachers throughout the years. 85 young people were registered for the school year of 2021-2022.



Rev. Dave Gunderson, Rev. Steve Weispfennig, DCE Josh Schmitt, Ellen Schmitt, SD Exec. Sec. Rev. Darren Olson

Our St. John's Deaconess

Andra Gates, RN, served as St. John's Parish Nurse for 18 years. In 2016 God called her into Deaconess Service and she enrolled in Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, being funded by Lutheran Women's Missionary League, District Office, and churches of the Yankton Circuit.

She graduated with a Master of Arts in Deaconess Studies in 2018 and has served as a winter Deaconess for Concordia Lutheran in Sarasota, Florida returning home for summers in South Dakota, gardening and volunteering deaconess activities in the community.

Primary work as a deaconess is to assist pastors with home visits, lead Bible classes, visit the sick, widowed, lonely, and troubled, mainly showing mercy to those in need of our Savior.

A Reminiscent Retirement

January 1, 2018, Pastor Gunderson announced his plans to retire in July after 28 brief years at St. John's.

On July 15, 2018, a congregational picnic was held at Riverside Park in honor of Pastor Gunderson's retirement. District President Reverend Scott Sailer, Pastor Darren Olson of Sioux Falls, and DCE Joshua Schmitt were speakers and Hannah Weisphennig led musical songs. Pastor Dave and wife Connie were presented with a monetary gift and many well wishes.

July 29, 2018, Pastor Steven Weisphennig was installed as senior pastor at St. John's. Reverend Scott Sailer preached the Sunday sermon and conducted the Rite of Installation.

Mission Trips

In the summers of 2015 through 2019, a number of St. John's members experienced mission trips to various locations. In August of 2015 fourteen member's first mission trip was to Robin's Nest Children's Home, an orphanage in Montego Bay, Jamaica. Led by Chad Lacey's construction skills, the team built a new addition to the facility plus painting and organizing. A lot of time was spent interacting with the children, playing, swimming, and reading.

In June 2016, a return trip was made to Robin's Nest. Thirteen members of St. John's built a storage shed, cleaned and helped with meal times and sharing time with the children.

In June 2017, a smaller group helped at Camp Restore in New Orleans continuing to rebuild following Hurricane Katrina.

May 2018, five St. John's members traveled to Crossing Cambodia, a mission center for the homeless street children of Phnom Penh making improvements and helping with schoolwork.

June 2019, a third trip was made by six members to the Robin's Nest Children's Home in Jamaica, cleaning, painting, and organizing. Time was spent helping with mealtime, dishes, laundry, and being with the children.

On May 26, 2018, five team members of St. John's traveled to Battambang Cambodia for two weeks to assist at the Crossing Cambodia Ministry. They did a rest and relax retreat with the mission director with devotion and prayer time and then spent hours clearing, cleaning, and restoring the area. Crossing Cambodia is a ministry dedicated to the education of homeless children where they are fed and educated.



*St. John's Mission Team Members Justice Evans, Janie Krohn, Tara Kinsley, Jim Kinsley, Alice Rokahr
with Missionary Greg Holz & Crossing Cambodia staff*

Pastor Willms is Welcomed

In the fall of 2018, Pastor Levi Willms of Kaukauna, Wisconsin accepted St. John's call to serve as associate pastor. He arrived in Yankton with his wife, Jessica and their five children.

Pastor Willms was installed on December 9, 2018 by Pastor Tim Rynearson, District Second Vice President.

"Our family came to St. John's in December of 2018 and very much enjoyed settling into Yankton and St. John's. In some ways it is almost hard to remember much from the times before Covid, but we feel as things have settled in well now. St. John's is blessed to have a ministry team as well as the guidance and wisdom of Pastor Jim. St. John's gives us the opportunity to preach and teach God's Word and we are working to encourage and support fathers and mothers to disciple their children in that precious Word."

Yankton has been a great community to be in and we live close to Memorial Park and love time out by the lake as well. We have easy access to everything we need and the enjoyment of some beautiful parts of God's creation. It is a great place to raise a family."



Front: Rev. Paul Albers, Rev. Levi Willms, Rev. Steve Weispfennig
Middle: Rev. Paul Warnier, Rev. Brett Keller, Rev. Jacob Bobby
Back: Rev. Jim Mueller, SD District 1st VP Rev. Tim Rynearson, Rev. Ken Johnson

Our Faithful Secretary Retires

In May of 2019, secretary Paulette Gross retired after serving that position for 33 years under the guidance of Pastor Hawley, vacancy Pastor Lemkuhl, Pastors Gunderson, Sawyer, Wenz, Weispfennig and Willms as well as several vicars. She began working 27 ½ hours per week in May of 1986 until 1991 when she served full time. She was responsible for all office duties including typing out sermons and the weekly bulletin plus “other things deemed necessary, including making coffee!” At her retirement, secretarial duties were turned over to Mickey Wadkins and later Chelsea Campbell.

Covid Complications

The Covid-19 pandemic in America disrupted worship, events, and activities. Pastor Willms stated that beginning in March of 2020, St. John’s did not have “in person” worship services for almost three months – until Memorial Day weekend. During that time, the Elders and staff developed a workable solution for doing a live stream video of the service and drive-up communion was offered following the live stream. After we began having “in person” worship, we continued to offer drive-up communion for the rest of 2020 which ended in May of 2021.

We added a Saturday service when we went back to “in person” worship that allowed us to spread out our crowd. Throughout 2020 we had extra spacing between pews and found workable solutions to help people feel comfortable during worship. In 2021 mitigations were lessened and we ended the Saturday service and the livestream in June. Throughout, the Elders worked very hard to help people feel safe. They assisted the staff with good solutions to serve the whole congregation. We were blessed to have such great elders.

When “in person” worship services resumed, Van Miller offered to cover the audio/visual portion of the services. This involved recording the audio and sending it to the KYNT Radio Station as well as recording the video for You Tube and Facebook. Van felt blessed to assist with these services.

Offering drop boxes were built by Roger Gregg and located at two entrances to the Sanctuary. This eased the duties of the ushers and eliminated the passing of offering plates.

Having greeters at the entrances had to be discontinued for some time. Also discontinued were the annual soup kitchen and ice cream social fundraisers. Covid caused the end of Ambassador Newsletter which began during Pastor Hawley’s pastoral service. Mission trips ended, the contemporary worship services were interrupted, the Jubilation Choir has been greatly missed although the handbell choir was able to ring on occasion. The LWML South

Dakota District Convention due to be held at St. John's in 2020 had to be cancelled. And yet our Savior led us through this valley by His mercy and grace.

Hannah Weispfennig, Music Director of St. John's from Fall 2013 through Spring 2018

St. John's has had numerous wonderful choirs over the years, singing in four-part harmony. It was always a joy to direct the choir. Musically, the choir members learned from each other and brought different insights into the piece we were working on. Delra Ulmer, our accompanist, could play any music you put in front of her, so she assisted the choir a considerable amount.

Retired Pastor Jim Mueller was in the choir all the years that I directed, and he was always available for spiritual insights as well.

Another part of directing the choir that I enjoyed was getting to know the group on a personal level. A typical night at choir would involve someone sharing pictures of their grandchildren or sharing about the passing of a beloved community member or family member.

Lent always provided opportunities for singing. We sang for the Living Last Supper, which was on Maundy Thursday; the Tenebrae service on Good Friday; and of course, the celebration of Easter. We typically did the same selections year to year for the Living Last Supper and the Tenebrae service. We all enjoyed singing them and everyone had their favorites, much like beloved Christmas carols. We provided the music for the Living Last Supper from the balcony while men from the church played Jesus and the disciples in front of the sanctuary. Many men would portray the same disciple year after year and one of the choir members, Susan Buxcel, could do an outstanding impression of her husband's part that made everyone laugh. "Hands, these hands!"

Aside from choir, there were two other musical groups that I oversaw but did not direct. The Handbell Choir and the Praise Team. The Handbell Choir was directed by Jennifer (nee Peterson) Nelson and the Praise Team was led on piano by Donna Knodel. These three groups were responsible for providing most of the special musical offerings during worship.

Donna Knodel and I, with the help of the Sunday School teachers, directed the children's Christmas program as well. The Christmas program of course would tell the story of Jesus birth, with the younger children dressing up as the characters in the manger scene. Candy treats were provided for the performers from the Lutheran Laymen's League as well as cookies and hot chocolate in the fellowship hall afterward for all in attendance. The Sunday School children also provided special music on Mother's Day during the 10:30 am service, which was also a nice way to wrap up the school year.

“Walking in Love”

June 3 and 4 of 2022, the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League held its 62nd South Dakota District Convention at St. John’s Lutheran Church in Yankton, SD hosted by the dedicated women of the Yankton Zone LWML. The convention registered about 240 women and men from South Dakota plus a National LWML speaker.

An inspiring worship was followed by various presenters describing how previous mission grant monies had been put to use.

After an evening mission pledge walk over the Historic Meridian Bridge, a 50th birthday party was celebrated for the Puppet Place, an annual presentation for the SD State Ministry at the SD State Fair in Huron, SD.

“Gifts from the Heart” (items and cash) were collected for three local agencies. It was truly a time of “Walking in Love!”

Dianne Diekmann, Yankton LWML Zone President

The Lutheran Laymen’s League (LLL)

The Lutheran Laymen’s League began in 1906. The St. John’s League was organized August 15, 1946 as a men’s Fellowship Club. The LLL voted to become a couples club in 1969.

Some of the activities included:

- Making State Hospital visits with lunches
- Held a Mission Fair for mission support
- Provided pancake and chili suppers
- Prepared church signs at legal highway locations
- Paid for a wheelchair and a copy machine
- Bought paint and painted the Fellowship Hall in 1985
- Distributed Advent and Lenten Devotions
- Provided “Take Heart in Grief” booklets
- Began buying Children’s Bibles for 3rd graders in 1991
- Numerous monetary donations were made to foreign missions and for sponsorships
- Continue to provide Project Connects tracts.

Sandy Williams has taken over the sale of greeting cards to fund the purchase of the Children's Bibles.

Thank you to all who helped make the LLL success.

Betty Kirchner

Our Youth Head for Houston

July 7-14, 2022, DCE Joshua Schmitt and four adults chaperoned ten youth from St. John's plus two youth from another church to the National Youth Gathering in Houston, Texas. They joined about 20,000 in attendance.



Front: Josie Stokes, Zara Bitsos, Tara Kinsley, DCE Josh Schmitt, Claire Koenigs, Sophia Petheram, Tonja Koenigs

Middle: Will Stokes, Frankie In't Veld, the GOAT

Back: Josh Saylor, Mason Ostermeyer, Olivia Hansen, Shae Rumsey, Jaxsn Thoms, Abby Saylor, Jim Kinsley

Precious Preschool People

Susan Buxcel offers a history of St. John's Preschool:

St. John's Preschool is extremely proud to be celebrating 30 years of children's ministry. From our first preschool class in 1992 our Heavenly Father has blessed hundreds of children who have attended our preschool to learn about our Savior, Jesus Christ, and His love for them.

When we opened our doors in 1992, there were 12 students enrolled in our M-W-F and T-Th half-day sessions. Eighty children were enrolled in 2007. An all-day M-F Pre-K class was implemented along with two sections of T-Th classes, and three sections of M-W-F classes.

Our enrollment has shown a decline in recent years since the Yankton public school offers a tuition free program to the community. We have maintained a quality program that is Bible based along with a chapel time led by St. John's pastors and our D.C.E. The students enjoy writing and drawing with computer activities. The smart board teaches them many academic skills along with yoga and dancing activities. Our little lambs also learn basic preschool skills – coloring, writing, cutting, patterns, and listening. Our St. John's Preschool has been nationally accredited through NLSA (National Lutheran School Association) since 2016 and is the only free-standing Lutheran preschool in South Dakota to be accredited.

We have been blessed with a quality teaching staff over the years including Cyndi Sawyer, Susan Buxcel, Patsy James, Jennifer Johnson, Jami Stevens, and Christy Hagge.

In the fall of 2022, we are blessed to have Dee Mulder continue as our current, faithful teacher who will be teaching the T-Th A.M. 3 year old class and the M-W-F A.M. 4-5 year old class. We welcome our new head teacher, Angie Kronaizl, who will be teaching the M-F All Day Pre-K and the M-W-F 4-5 year old All Day Pre-K class. St. John's Preschool Lambs learn many academic and social skills, but most importantly, they learn to share the love of Jesus and know that He is our friend and Savior.

The following are Pastor Weispfennig's responses to questions:

How many members are at St. John's?

This question always makes me cringe a little – I never really quite know how to answer this question satisfactorily. Too often we get too focused on numbers. Too often we measure the church's health and success by "how many." The church's ministry is not about how many members it has, how many people attend worship, or how many people participate in certain church organized activities. The church is about Word and Sacrament ministry regardless of how many members or worshippers a congregation has. It doesn't really matter "how many," if the Word of God preached and taught in all its truth and purity and the Sacraments are rightly administered. Word and Sacrament are the means of grace by which disciples of Christ become spiritually mature, which is difficult to measure.

Unfortunately, the church membership in this country has often been treated kind of like a country club – you join the organization, pay your dues (offerings), and receive benefits from the organization. What this has come to mean for church membership is that you or your family are privy to have baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals at the church. But just having your name on an earthly church roster does not mean you are saved. If you cut yourself off from God's means of grace of Word and Sacrament, and don't regularly participate in them, you put yourself in danger of falling away from faith and being cut off from God for all eternity. Therefore, earthly church membership rosters are really only helpful for organizing a church's Word and Sacrament ministry for the spiritual care of its members.

The only membership roster that truly matters is the Book of Life written in heaven. Jesus has written the name of all true believers in the Book of Life with His blood shed on the cross by grace through faith in His salvation for them.

To answer the question simply: we have over 1400 members on our membership roster.

What challenges do you foresee in the future of St. John's?

St. John's challenge is the same challenge that has plagued humanity since Genesis 3: SIN. However, sin manifests itself differently at different times.

One of the biggest challenges I foresee right now is worldly influence infiltrating the church. This has often been the problem of God's people throughout Scripture, which has led to idolatry. A contributing factor to this is Biblical illiteracy – not knowing much of the content of the Bible and regularly reading God's Word.

Of course, the only answer to this is Jesus and being in His Word and Sacraments.

Some Interesting Data

The income for the church

In 1929	was \$ 1,258
In 1951	was \$ 5,805
In 1963	was \$ 30,036
In 1982	the budget was \$109,881
In 2007	the budget was \$508,698
In 2022	the budget was \$814,799

Also interesting for the year 2022:

St. John's celebrates 140 years

The LWML celebrates 80 years

Puppet Place celebrates 50 years

Our Preschool celebrates 30 years

To God be the Glory!

A Prayer for St. John's

Dear Heavenly Father,

Bless Your church on earth and

Bless us whom Your Son Jesus Christ

has called to be His disciples,

to be the salt of the earth,

to be the light of the world.

May our church be a place

where boys and girls find Jesus as their friend;

where young men and women glimpse the splendid
vision of life;

where those in middle age find the rod and staff
to face the trials of life;

where the elderly see heavenly rest at life's end;

where the doubting find certainty and
the tempted find strength;

where the sorrowing find comfort and
the weary find rest;

where the lonely find fellowship and
sinners find forgiveness.

In Jesus name,

Amen

(Lifelight 1992)