

## INTRODUCTION

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*And these things we write unto you, that your joy may be full.* 1 John 1:4.

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**There are a few of the congregations in North Carolina about which considerable volumes might be written. Such especially are St. Paul's, St. John's, Bethel [Gaston Co.], and Miller's. . . . but we hope some local historian will enrich the archives of our American Lutheran Church by collecting the data of these Churches, some of them a hundred years old and more.**

Such was the language of Rev. R. E. Golladay, B. D., in his pamphlet, *History of Concordia District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States*, published in 1903. This quote was describing the four oldest North Carolina congregations who joined the Joint Synod of Ohio. Of these churches, only Bethel Lutheran Church, Gaston County, has complied with his request prior to this writing. The other three are from Catawba County and have from time to time printed historical sketches only. Now, hopefully the name of St. John's can be reduced from Golladay's "wish list," and much of the early history of St. Paul's and Miller's is also preserved, as the three Catawba County churches were served by many of the same pastors until the 1880's.

The St. John's Church story is interesting -- to make the most absolutely preposterous understatement contained within these book covers.

It's hard to believe that this Church was founded about twenty years after the Province of North Carolina became the State of North Carolina in the United States of America. In all likelihood, George Washington was president when St. John's congregations were organized. John Adams was President when the first land purchase was made. The Church existed over forty years before there was a place named Catawba County, over fifty years before a railroad, and nearly eighty years before there was a town named Conover. The date on the original deed places the congregation over five years older than the oldest Lutheran Synod in North Carolina, thirty years older than the state's first German Reformed Classis, and about fifty years older than the Lutheran Missouri Synod. Not only is St. John's quite old, a great heritage rests at the "Church on the Hill," and it deserves to be remembered.

If you were told that St. John's had the largest church building for the German-speaking settlers west of the Catawba River in North Carolina around the year 1800, would you believe it? If you were told that St. John's can boast the largest-known confirmation class ever held in an early German-descent Church in the local area, would you believe it? If you were to be apprised as to a later confirmation class of over 40 participants, would this seem likely to you? If someone told you that the baptized membership of St. John's was well over 600 souls before the year 1820, what would you think of that person's mental capacities? Would you believe that a Negro member of St. John's aspired to preach the Gospel in the year 1865? If you knew that the formation of the only remaining Lutheran college in North Carolina actually had its roots on the hilltop three miles north of Conover, what would you think? If a rumor surfaced that St. John's may have been the most prominent Lutheran/German Reformed Church of the area in its formative days, and possibly, the largest in the State of North Carolina, would you believe it? Do you think it possible that the third oldest Lutheran Synod in North America held its meeting at St. John's in 1811? Would you believe that St. John's Church is the oldest North Carolina church in the Missouri Synod? And the list of this type of questions could go on for pages.

Now that your attention has been gained . . . Most current members would easily answer "NO" to each question. However, every question above might be truthfully answered "YES"!

The St. John's story is one of our hardy ancestors, who settled into the area now known as Catawba County, to escape the religious and civil persecutions of their homeland, and to find a better way of life. It is the story of church trials and triumphs, church chaos and calm, church unionism and separation, and church growth and division.

From a true historical perspective, it is the story of war and peace, formation of a country, formation of a state, formation of a county, and formation of a town. It is the story of family joy and happiness, during births, baptisms, confirmations, and marriages. But it is also that of hardships, epidemics, wars, and death.

St. John's is the story of its pastors, who have provided the means of grace to the souls of its congregations for two centuries. It is also the story of pastors who are human beings, with differences in personal or doctrinal beliefs.

However tempting it may be, it is often too easy to portray the history of a church through its pastorate. This temptation was resisted as was possible; unfortunately, many of the available sources of information were written by or about St. John's pastors. Very few words seem to exist about the early people or the congregations themselves, as the German-speaking settlers seemed more concerned about making history than preserving it in the written word (in the English language).

St. John's is the story of Christian education, Sunday School, Bible School, church picnics, sunrise services, and many other organizations, events, and milestones.

St. John's is the story of the tragedy of a fire, but more importantly, the God-given strength and determination of the people to demonstrate to themselves and their community the faith and convictions of their forefathers.

The true history of a church belongs to the people -- to the families that founded, maintained, "grew up", and "lived" in that church. "Where there are two or three of you gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of you." Particularly in the early records, name-dropping was preferred as often as possible, so that current members and relations may realize the whereabouts of their ancestors.

The Bible offers us a perfect example in writing a history book about the people. Although it gives us the "law" and the "gospel", it also provides an unimpeachable history of the Jewish people, including family history. In Genesis 5, there are listed ten "begats" between Adam and Noah's son, Shem. Nine "begats" later came Abram, father of Israel. The New Testament begins with the continuation of the Hebrew genealogy, including forty-one more "begats". "So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations." [Matthew 1: 17] The number of generations from Adam to Christ total sixty. The number of "begats" at St. John's now totals from about eight to ten.

The writing of a history should have a useful purpose. The experiences gained at a former time should be remembered and considered later. The child who touches the hot stove and feels the uncomfortable sensation will never intentionally touch it again in its lifetime. Positive experiences are remembered with equal clarity. However, the lifetime of a Church spans many generations of human lifetimes, so the prosperous periods of the church, and the factors that caused them, can be forgotten by later generations. Possibly of greater importance, without a little reflection on the past, the church's "hot stove" reflex may require re-learning every third or fourth human generation.

Several occurrences were uncovered during the first century of St. John's, which are not very appealing, based on the benefit of over a century's hind-sight. Much introspection was given to each incident. Past historians have, more often than not, chosen to ignore them, barely touched on them, or dressed their language with glamour or euphemism. Sometimes, excuses were given for neglecting them, such as "not to open afresh those wounds." Quite often, these historians were writing from an obviously biased perspective, and the referenced incidents demonstrated deficiencies to their writing's purpose. Should this approach have been taken in a history of St. John's? Maybe so. But, then, the "hot stove" experiences of the Church's youth could be forgotten as it matures.

Again, the Bible offers a perfect model to appease the conscience of a church history writer. In plain language, it recounts the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, the doubt of Moses that prevented his entry into the promised land, the sins of the flesh of King David, the misgivings of Jonah, the denial of Peter, the betrayal of Judas, wars where thousands of men were slaughtered in a single day, the evils of Sodom and Gomorrah, etc., etc., etc..

This divinely-inspired example dictates that histories should relate problems and failures with equal attention and candor as the achievements and glory. It is only with this approach that the reader is reminded that the early church was not completely filled with love, harmony, unity, fidelity, and prosperity, any more than that of the persons or families in its membership. These events often vividly demonstrate many of the tensions and temptations that tested the faiths of our ancestors. As the Church belongs to God, the history of St. John's occurred within his omniscient plan; therefore, apologies for reciting some of the less desirable details are not forthcoming. And admittedly, a few of these stories were the most intriguing part of the research, and soon became the most interesting to relate.

As many notes and reference materials began to accumulate, the possibility of a reasonably complete history for St. John's bicentennial celebration became more plausible. But alas, church records from the early era were not known to exist. In fact, no church records or ledgers could be located until the year of 1868. This forced the improbability of reconstruction of a church history from records, documents, and writings that were obtained from

outside sources. Fortunately, the granite in the well-maintained cemetery offered considerable insight into the first century, as its testimony assisted greatly in matching up St. John's names and dates to the outside sources.

One problem surfaced very quickly when examining early records for applicability to St. John's -- a language barrier. The founders of St. John's spoke German!! And they wrote in a German script, that is unrecognizable today. Many documents, publications, tombstones, and other possible references were written in German, as this was the commonly-used language at St. John's until about 1810 to 1820. Often, translations were available, but sometimes they were not. Rather than hire a translator or learn German in my middle-ages, I chose to learn the German cursive somewhat, and get poor translations via the computer. This method often allowed reasonable paraphrases.

It seemed more interesting to include the German spellings for certain words and names as they appeared, as this emphasizes the ancestral and linguistic "roots" of St. John's, and provides some clues as to when the community's transition to the English language occurred.

It should be duly noted, that this history was definitely written from the perspective of the Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation presently in existence at St. John's. St. John's facilities served two or three congregations for the first century and one half. Some attention was paid to the existence of the German Reformeds during the formative years, and to the Tennessee Synod Re-organized (later Ohio Synod) affiliation, as they were integral ingredients in the recipe resulting in today's Lutheran congregation, as well as several surrounding churches. However, there was not the serious attempt to accumulate complete documentation on these parts of the St. John's family, as many of the individual families have either been absorbed into the remaining Lutheran congregation, have regretfully moved elsewhere, or have developed histories of their own that hopefully realize their passage through St. John's.

Certain time periods have caused considerable consternation during research, as the information either is not available, or simply could not be located. Specifically, Daniel Moser and Adam Miller, Jr. were two nineteenth century pastors who proved particularly elusive -- not that reasonable information did not exist about them, but that little specific information could be found as to their direct relationships with the families of St. John's. A second blurred period is that of the Tennessee Synod Re-Organized congregation that worshipped at St. John's from about 1845 until 1883. Perhaps future St. John's enthusiasts, armed with additional information, can fill in these gaps. Should further information surface, perhaps a supplement can be offered.

Fortunately, certain early periods of St. John's can be reproduced with amazing accuracy, as outside sources of information have been carefully maintained. The periods of 1814-1831 and 1845-1900 are fairly well documented by sources outside the Church. Enough glimpses into the period prior to 1814 were discovered to begin the story, and a few of these early records are astonishing.

Brief histories of St. John's have been written by Reverend Carroll Orestes Smith, who presented his first account at the centennial celebration, held in May 1899. He later read the history of St. John's at its 125th and 150th celebrations, at the dedication of the current church building, and several other times. Fortunately, he wrote down his thoughts, and on many occasions, they were published for our education and enlightenment today.

In many cases, his accounts are the only known record of certain events, due to the loss of many church records. Reverend Kenneth H. Reidenbach has supplemented these efforts at various anniversary celebrations in the last twenty-five years or so. Special thanks go to these two pastors for preserving portions of the past, which could have otherwise possibly been lost forever.

During the course of this research, the deepest respect was gained for our forefathers, who fought for their religious freedoms, and suffered through the trials and tragedies that caused St. John's to come into existence and to be sustained for two centuries. Hopefully, similar emotions are transmitted within these pages.

Many thanks must go to persons who assisted in obtaining information or in other preparations for this endeavor. Several persons stand forth as providing great assistance in gathering elusive information. Mrs. Gwendolyn B. Sherrill, of Conover, encouraged the effort and continuously sent me a stream of church-related articles and St. John's family-related information. If I got stumped on an individual or family, she usually had the answer or knew where to find it. Mr. Robert C. Carpenter, of Bessemer City, provided tremendous assistance in the gathering of information on the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod Re-Organized, for which little or no comprehensive history has been written, and whose congregation has not existed for several decades. We also shared much information relative to the Rev. David Henkel. The family of Rev. C. O. Smith, former president of Concordia College, has been most gracious in allowing me to copy many items relative to Concordia College and St.

John's. Mrs. Ann Williams McAllister, of Hickory, gave incredible assistance and advice into the early years. Various others have provided church and family information, without which much would have remained untold.

The libraries that were visited consisted of no small number. Cooperation from local libraries was outstanding, including Catawba County Library, Elbert Ivey Library, and Lenoir-Rhyne Library. Local libraries in surrounding counties were also searched for esoteric information, and the libraries in Davie County, Davidson County, and Old Salem provided a few surprises.

Many College and University Libraries were consulted, and there could have been no more kind treatment and reasonable access to rare pamphlets and original documents than the Perkins Library at Duke University. It was at Duke that many, many of the incredible nineteenth century facts and myths became verifiable historical reality at St. John's. Mr. Erwin and his excellent staff made my visits there most memorable. Also, Abdel Ross Wentz Library at Lutheran Theological Seminary, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, houses a great number of the original Henkel family papers, and has been most cooperative. The University of Virginia also was of great assistance. The various Henkel collections there provide a most vivid account of the early history of the church and these records have not been extensively used by historians previous to this history.

Neighboring churches have helped beyond measure, as often, the records of one early church are similar to that of another served by the same pastor. Church archives that provided much information and insight into this effort include Concordia Lutheran, Conover; St. Peter's Lutheran, Catawba County; St. Mark's Lutheran, Claremont; St. Paul's Lutheran, Hickory; Trinity United Church of Christ, Conover; and many others. No church was unwilling to show me their earliest records, and most were willing to make copies or allow me to do so, if it would assist this effort.

The results of these efforts are finally in your hands. May they be dedicated to the glory of God, to the memory of our Christian heritage, and in honor of those who maintain it, so that we may bequeath the faith of our fathers to the hearts and souls of our children.

Mark Smith

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***Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations: ask thy father, and he will shew thee; thy elders, and they will tell thee.*** Deuteronomy 32:7.

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