

St. John's alive and well after 150 years

By RUBY REDEKOPP Intern | Posted: Friday, July 31, 2015 7:00 am

While many small churches are struggling to keep their doors open, St. John's Church of Biscay is going strong at 150 years old.

The church, officially called St. John's Church of Hassan Valley Township and southwest of Biscay, has about 120 members. As its anniversary approaches, St. John's is celebrating its heritage and looking toward the future.

As a way of honoring the church and its history, member Jerry Wright submitted information and a photo of the church to the TV show, "U.S. Farm Report" for its "Country Church Salute" segment. The church will be featured during the last 15 minutes of the television show. For most television subscribers, the program should air from 6 to 7 a.m. Saturday, Aug. 1, or Sunday, Aug., 2 on the RFD-TV channel. You can also watch it online at www.agweb.com/usfr/.

MEMORIES OF DAYS GONE BY

A few of St. John's longtime members recently gathered in the little church's sanctuary to reminisce about the church's past.

Lillian Nemitz, 84, recalled memorizing Matthew 5, 6 and 7 for her confirmation in 1945. The pastor at the time had promised a Bible to anyone who could memorize the passage, otherwise known as the Sermon on the Mount. Nemitz was the only one in her class who took the challenge, and her efforts were rewarded.

"I was using the family Bible before that," she said.

Someone asked Nemitz if she could still recite it today. "No way!" she exclaimed, laughing. "I don't even know my own name!"

A few descendants of the founding families, including the Peters, Sankens and Blocks, still have ties to the church. Seven generations of Blocks have attended St. John's, beginning with the family of



"God our help in ages past ... our hope for years to come"

"God our help in ages past ... our hope for years to come" is the catchphrase of St. John's 150th anniversary celebration. A few of St. John's oldest members are pictured, from left, Lillian Nemitz, Alice Kaufmann, Margie Block, Marion Padrnos, Don Padrnos and Richard Swift.

Philip Block.

“My husband’s great-grandfather was one of the first members of the church,” said Margie Block, 90. “They used to have church in their house.”

St. John’s has three members 90 years of age or older: Block, Eileen Moehring and Richard Swift.

Swift, 90, was invited to the church by his son and daughter-in-law when he came to live next to them in 1999. He loves the church and its people as though he’s been there his whole life.

“These people here welcomed me as an old friend and they don’t ever let me go,” he said warmly.

Marion and Don Padrnos, both 82, are being honored at St. John’s as the couple that’s been married the longest. They’ve been married 62 years.

Marion grew up at St. John’s, but attended a congregational church in Brownston with her husband until two years ago, when the couple returned to St. John’s. Don loves to listen to the children singing at the beginning of weekly services. He said their joyous voices are so loud he’s heard them while sitting in his car in the parking lot.

“They have great Sunday school classes right now,” he said.

Alice Kaufmann, 83, doesn’t have a connection to the founders, but her family has been involved with the church for many years, starting with her grandparents.

“I think everybody participating keeps the church going,” Kaufmann said.

One event that always draws a crowd is the church’s annual ice cream social, which has been a staple of the church’s ministry for longer than anyone could remember. Before that, chicken suppers were served by the Women’s Guild. This year, between 350 to 400 people attended the social on the second Thursday in June.

Block recalled why the social takes place so early in the summer each year.

“They wanted to get it done before the boxelders, because the boxelders come later in June,” she said.

Everyone in the church pitches in to help with the ice cream social, and people come from miles around for a refreshing treat and some fellowship.

“As many years as we have had an ice cream social, we’ve never had a failure,” Nemitz said. Even when the electricity went out one year in Hutchinson in the 1970s, plans for the ice cream social marched on.

“The men got 10 gallons of hot water from the creamery and dumped coffee in it. That was the coffee,” Nemitz remembered.

Aside from organizing the ice cream social, the women’s guild members are well known for its egg

salad and egg coffee.

“They have some secret recipes that are passed on from generation to generation,” said the Rev. Bob Taylor.

Several members remembered the fun times they had in youth group, which met in people’s homes back in the day. Sleigh rides, hay rides, scavenger hunts and plays were run-of-the-mill for the teenagers who grew up together.

“We were a busy bunch,” said Marion Padrnos.

A FRIENDLY CHURCH

The St. John’s congregation isn’t just elderly folks. With so many families spanning multiple generations, the church has a good mix of young, middle-aged and older members.

“That’s a balance in a little country church you don’t see as often,” Taylor said.

“I think the intergenerational thing is great because everybody learns from each other.”

While St. John’s has only 120 members, Taylor said the church is able to put on large events because most of its members are involved.

One example of this is St. John’s vacation Bible school, running Sunday through Thursday of this week. It was expected to draw about 50 kids.

“Almost everybody in our church is involved in some way (with VBS),” Taylor said. “It’s fun to see these elderly ladies sitting down and just smiling as these kids come by to pick up their snacks.”

“I think that’s one of the strengths that we have — keeping the young kids involved,” said Julie Karl, daughter of Kaufmann and one organizer of the 150th anniversary celebration.

Karl described the church as a family, and it’s that spirit that makes people like Swift feel welcome when they walk through the front doors.

“As long as that atmosphere continues, I don’t see this church declining out of existence,” Taylor said.

While you may think it would be hard to join a church with such a close-knit community of longtime members, the members would likely disagree and then invite you over for coffee.

“Strangers come to church and they aren’t strangers when they leave,” Block said.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

If you had pulled your buggy to the side of the road and asked for directions to St. John’s in 1865, you would have received either a blank look or the wrong directions.

That's because the church didn't go by the name St. John's and didn't have its own building when it was founded by Henry Braun. The first services of the church were conducted in Philip Block's home, and later a schoolhouse. When the church was only 3 years old, a simple unpainted building was built. This first building was used as a house of prayer until 1883, and then as a church schoolhouse until it burned down in 1890.

The second church building stood for a little over 20 years. Hit by an August tornado in 1904, the entire church was demolished — all except one interesting piece.

“One remarkable thing about the church is when the tornado hit the church, the only thing left standing was the carving behind the altar,” Taylor said.

The untouched carving was then put in the new building, which has been the site of services ever since. Beginning in the 1920s, the church began the gradual change towards services given in English instead of German. A basement and kitchen were added in 1949, and a narthex in 1976.

Taylor recalled another astonishing occurrence with the church building. Several years ago, a tornado ripped through the area. Taylor said the funnel wreaked destruction up until the blacktop of the parking lot, but lifted up as it went over the church. The tornado touched down on the other side and continued its terror, but the church was left unharmed.

Over the years, the name of the church changed many times with denominational shifts.

1865: First Lutheran Church and Society of Glendale, Minnesota.

1877: Some confusion on the exact name at this time. Either St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church near Biscay or German Evangelical St. John's Congregation of Hutchinson

Somewhere between 1931 and 1943: St. John's Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Church

1957 or 1962: St. John's United Church of Christ

2000: St. John's Church of Hassan Valley Township

St. John's last name change occurred after it switched to the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, or the C.C.C.C., in 1999. The decision was made for doctrinal reasons.

“They wanted to find a more biblically oriented organization,” Taylor said of the congregation. “The four Cs was another break-off from the U.C.C. that wanted to be more biblical. I think the people felt more of a kinship with it.”

He also said, “A lot of the congregational churches (now) in the four Cs had the same concerns that the U.C.C. had become quite liberal.”

Another thing that drew the church to the C.C.C.C. was the denomination's structure.

“One of the attractive things about the congregational church is that each local church is more of an individual entity,” he said, “so it’s a little looser and it gives the local church a little more freedom.”

Taylor is the first pastor the church has had all to themselves. Starting in the 1950s, St. John’s shared ministers with an evangelical church in Lester Prairie until the two broke their yoke in 1997. Taylor, who lives in Otsego, came to the church in 2002 as a part-time minister.

LOOKING TOWARD EXPANSION?

Now, the congregation is considering expanding its present building. Since a straw vote to seek a plan was taken in May, two designs have been drafted and proposed for the addition. One details expansion to the north and the other to the south. The congregation will vote in September about which addition to proceed with.

Taylor said if they decide to move forward with the project, building won’t begin until the majority of funds have been collected. Then, the church will issue promissory notes to members and pay them back with interest for the rest of the cost.

Taylor isn’t worried that the money won’t be enough. A few years ago, the church raised money for a \$109,000 elevator without much difficulty.

“I think that will be an encouragement to the people should we decide to build, that the Lord will provide because he’s done so in the past,” he said.

An addition to the building is estimated to cost \$350,000 to \$400,000. The north addition would cost a little more than the south.

While St. John’s has only grown by a few members during the past 10 years, they’ve needed the space for some time to accommodate all their programs, including Sunday school rooms and more room for funeral lunches and other events.

“Pastor Bob doesn’t have an office, so it would be nice to have a space for him,” Karl said.