

Glimpses

of
St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Ivan Quandt

In the last issue of St. John's Glimpses, we examined the first seven years that the congregation was housed in the present building in Springfield. During that period, Pastors Voss and Janssen served the people of St. John. It was a time of growth, healthy activity, and adventure. In 1961, however, Pastor Janssen left Springfield and the congregation was left with its thirteenth vacancy.

In 1962, St. John Lutheran Church welcomed its fourteenth pastor, the Rev. Edwin H. Kringel. He arrived with his wife Ruth and the youngest of his children (the older two were in college or a career) and they moved into the parsonage next to the church. He hoped to build on the successes of his two predecessors, and he did. During his years of service, both a junior choir and the Walther League (youth group) reached their peak memberships. Several strong scout groups made use of the church facilities. Church attendance held its own during his first two years.

Ruth Kringel became a well liked, respected leading lady of St. John. She quickly moved into leadership roles in the Mary Martha Guild, in the Mr. and Mrs. Club, and in other social activities.

Pastor Kringel arrived at a time of transition at St. John. The church's move to Springfield brought new growth in membership as the surrounding community was developing and growing, but many of the new members were from a non-Missouri Synod background. It immediately became clear that Pastor Kringel was very much a traditional pastor. In doctrine, in practice, and in thought, he was a Missouri Synod Lutheran through and through. This pleased a substantial number of the members, especially those from old St. John who still served in leadership roles in the church. These traditionally minded leaders seemed to exert a strong influence on the congregation's governance during this time. An example of this is found in the 1963 Voters minutes, when the eligible voters (all male) deter-

mined that all Church Council meetings would be closed and anyone called to report to the council would wait in the entry until invited into the office. But the leadership was gradually changing during this time as well. The active young families were exerting a greater and greater influence on the governing of the congregation as they were elected into leadership positions.



Pastor Edwin Kringel

While the membership may have been happy with their pastor's doctrinal views, they gradually became upset with the manner in which he dealt with congregational problems. An array of grievances was collected against him, but not all the membership agreed with the grievances or with the process that the church leaders chose. By the end of 1964, the congregation was sadly divided. In January of 1965, an English

District vice president met with the membership in an effort to reconcile the differences. The effort failed, the 4-member Board of Deacons resigned simultaneously, and in March English District President, Dr. Bertwin Frey, met with the members. At this meeting, Pastor Kringel tendered his resignation, effective within 6 months, and in August he moved to his new congrega-



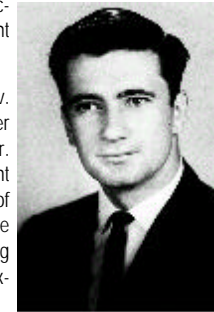
Confirmation

Pastor Kringel confirms Judy Bell, Lynn Howarth & Bob Woodward

tion

This vacancy was especially difficult. The leaders of English District, realizing the deep wounds resulting from the controversy with Pastor Kringel, urged an attitude of penitence for the congregation. No doubt, candidates for the position of St. John's pastor were cautious. The first three attempts by the call committee brought only rejections. The vacancy dragged on for eight months.

Finally, in April 1966, The Rev. Aaron L. Uitti arrived in Springfield after accepting St. John's fourth call for a pastor. He arrived with his wife Cathy, pregnant with their first child, and little in the way of material possessions. The move into the parsonage took little effort. Upon realizing their lack of furniture, the congregation extended the Uittis \$3000 to purchase some. By the time they left St. John, the Uitti family had grown to five.



Pastor Aaron Uitti

Pastor Uitti was anything but traditional. He gave as much attention to the youth of the congregation as he did to the adults (and the teens loved him for it). Being more progressive, he asked for a weekend leave to attend a retreat for youth, he once made an attempt to hold a joint service with a non-Missouri Synod church, he ordered Sunday School materials that were not published by Concordia Publishing House, and, most of all, he had a strong interest in working with the poor in inner-city Philadelphia. He made several different attempts to have St. John join interchurch organizations that were dedicated to inner-city missions. He was held to helping one Philadelphia Lutheran congregation and then only with the use of volunteers.

This did not keep the pastor and his wife from launching many volunteer efforts to help the needy. For several years, members of the congregation collected money and canned foods for the city and helped with serving meals. Cathy Uitti even gave nutrition lessons to a group of ghetto mothers.

Pastor Uitti was an intellectual. He worked on a graduate degree while in the Philadelphia area and became a well-known figure in the library at Penn. He was an excellent teacher and offered many interesting adult Bible study classes. For a time, he ran an "advanced" Bible study in addition to a regular one. His sermons, which also had a scholarly hue, tended to emphasize the relevance of the Bible to current times.

It is of interest to note that an important amendment was made to the constitutional bylaws during this time. A single word was changed in Article I, Section C, and at the regular Voters Meeting on March 10, 1968, women gained the right to vote. At that same meeting three women "presented themselves and were accepted by the assembly" and exercised their right to vote. Sally Auth was one of those three.

Membership in St. John had begun to decline already in the 1950's. It held rather steady during the early years of Pastor Kringel, but attendance tumbled as the controversy developed. During the vacancy, attendance actually increased as unhappy members came back. Membership and attendance began a very long slide during the years of Pastor Uitti.

The split between the members began to grow again after Pastor Uitti had been at St. John for several years. Although he liked people and was well respected, he was unable to mend the deep divisions that existed at the time of his arrival.

In 1970, Pastor Uitti had the opportunity to fulfill much more completely his wish to work in the inner city. He accepted a call to an inner city Lutheran church in Detroit and left St. John.



Aaron & Cathy Uitti

St. John 150 Years!