



Growing Up at St. Paul's Lutheran Church by Dan Saugstad

(This is a homage. Not to a building, not to mortar and stone and glass, but to the decent men and women that breathed life into four walls. If reading this brings back pleasant memories of your journey into adulthood, so much the better).

I am Norwegian by heritage. Like many Norwegians, I am also Lutheran. When I was young that meant being a member of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), not one of the heathens from the LCA (Lutheran Church in American), or Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. Later we merged to form the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America), so maybe they weren't heathens after all.

Anyway, my parents were members of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, located on the corner of West Avenue and Division Street. That church, and its many members, have had a profound influence on who I am today.

THE BUILDING

My earliest memory is of the 'old' church, which was located on the south side of Division Street, where the church parking lot now resides. I have very vague memories of a Christmas pageant, and of going down the stairs to the basement, where all the children received a small brown paper bag containing mostly hard Christmas candies, the type no one buys anymore, and a tiny number of Hershey's chocolate, the individual serving size. I am not sure, but there may have been a small container of Dolly Madison ice cream as well, that you ate with one of those wooden paddles.

Not long after, the congregation built a new church across the street, where it stands today. It was attached to the building that housed the church offices, and Sunday School area.

Peter Nelson and Sons constructed the church, probably in part due to Peter Nelson being a member. The building was spacious, and included a large number of PADDED pews, a choir loft, a REAL pipe organ that cost over \$10,000 in the early 60s, as well as an industrial quality kitchen in the lower level.

The Americans with Disabilities Act wasn't something that people considered back then, so there was no easy way for people with walking problems to get into the church. However, the design included a very shallow set of steps, a quarter to a third of the normal height of a step, which went from the southern wall of the church around the west side, to an entrance.

Later, years after I left La Crosse, the congregation did add an elevator and a main entrance on the west side of the building to address the problem.

The kitchen included restaurant quality ovens and cooler, as well as a large flat-top grille, ideal for making scads of pancakes and bacon for the requisite Easter brunches, as well as the many other events put on during the year.

There was also a small stage for the choir to rehearse, and, why I have never understood, at least one shuffleboard court laid into the tile.

The congregation dug deep into their pockets to make sure the sanctuary was well appointed. In addition to the afore-mentioned organ, there was a baptismal font carved from a single piece of marble, and a wooden pulpit with carvings representing the Parable of the Sower. As time and budget allowed, the many clear glass windows on the west side of the sanctuary were replaced with stained glass, each window paid for by a family.

There was also a smaller chapel in the education building, which also had its own organ, along with carvings at the front of the chapel with the words to Psalm 51.

Outside, there were two major pieces of art. Along West Avenue on the education building is carved the words to 1 Corinthians 13. Along Division Street is a Bronze sculpture entitled 'Damascus Illumination', portraying Saul's (St. Paul's) conversion.

Services were well attended, and during Christmas and Easter folding chairs had to be put in the wide aisle on the east side of the sanctuary. It would be safe to say that St. Paul's was a thriving church in the early 60s.

One of the nicer things about St. Paul's to me as a child is it was only two blocks from Dixie Cream donut shop on the corner of West Ave. and Market St. It was a rare but glorious Sunday when we got to stop and pick up a donut on the way home after church. The Fitzimmons family produced the most amazing donuts, including a crème-filled one which I have yet to find an equal.

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Us kids had our own place for Sunday worship, located on the third floor of the attached building to the church. I am not sure of the exact number, but 50 or more children seems to be about right as far as the number that attended each week.

Everyone was dressed in their Sunday best, mimicking the grown-ups. This was before it was acceptable to come in casual clothes. Boys had clip-on ties, girls wore skirts or dresses. A set of jeans never saw the inside of that church on a Sunday, at least not that I remember.

I do not remember much of what we did, but I do remember we sang songs each week. The overwhelming favorite, on page 96 of the hymnal, was 'Battle Hymn of The Republic'. We sang it with gusto. Given a choice, we would have preferred to sing it very week. We weren't given that choice.

If you had a birthday, you would go to the front of everyone and receive a small metal pin with 'Happy Birthday' on it and would be given a chance to put pennies into a small, white, plastic church. That was a special event for a young kid.

All the children were given envelopes for their weekly offering, which were collected and brought to Bessie Sandy, the Sunday school treasurer. Miss Sandy seemed quite old to me but had the kindest eyes and smile imaginable. She was just one of the many members who volunteered to help. Some of the teachers names I remember were Miss Figgie, Miss Helke, Miss Feroe, Mister Jansky, and scores of others. Jean Solberg was always a big supporter of anything to do with the children.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

Each summer we had a week of vacation bible school. Again, there were scores of kids that attended. Most of what I remember was the smell and taste of the glue used to put bible characters into a little workbook we received. That, and the Kool Aid and cookies we received each day.

I am pretty sure none of the cookies came out of a box or were wrapped in plastic. That just wasn't done. These were homemade cookies, baked by the same moms that handed them to you.

The cookies and Kool-Aid were served in the youth room, located on the bottom floor. Of course, there was a shuffleboard motif on the floor.

There was also a small Coca-Cola machine, with 7-ounce Cokes for a dime. It was a rare event to have one, but every week I'd beg for a dime to do just that.

It turns out that the students from Aquinas, located just a block to the north, discovered the machine, and made frequent use of it. That caused a minor controversy as I remember because they did not return the bottles.

YOUTH CHOIR

When I entered fourth grade, I found out I was old enough to join the youth choir at St. Paul's. The church had three choirs at the time, a children's choir, a youth choir, and a senior choir.

The youth choir was directed by Dr. John Cleveland, a soft-spoken man who managed to keep us under control and managed to coax actual music from our lips.

Charles Whaley, Joan Olstad, Alan Skipton were just some of the members I remember. Alan was a particularly gifted musician, even as a young man. He played the dual-reed oboe, a rare feat for anyone, and was a great singer.

Joan often accompanied various groups from church, and was quite accomplished as a pianist.

One of the highlights of being in the choir were the picnics we had at least once a year, always at Houska park. The picnic was nothing fancy, just hot dogs, chips and PopDoc soda. Those old enough probably have their own memories of The Pop Doc.

One of those picnics resulted in an event that, in my family, has now achieved almost legendary status: It turns out that Chuck Whaley and I LOVED PopDoc Black Cherry soda. So much that we decided to take two bottles from the wooden case in one of the coolers in the basement of the church and hide them so we could make sure no one else got them.

Now how we thought that those bottles would magically be transported to Houska Park, I'll never know. Sure enough, Dr. Cleveland noticed two open slots in the wooden case as we loaded up the vehicles to go on the picnic.

It took him about 10 seconds to find the culprits; Chuck and yours truly. He took us aside, explained how sad he was that we did what we did, and that maybe cancelling the picnic was in order. We pleaded for mercy, were granted same. Neither of us were apparently built for a life of crime.

YOUTH GROUP

During my teen years, St. Paul's added another pastor. Kurtis Karlstad would form a youth group which became fairly popular. We even put together and performed a Christian musical, which we performed at the church and at other churches in the area.

My talent was in moving my lips and not actually producing any sound whatsoever. It would be a fair statement to say my singing talent from youth choir did not survive the journey into puberty.

MISSION OF THE LOVING SHEPHERD TRIP

Pastor Karlstad, when I was between my Sophomore and Junior year of high school, arranged a trip to The Mission of the Loving Shepherd, located in Nogales AZ.

In order to help pay for the trip, the youth did some fund-raising, including members of the congregation 'buying' a youth for a day. I'm pretty sure this would not be even close to socially acceptable now, but back then no one thought a thing about it.

Ray and Joyce Wichelt were the family that purchased my presence for a Saturday. I spent the day helping prepare their lawn for the spring. A nicer family you could not imagine. Ray has passed, but I still remember his kind eyes and ferocious grip of a handshake.

We managed to get the trip paid for (one more case of my mother finding money in an already tight budget) and flew to Phoenix, where we were told a bus would meet us for the trip to Nogales, which was right on the Mexican border.

Calling what met us a bus was a bit on the generous side. The bus, an old school bus, was stripped of seats in the back half for the luggage and had seen its better days decades earlier.

When we stopped for supper, it turns out the bus wouldn't start, and we had to push it to get it started. Apparently, the generator was as old as the bus.

Sure enough, as darkness came the generator left us. There we were, on the side of the road miles from our destination.

It was at this point where one of the adults from the Mission, Dave? maybe, asked us to bow our heads in prayer. He proceeded to thank God for the breakdown, and how thankful he was for having more time to get to know us, and to appreciate the beautiful night. He reminded us that God answers every prayer, even if it is with a 'no'. His sincerity was more powerful than his words.

He was right of course. The night sky was filled with stars you could just not see in the city. And we had stopped within walking distance of a bar of some sort, so we had sodas, talked and became closer.

I don't remember much of the trip after that, other than because of the crowded conditions I managed to talk Sue Ekberg (a SENIOR) into sitting on my lap during the rest of the trip. I enjoyed every single mile, trust me.

We spent a week in Nogales, including an overnight stay on the Mexican side. It was the first time most of us had truly seen abject poverty. The sights and memories have stayed with me to this day.

We also helped with the building of what would be a school on the site of the Mission. My job was to soak bricks in water prior to them being used. Hot and dusty, but not a soul complained.

Along with Sue, I remember Mark Myers, Mark Vinge, Mary Evenson, Leslie Adsit, Jenelle Patterson. And of course, Dean Waters, who had a personality unlike any other. Dean, along with Sue, are no longer with us, but I will never forget either of them.

ADULTING

I remained a member of St. Paul's up until the time we left for Green Bay. Pastor Feroe married Linda and I, not in the church, but at a scenic overlook just north of Genoa WI. It was the hottest day of 1980, but Pastor was very gracious and hiked the long trail to the top of the overlook like a trooper.

All three of our children were baptized in La Crosse

Someone even had the bad sense to have me as part of the Church Council, where I felt like the little kid invited to sit at the grown-up table for Thanksgiving. So many leaders of the church, who gave of themselves not for them, but for others. Finn Posaas, Mr. Larson, so many good people.

ST PAULS TODAY

We left La Crosse for Green Bay in 1989. Since then the congregation has seen a steady and inexorable reduction in the size of the congregation. The Sunday School area is now full of memories, not children.

I am not sure why this has happened. Surely part of the reason is that St. Francis Hospital and Viterbo College have devoured many of the single-family houses in the area.

Also, it hasn't helped that there is another Lutheran church less than a half mile to the west, as well as one less than a half mile to the east.

I have even heard rumors that the congregation might dissolve, members moving to other churches.

If this happens I will shed a tear or two, as so much of my youth is tied to the memories of that building and the many many individuals that breathed life into the walls.

To those of you that helped shepherd me from youth to adulthood, thank you. I am forever in your debt.

