



Celebrating 50 Years

St. Mark

LUTHERAN CHURCH

ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

ST. MARK LUTHERAN CHURCH

BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA

AUGUST 20, 2023

C O N T E N T S

History Summary

Correspondence and Pictures

Received from Former
Pastors and Teachers

Service Bulletin Information

Activities of Celebration

Memorable Photos

Brief Summary of Events Getting Services Started in Bemidji

In 1970 inquiry was made (by the Jim Gildersleeve family who had purchased a dairy farm near Bemidji, MN) to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod to start exploratory services in Bemidji. We were referred to the recorded tapes that we could use in place of services and were informed that there was a small (new) mission in Brainerd, MN. We also found out what was required to get things moving along so advertised in the Bemidji Pioneer for interested parties (needed 4-5 families). On July 2, 1972 our first exploratory service was held in the "Carpenters' Hall" in Nymore with 20 people. Pastor Roy Rose of Christ Lutheran Church of Brainerd served as our pastor.

Effective July 1973 mission status was granted and the congregation was assigned its first pastor, Lee Vaccarella, to serve. Services were being held in the 7th Day Adventist Church, which was purchased as well as a parsonage shortly thereafter. These facilities served until the building of a new church and parsonage on land purchased at 2220 Anne Street.

A day school facility was added to the church and classes began September 1984 with two half-time teachers and 19 students Grades 1-4. Classes have continued to serve students and we have currently two full-time teachers and principal. Pastor Benjamin Zamzow is our current pastor.

Following this summary are letters, pictures, congratulations from former pastors, teachers, and other individuals received recently giving their congratulations and perspective of God's blessings of our congregation.

Message from Pastor Roy Rose:

Dear Members of St. Mark Lutheran Church,

Thank you very much for inviting us to your 50th Anniversary celebration. May it truly be blessed by our God who has so richly blessed you during the past half century of His grace!

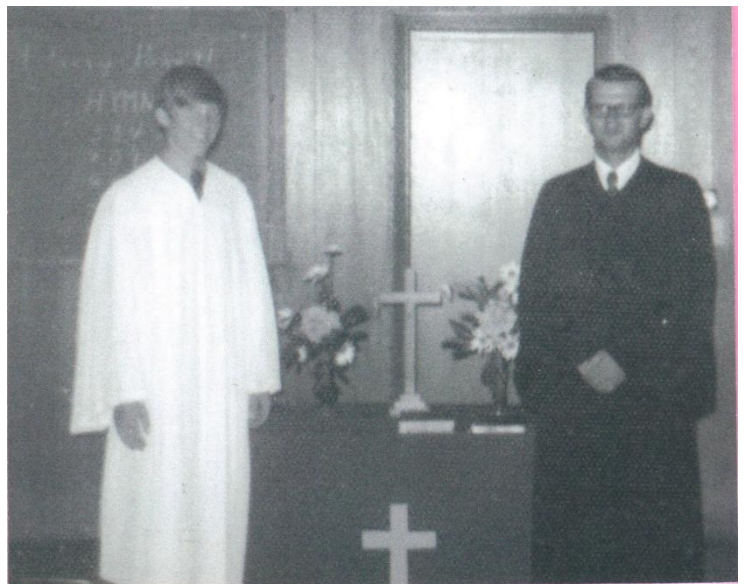
I can still remember our first service there in the Carpenters Union Hall on a Sunday evening in 1972. The 5 Gildersleeves were there with Marge playing the plastic organ. They had been coming down to Brainerd almost every Sunday for a few years (about 90 miles), after milking the cows. George Hubler, a WELS man who had been waiting for us to come to Bemidji and a few others were there, too.

After cleaning up the ashtrays and a few beer cans from the afternoon union meeting, we set up a table as an altar, and the hall podium for a pulpit/lectern, and we began the first service with the carpenters hammer symbol hanging over my head. By 1974 we had mission status, purchased an older church building and called Lee Vacarella as the first pastor. After his installation, I took a call to Michigan. I retired from the full-time ministry 10 years ago.

Although I've enjoyed coming back a couple of times to preach for special occasions, we will not be able to make the trip this time. I'm preaching at a vacancy here in Green Bay that Sunday, and my wife, Barb, will just be at the end of her 9 week recovery from surgery, and probably not quite ready for a long trip just yet.

God's blessings,

Pastor em. Roy H. Rose



*St. Mark's First Confirmand
at Carpenter Hall; Bemidji/Nymore
1973
Pastor Rose, Ricky Willberg*

Message and information from Pastor Vaccarella:

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." Psalm 118:24

Greetings to the pastor and members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church.

God's blessings to you as you celebrate fifty years of ministry in the Bemidji area. Barbara and I wish that we could be there with you today to help you celebrate, but we aren't able to travel much anymore. However, you are on our hearts and in our prayers.

As your first resident pastor, my wife, family and I have many fond memories of that first little church and its wonderful, hard-working members. What a privilege it was to serve you.

We thank and praise the Lord for the many blessings He has poured out on St. Mark's in the past fifty years and pray that He will continue to walk with you into the future so that many more souls may be won for Christ.

With our heartfelt congratulations and thanks to our God,

Pastor Lee, Barbara, Rob and Jon
Vaccarella



Installation Service



Pastor Vaccarella also sent a copy of a paper (rough draft) that he wrote called, "Diary of a Home Mission," to complete one of his class requirements. This document describes his first years as pastor at St. Mark in Bemidji. Rob, his son was going to read the paper but time was short prior to the lunch. (He did have laptop set up so people could view pictures of Bemidji congregation.)

It also includes the start of another congregation from ground zero in Grand Rapids while serving the Bemidji congregation.

Upon request, it can be shared.

Pastor also sent another short note – quoted below:

"Congratulations to St. Mark's Lutheran Church on your 50th Anniversary. All praise and thanks be to our God and Lord Jesus Christ for bringing you to this milestone.

Pastor Lee Vaccarella and family"

Message from Pastor Mark Grubbs:

50 Years of God's Miracles Among Us

When we hear the word "miracle", we naturally think in terms of the mighty acts that God performed in Bible times, great outward manifestations of His limitless power, glory and love. For example, the parting of the Red Sea, the fall of the walls of Jericho, or Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Maybe we also think from time to time, "If only I could have seen those miracles in person!"

But you know, every day God performs miracles in our lives which may be less dramatic yet just as real, just as much demonstrations of His limitless power, glory and love for us. Remember, every time God does something in our lives which we could never do using our own power or abilities that is indeed a genuine miracle. And it is so important that we recognize those miracles He sends us.

We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of St. Mark's Congregation. It is an important milestone, not because of anything any of us has done, but rather because of the things that God has done in our midst these past 50 years. Stop for a moment to consider the many ways He has filled those years with miracles of His grace and forgiveness.

To begin with, this church has been a house of God, literally filled with His miracles. Just think, in the original church building and now for many years in this building, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, God has used His holy and errorless Word to touch our hearts and souls. In countless Bible readings, in thousands of sermons, in Bible classes, in Catechism classes, God has shown us our sin and our need for forgiveness and He has told us that all those sins are now taken away. Over and over again God has repeated that precious message that Jesus led the holy life God demands of us and that He willingly went to the cross in full payment for those sins, the sins of the whole world. That is God's message of love and salvation and being blessed with hearing it is always a miracle.

He also used this church as a house of miracles when it comes to hearing and answering our prayers. Again, imagine how many prayers have been offered here in God's house over the years. He has listened to us as we came asking His help and when we came seeking His comfort when we were sad or in mourning. We have come on happy occasions. We have asked for His guidance and strength. We have come when we knew no one else could help. And He has heard and answered every prayer in His own perfect way. Again, 50 years of His miracles among us.

We have brought our children to Him here, for Him to place saving faith into their hearts by the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism. Those children don't look any different after their baptism than before. We didn't see the Holy Spirit descend upon them. And yet, every Baptism we witnessed was a powerful and amazing miracle of God. Something no man could do, and yet, what God alone can do through His holy Word. When parents bring their children back from the baptismal font, they bring back a believing child of God, an heir of eternal life. Miracles of God.

The same can be said of the miracle God works through Holy Communion. We see and taste only bread and wine, but through His Word we know that we receive as well His true body and blood, given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins. A blessed supper. And a miracle of God, something only He can do.

Or think for a moment about what goes on day by day in our Christian school. Every day is a day begun with prayer and Bible study. Every class is connected to God's Word. Every child is reminded without fail every day how Jesus lived and died for him personally. That Bible based education is incredibly rare today. It is beyond all price, Amazingly, every day is a day of miracles in our classrooms. How much we have to praise God for.

Let's celebrate 50 years of God's miracles among us. And let's thank Him with all our hearts for His saving, forgiving love. Despite our unworthiness and our failure to appreciate all He does out of love for us, let us ask Him to be with us and our children and their children in the coming years. May He keep us dedicated to sharing His Word in all its truth and purity. And as we often sing in the hymn "God's Word is our Great Heritage": Lord, grant while worlds endure/ We keep its teachings pure/ Throughout all generations!

--Pastor Mark Grubbs



Message from Pastor John Ruege:

Pastor John A. Ruege, Jr.
6857 U.S. Hwy 41 S.
Marquette, Michigan 49855

St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church
c/o Pastor Benjamin Zamzow
2220 Anne St.
Bemidji, MN 56601

Dear Pastor Zamzow and members of St. Mark's,
**Rejoice in the LORD and celebrate, all you righteous, and shout joyfully, all you upright in heart.
Psalm 32:11**

Our Lord gives us reason to rejoice in his grace to us everyday. The greatest evidence of his grace is the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ as our Redeemer who takes away our fear by removing our sins and giving us the promise of eternal life.

Today you rejoice because God has given St. Mark's the blessing of having been in Bemidji for fifty years to share the gospel with the people in your community. And what blessings you have seen in the past fifty years. Among those blessings were the opening of a Lutheran Elementary School, several building programs completed and one recently begun or about to begin. The Lord has blessed you with workers to publicly proclaim his grace both in the pulpit and classroom. He has blessed you with lay members of St. Mark's who willingly give of their time, talents and treasure out of love for the Lord.

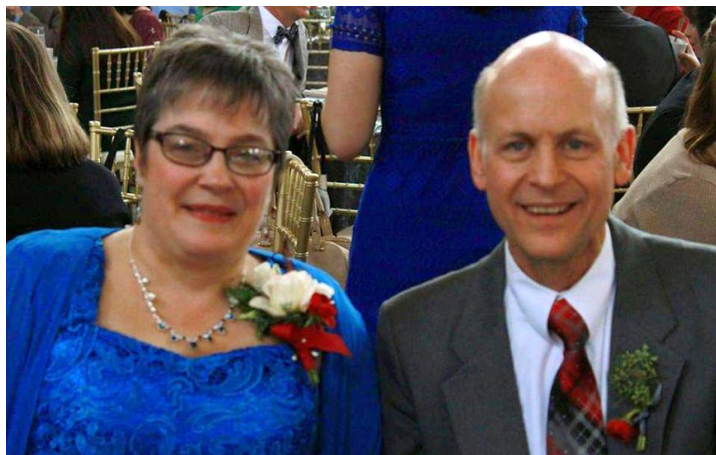
My wife Pamela and I have fond memories of St. Mark's and Bemidji, not the least of which is that both our children were born at the Bemidji hospital just across the highway from the church. Both of our children now have families of their own and attend WELS congregations where they live. We are deeply grateful for those blessings. Pamela cherishes the opportunity she had to volunteer at St. Mark's School.

We are also grateful to St. Mark's for your online streaming of your worship service. This was especially important to us during covid when Pamela watched your service because she was unable to attend public worship by Dr's orders due to her weakened immune system. Another wonder of God's grace is that so far neither of us has contracted covid, even though I now serve two congregations.

We regret being unable to join you today. We would have loved to celebrate with you in worship and in activities after the service. Though we are not with you in person, we are with you in spirit and surely pray for God's continued blessing on St. Mark's, your school, called workers, your members and for the spread of the gospel in Bemidji.

Serving Christ with you

Pastor John A. Ruege, Jr.



Message from Pastor J Schallert:

J.L. Schallert

409 E. North Street Cambridge, Wisconsin 53523
Phone: (608) 423-3550 Email: schalldad56@gmail.com

August 5, 2023

St. Mark's Ev. Lutheran Church
2220 Anne St NW
Bemidji, MN 56601-5850

Dear Members of St. Mark's,

Your invitation to your fiftieth anniversary celebration came in the mail several days ago. First of all, congratulations to you! Half a century of service is a very good benchmark, and you are, ~~without a doubt, very grateful to the Almighty for allowing you to do all the work you've done~~ there in Bemidji for the last fifty years.

I'm afraid I won't be able to attend the proceedings, though. I'm probably going to be retiring in a couple of months. I've inherited a house in Milwaukee, and almost all my time and resources for the past year have been going to necessary repairs and updates to make the place inhabitable for my wife and me. Also, it would have been pretty difficult to get a substitute for me on that Sunday. So I thank you kindly for the invitation and the good wishes, but must regretfully decline.

In her letter, Marjorie requested that I might send a picture of myself. But since we are in the midst of getting things ready for a move in September, I'd be hard pressed to find a good one. Truth is, I don't precisely photograph well, anyway. Just remember me from when I was in Bemidji, and then imagine me a quarter of a century uglier. Everyone in the family is twenty-three years older, including our little baby, who is now lovely young auto mechanic at a Meinecke's in Madison.

I'm afraid I don't recall doing anything all that noteworthy during my short time at St. Mark's. I've never been a noteworthy sort, anyway. I see, however, that St. Mark's has certainly thrived in the years since I left. Checking over your website, I was quite impressed with the ~~breadth and scope of the ministry at the church. You deserve quite a pat on the back for the~~ way you have expanded your activities and programs.

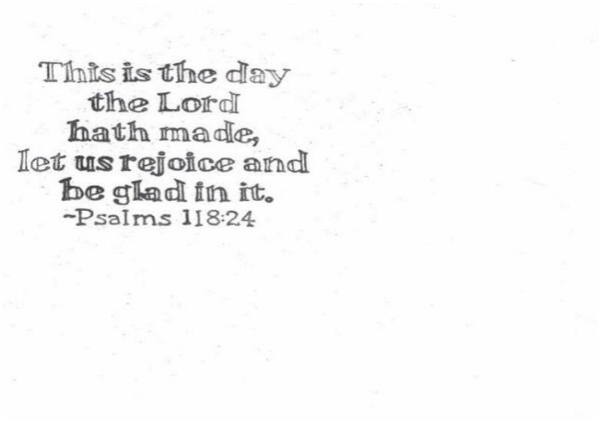
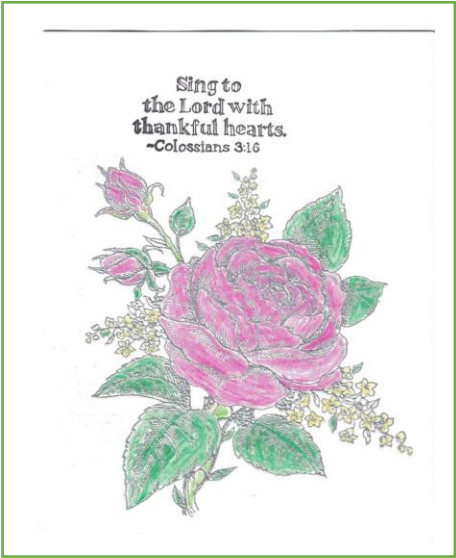
So, once again, thank you for the invitation, and thank you for the opportunity you gave me to re-enter the ministry back in the Nineties, and to serve St. Mark's for the couple of years I was there. My family and I will always be grateful for everything you did for us.

Sincerely,



J.L. Schallert

Pastor Schallert also sent an inspirational, homemade card:



Message from Pastor Lon Kuether:

Kuether Family Memories of St. Mark's

When we arrived in Bemidji in November of 2000 our four children were ages 1 to 7 and now, they are ages 24-30. Our time at St. Mark's was certainly filled with many blessings. Here are just a few highlights:

- One of the highlights was the "Night We Light" parade and fireworks. Standing in the slushy snow and usually frigid temperatures wasn't necessarily a pleasant experience. But being among the throngs of fellow Bemidjians always warmed us up. The year that St. Mark's sponsored and performed in the "Best Christmas Pageant Ever" we also Christmas caroled before the parade began.
- Having our entire family participate in the "Best Christmas Pageant Ever" was also a wonderful memory. Pastor Kuether played the part of the Minister, Kris was a member of the Ladies Aid, Christian was LeRoy Herdman, Caroline and Colleen were angels and Caleb was a shepherd. It was a great way to connect to the community and great fun and fellowship within the congregation.
- We also enjoyed walking down the street to the Paul Bunyan Communications Picnic and Walleye Feed every spring. The kids enjoyed seeing all of the PBS characters and getting their faces painted.
- Talking about the Mississippi headwaters is definitely not the same as actually visiting it, which we often did when family and friends came to visit.
- Since leaving Bemidji some of us have missed being on a lake and hearing the loon calls. Although Caleb can still imitate the loon call with his hands.
- While our kids, at the time, might not have appreciated attending a one room school all of those years, they now often comment on how much they learned from Mr. Bitter. Especially Hymnology and Geography! Christian is now a Social Studies teacher and teaches Geography. And they all love good Lutheran hymns.
- Three out of the 4 kids were confirmed and graduated at St. Mark's. In fact, the day we moved to Crete, IL, it was the morning after Caleb's 8th grade graduation.

We praise God that the connection we have with the members of St. Mark's is not limited to our 10.5 years in Bemidji. Celebrating, mourning, and worshipping with all of you was and is cherished! Because of Jesus we know that our fellowship with you will bridge this short life for an eternity in heaven with Jesus.



Hello Bemidji!



**St. Mark's School kids celebrating
Christian's 11th birthday in 2004**



Headwaters at Itasca



Christmas 2009



Kids Club Tubing



Farewell St. Mark's-May 2011



Our original 6 now has grown to 11.



**Caleb and Lily's wedding.
August 19, 2022.**



Christian with 6-month-old twin sons. Julius "Jules" & Ignatius "Iggy"



Mila-Christian and Sasha's 3-year-old daughter with Lake Michigan in the background.



Caleb and Lily in Shanghai, China. They moved there on August 9th.

Message from Pastor Aaron Nitz:

I remember when I received the assignment to St. Mark's on May 19, 2011, I had never heard of "Bemidji" before, so I didn't even know where in Minnesota it was. Although, perhaps I should have been at least somewhat familiar with Bemidji since I was born just down the road in Grand Rapids and spent the first 2 years of my life there. My dad was pastor at St. Luke's and even had covered the vacancy in Bemidji when Pastor Grubbs accepted a call elsewhere. When I was assigned to St. Mark's my dad gave me a file folder he still had from when he served the vacancy with meeting minutes and reports in it. I had met at least one member of St. Mark's before I was assigned there. Pam Francisco (nee Gildersleeve) babysat me when I was only a couple of years old while she was living in Grand Rapids. Only the Lord would know that many years later I would serve as her pastor!

We moved to Bemidji in July of 2011. Tom Carroll and Darold and Judy Krenz were so gracious to drive to Mequon, WI where we were living to drive our Budget moving truck back to the parsonage. The congregation was also so gracious to pay for a hotel for us to stay in as we traveled with our 2 young girls (Megan and Jenna) and our newborn, Lucas, to northern Minnesota. Before we arrived in Bemidji the congregation had been busy making repairs to the parsonage. New flooring was installed, bathrooms were fixed up, the rooms were given a fresh coat of paint. Paul took a video of the church and the parsonage for us so that we knew what everything looked like. Lou Tasa was very kind in planting some plants in the beautiful garden behind the parsonage for us, so we had produce at the end of summer.

I was installed and ordained at St. Mark's on July 17th, 2011. It was an afternoon service and since it was the only service that Sunday, I remember the church being very full. Vacancy Pastor Mark Falck conducted the service, my uncle, Pastor Jonathan Nitz preached, and my dad, Pastor Daniel Nitz, did the rite of ordination. We had a wonderful meal after the service which was enjoyed by all.

The congregation was very gracious to me being a rookie pastor fresh out of the Seminary. With young age comes young energy and I was excited to cut my teeth on ministry. I had a lot to learn as a young pastor and the congregation was very kind and patient with me as I slowly gained experience and shared God's Word with God's people. I received training in order to continue Pastor Kuether's ministry to those at Beltrami County jail. I continued that every few months throughout my time at St. Mark's. I also began work to get the campus ministry restarted at BSU. Katie was especially blessed through a "Moms and Tots" group she began with the other young mothers at St. Mark's.

In September of 2011 I had my first wedding – Nathaniel and Rachelle Barckholtz. In October of 2011, I conducted my first baptism at St. Mark's as Hilma Newell was baptized into God's family. By the end of nearly seven years that I was pastor at St. Mark's, I had the privilege of baptizing 52 people (mostly children). That many children in a congregation is a great blessing!

After the rear window of the church was installed, just before I arrived in Bemidji in 2011, I remember that the plan was to put stained glass in the 7 side windows as well. In 2012 the congregation asked the same artist, Pastor Nathan Pope, to create drawings for those windows with the theme: "How Jesus shows that he is the Son of God from the Gospel of St. Mark." In 2012, there was also a need to look into additional staff for the school to address the increasing number of students. In 2012 we had a mission festival with my father-in-law, Pastor Dan Myers, who preached and did a presentation on the mission work in Cameroon, Africa.

In 2013 we celebrated St. Mark's 40th anniversary and had Pastor Lee Vaccarella with us for that celebration. 2013 also brought about a "face-lift" for the narthex area with women of the congregation creating a plan to make the space more warm and welcoming. Due to the increase in attendance in 2014 we added a 2nd Sunday morning worship service. Initially, we tried 7:30 am and 10:15 am with Bible study in between, but settled on 8 and 10:30 by the beginning of the summer. In December of 2014, the new stained-glass windows were installed and a special worship service was held to dedicate them in which I preached a mini sermonette on each window.

In 2016, we worked through a planning process and had District President Charles Degner assist. In April of 2016 the congregation voted to call Joy Holderbecker and expand the school to include Kindergarten. In October of 2016 we did a preaching rotation where we exchanged pulpits with the WELS churches in Sauk Rapids, Baxter, and Grand Rapids.

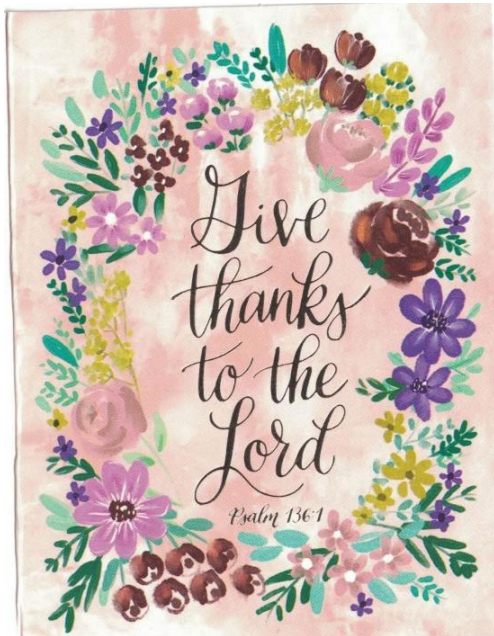
In 2017, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. That included special worship services, a Bible study that used clips from the newly produced Luther movie, the Sunday school children put on a Luther play, and we hosted a showing of the Luther movie "A Return to Grace" at the Bemidji movie theater and sold 146 tickets.

In January of 2018 I received a divine call to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Cheyenne, WY and accepted it. A wonderful farewell was planned for our family and was held on April 8, 2018, with a meal and program. After almost 7 years of fond memories, we said our tearful goodbyes to such dear friends. Three of our children were born in Bemidji. David on November 25th, 2013, Elena on July 16th, 2015, and Grace on February 19th, 2017. We really enjoyed the life in the Northwoods- fishing, hunting, exploring state parks, camping, and swimming. We will always remember very fondly our time at St. Mark's because of the many people we grew to know and love. But we're most thankful that by God's grace the changeless gospel of Jesus our Savior continued to be shared through worship, bible studies, and the Lutheran school at St. Mark's.

To God alone be the glory!



Message from Melissa Koenig:



Dear Marjorie, 8-17-23
Thank you so much for the invitation to the St. Mark Anniversary Party! Sadly, I can't be there for it. My school starts right after Sunday, so I don't have time to travel. I am doing well! My condo and classroom are getting organized. I will continue to keep St. Mark Bemidji in my prayers. Say hi to everyone for me. Miss you all!
Love,
Melissa Koenig

Farewell Reception for Melissa, Nathan and Jody Bitter:



Reflections of God's Work Through Christian Education at St. Mark

Jamie was placed in foster care at the Gildersleeve home at the age of 7 by Hubbard County Social Services. He had been living with his mother and her partner (with whom he didn't have a good relationship) and was placed in our home indefinitely.

His mother was only 14 years old when he was born; he lacked discipline; and it was a difficult change for him. Since our other foster boy was attending Laporte School, we enrolled him there also. Although only 7 years old, he was very brilliant and was a great challenge for the teacher. He did not like repetition and was so advanced that he acted up very often. To curtail his actions/behavior, frequently he was put in a secluded student desk area near books. Some of his favorites were to read encyclopedias and dictionaries so he was very pleased – not viewed by him as discipline. He helped the other foster boy with his high school studies regularly each night. Jamie was required to attend weekly therapy sessions with a counselor at Upper Mississippi organization. The county then suggested he attend the Bemidji School to be challenged more beginning the next year. That didn't work out and he was expelled so attended a special school at Upper Mississippi for the remaining balance of the year to learn about behavior issues. That wasn't successful either and we finally convinced the county to allow him to attend our school at St. Marks. Since our family attended church regularly and he attended Sunday School (which he had not done at home) we thought it would be important that he understood tough love, to have Jan and Catie's teaching experiences at our school and to learn in depth about Jesus as his Savior. That was a change for him; and, once he was given some responsibility to help the younger children with their studies, he was a different student and became more responsible. Behavior issues became less frequent.

One highlight of his attendance was that he was chosen to be Martin Luther in the school play about Martin Luther. He excelled, was a great performer as well as learned so much more about Jesus and what our church believed, etc. Jamie lived with us for 5 years prior to him returning to live with his mother, who had married a serviceman and had learned about parenting. (They had moved to Texas.)

Jamie influenced his mother by encouraging her and husband to attend church with him and they became very active members. It was unfortunate that he died a few years later – 16 years old (accident with "unloaded" gun) but his mother donated his organs, etc. so 18 people were recipients. She was so thankful for his life at our home and that he learned that he, as well as she and husband, were children of God, and wanted more opportunity to spread the gospel to others. They donated the wrongful death insurance money to their church to build an early childhood addition.

This is a success story of the school, its purpose, God's plan and blessings that our family wanted to share with you. We encourage everyone to continue to support St Mark as well as our pastor, school, and teachers to bring the unchurched into our fold.

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 2 Peter 1:2

Special Service Information celebrating 50th Anniversary:



50th Anniversary Service

August 20, 2023

10 AM

Today's Theme



O Lord, let this your little flock,
your name alone confessing,
continue in your loving care,
true unity possessing.
Your sacraments, O Lord,
and your saving Word
to us e'er pure retain;
grant that they may remain
our only strength and comfort.
CW 861:2

St. Mark Evangelical Lutheran Church
is celebrating 50 Years
(1973-2023)

You are invited to stay and celebrate with us!

9 AM Welcome

Coffee, refreshments, fellowship

10 AM Worship Service

Following the service, please join us for:

Lunch time meal
Sharing memories
Yard games
Bounce house
Music
Snacks
Fellowship

Guest speaker – Pastor Lon Kuether:







40th Anniversary Celebration:





50th Anniversary Celebration – August 20, 2023







2023