

A History from the Future

Mohave Valley News

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City of Mohave Valley, AZ

By I.M. Reporter

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Valley, one of the oldest and largest churches in the City of Mohave Valley celebrated its 50th anniversary this past Sunday with an overflow crowd approaching 600 members, guests, and friends.

The congregation began in 1966 in the homes of several Lutheran families living in old Bullhead when the population between Needles and Davis Dam was approximately 1,800 people. The growth of the congregation has kept pace with the development of the area where the population now exceeds 180,000. The congregational membership is approaching 1,000 year round members with an additional 300 snowbirds who regularly participate in congregational events.



The 50th anniversary worship and celebration was so crowded that all of the campus was used for the service. The focal point for the day was the family life center which doubles as a worship area for large event such as this. The original 1982 sanctuary and basement were also pressed into service for the day. The service was simulcast into these areas



through the congregation's media center. The media center also broadcasts the regular services over the internet in full video for the shut-

ins in the area. The services are also heard on radio each week.

The Rev. Dr. Brady Blasdel, President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod,

formerly pastor of Lamb of God in Lake Havasu was the speaker at both services. Dr. Blasdel had been a missionary under retired pastor Dr. Earl Pierce when both served in Iowa. Dr. Blasdel's message to the congregation was on the importance of vision in creating an excitement and anticipation about the future. He credit Dr. Pierce for instilling that passion for vision in him and, it seems, in St. John as well.

The impact one congregation can have on a community is impressive. One does not normally see a congregation as involved in service to the community as this one is. After the services, this reporter scheduled interviews with several of the leaders at St. John to find out the reason for this. Those interviewed were: Senior Pastor Bill Johnson; Associate Pastor Floyd Blum; Youth Pastor and executive director of the "Fisherman's Shop" Brandon Larson; Director of Christian Education and the St. John's Preschool, Mrs. Sally Schmidt; Director of Music, Mr. Walt Schmidt, and St. James Pastor Jim Tyler. What follows are excerpts from those interviews.

The first person interviewed was Senior Pastor Bill Johnson. Pastor Johnson has been at St. John for 14 years. He came from the seminary as an assistant to Dr. Pierce. He has been senior pastor since Dr. Pierce's retirement in 2018. I began by asking Pastor Johnson how this congregation made the transformation from what many see as a rather subdued image into a dynamic community leader.

"Well, Inez, it is as Dr. Blasdel said yesterday. Vision!" "When I arrived right out of the seminary, the family life center had just been completed and the congregation was struggling financially. Not only had they taken out a rather large loan for the building, they had also voted to add staff. Quite a load for a congregation of its size back then. But, the congregation was committed to growth. This was true even before Dr. Pierce came in 2006. In fact, Dr. Pierce told me that one of the reasons he came was their commitment to making a difference in the lives of people here in Mohave, knowing that in doing so, the church would grow.

Dr. Pierce led the congregation through a visioning process that he had used back in Iowa. This process allowed the congregation to see into the future and imagine the possibilities that God had in store for them. The first step in moving towards this vision that is nearing completion today was the soccer field and playground. Now it sounds rather simple and small, but you have to remember what Bullhead was like in 2006 before the city combined with the valley. Expansion to the south was just beginning in earnest. The Mohave Crossroads Shopping Center was still desert and city facilities and services were just making their way here.



There was no public park in the area and the number of neighborhood children was continuing to grow.

“The congregation decided to move into the future by providing the soccer field and playground. Many community organizations and companies supported this vision and soon grants and funding came into place to bring this to reality. As you can see, the entire south side of the property is devoted to community use, as are many of our meeting spaces. The Narcotics Anonymous group which has been meeting since 2006 has brought hope and sobriety to over 500 people in their time here. Their weekly meetings top out at over 150 people in the social hall. We now have an AA group meeting as well as Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. We are quite proud of our English as a second language program which has led to our Spanish service. We have two men in training through our Lay Leadership Program who will serve as Pastors to this growing congregation within our congregation.

Our family life center is open to community events as well, although we are hard pressed to find an open night, what with the basketball leagues, the volleyball tournaments,

the aerobics and healthy living programs for seniors. We try to open the building early when it is hot so our neighbors can get their walks in.

One of the great blessings of the age diversity in this congregation is that we can have a senior citizens program going on in one part of the campus and our preschool in another and then both groups get together over lunch.

That preschool was another challenge that the Lord led us through and took us to new heights. Part of my call in coming here was to help raise support for the school. The need was there, we knew that, but where would we find the staff, qualified staff in Mohave Valley? As it turned out, right in our midst was a young family which had just moved to Mohave Valley and joined our church. She was a stay-at-home mom, but trained and licensed as a preschool director. Not long after they had moved here, Walt, that’s Sally’s husband lost his job as a musician at one of the casinos and it looked like they were going to have to move back to California. However, after much prayer and soul searching, they came to me with a plan. Walt would stay home with the kids and Sally would open our preschool. The Lord’s timing is always perfect. The school opened in 2011 and has stayed at capacity since then. Walt never went back to his regular work. He came through our lay leadership program and became one of our deacons and now serves as the director of music for all of our music programs.

“As you know, we have 3 services each Sunday with additional services on Saturday and Wednesday nights. We are considering another service in the gym at the same time as one of our regular services. This would be quite a strain on the parking situation. Why don’t we just go ahead and build a larger sanctuary? That would force us to give up the soccer field. We are looking at the new service as just a stop-gap until we finalize purchase of property for another daughter congregation somewhere down towards Needles but still in Arizona.

You know, this same situation is what led to the development of St. James in Laughlin Ranch. Pastor Tyler is the pastor there and I see that he is now here, so I will let you have some time with him.”

So, tell us, Pastor Tyler, how did you end up in Mohave Valley as Pastor of St. James? “Well, how I got to Mohave Valley is the easy part, how I ended up as a pastor is quite a bit longer. Do you have the time?” “Sure, go ahead.”

"I was born in Bullhead. Both my parents worked at one of the casinos, so I pretty much raised myself, especially after my dad left us. My mom remarried, but the situation deteriorated when my step-father developed cancer. I was one of the "breakfast bunch" at St. John. The junior high bus stopped in front of the church, so we (about 15-25) would wait in the church parking lot or under the porch for the bus. Pastor Pierce would set out hot chocolate in the winter and lemonade in the warmer months.

Because of this, I began to feel that St. John was a safe place for me, and whenever the doors were open I was there. I came for the Advent and Lent dinners. I started coming to the junior confirmation classes, the junior high youth group, whatever, it didn't matter. I didn't have to be home and I was safe. The congregation cared for us kids and welcomed us no matter how many times they had to say "walk!" or "wait your turn." They cared. Over time, through the example of Pastor Pierce, Brandon and later Pastor Bill, I decided to follow in their footsteps and went to the seminary after college.



Little did I know that the Lord had plans back home for me.

Because of the growth at St. John, and the success of the preschool, plans were made to begin a second worshipping site in the Laughlin Ranch area. A forty acre site was purchased along side the new highway 95 on the east edge of Laughlin Ranch. This site gives us the room to development not only the school, but a senior living complex as well.

The school now goes from first to eighth grades. Some of our students have gone on to Faith Lutheran High in Las Vegas.

The senior center has completed the first phase. We have condominiums for sale and the first apartment housing wing is filling up fast. The next phase will include an assisted living complex as well as a full care nursing facilities. We have seen how well the age mix has worked at St. John and are seeking to expand that model here at St. James."

Thank you Pastor Tyler. I see Pastor Larson is now here and we will continue our conversation with him. Pastor Larson, I just asked Pastor Tyler what brought him to Mohave Valley, so I will start with that question for you as well and tell us about this "Fisherman's Shop." Pastor Larson replied:

"Believe it or not, like Pastor Tyler, I'm pretty much a native of Mohave Valley as well. My folks moved here when I was very young to open the Hallmark Store. I grew up between a card rack and a cash register. In my late teens and early twenties I was torn between my two interests, God and retail. I started the Lay Leadership training under Pastor Pierce and was licensed as a deacon after the two year program. I knew I wanted to go to seminary, but I still enjoyed marketing and sales, so I kept putting it off. I didn't think there'd be a way to combine the two.

But, then I found out that I could complete my seminary studies on-line so I continued in that direction. At the same time, however, the possibility presented itself to open a Christian bookstore and coffee house in the new Mohave Crossroads Center. The congregation caught the vision of the possibilities of this ministry for outreach and agreed to back the business. The Fisherman's Shop is the result. It is a Christian bookstore and coffee house owned by the church with the profits used for the continuing expansion of the youth ministry programs at St. John and St. James. Not only do we serve a great cup of coffee, we provide training for young people just getting started in the world, and developing opportunities for those in need of a hand, not a handout.

The Fisherman's Shop also works with another one of St. John's ministries in Mohave Valley, Martha's Place. Martha's Place is a thrift shop and food pantry that grew out of the ministry of Jan Schuster who had her own personal program of helping those in need of food and clothing. Space was found in the new building at St. John to begin organizing this ministry beyond Jan's kitchen. Many, many families continue to be helped by Martha's Place, not only with food and clothing, but as at the Fisherman's Shop, with training and skills to go on to better jobs.

Brandon goes on: "I'm sure Pastor Johnson and Pastor Tyler forgot to mention that in addition to the services at their sites, we do have worship here at the Shop as well. Friday nights we rearrange the tables and go from recorded music to a live worship experience. We see the Shop as really the front door into the worshipping world of St. John and St. James. Kids hang

out here, much like the breakfast bunch at St. John, just because it is a safe place. For many, this is their first experience, their first encounter with Jesus and for most it is a positive one. Some worship with us every week. Others invite their family to worship at one of the main campuses. We have several families that have discovered Jesus because one of their teens stopped by for a latte.”



The Schmidt’s arrive for their interview. We start with Sally. Sally, we’ve already heard about the way you came to St. John. Can you tell us a little about why this program is so successful.

“It has more to do with God and the passion of the people of St. John than it has to do with me. I’m just along for the ride. The members knew the need was here long before we moved into the new building. They really did a great job of being a really welcoming place for children and families before we opened the school. Once moms and dads know that this is the place for them, then it is easy to offer a place for their children as well.



Once you spend a day here, with the kids running about, especially at lunch when our “older kids” come in on walkers and wheelchairs, and see the interaction of the children and the seniors, you begin to get just a little glimpse of what heaven is going to be like. Not only the ages but the colors as well. St. John used to be pretty much a monotone congregation, but they were serious about reaching this community and this community has become a rainbow of all of God’s people. The congregation is thrilled to offer the preschool to all and the preschool pretty much reflects the diversity of Mohave Valley’s population. The congregation has a big heart

and has an endowment fund that makes scholarships available to as many as it can who need financial assistance.

Another big plus for our preschool program is our kindergarten. Parents, especially young parents, really appreciate the fact that not only do we offer preschool but we have a MOPS (mothers of preschoolers) program and kindergarten. This means that their children can be in one place for a number of years before having to make the big change to elementary school. And now that we have our own bus, they can continue with our Lutheran education program through 8th grade up at St. James.”

Sally’s husband Walt is in charge of the music program here at St. John. Tells us how that is going, Walt?

“It is going great, next question?” No, really, we are so blessed here at St. John. While some may argue that it is better to offer worship in a large setting, we continue to worship in our original sanctuary and have several different services each week. This allows us to tailor each service to a different segment of our congregation. And whatever we do in music, we do very well. Our traditional service is probably more traditional than most people are used to. Pastor even uses incense from time to time. There is chanting. It is something to hear the voices coming from the chancel, the choir loft and the congregation all praising our wonderful God.



Then we have our LiteHaus service, featuring guitars, drums and keyboard. That groups really gets the old building rocking. Our third Sunday service kinda flows somewhere between the Harbor early service and the more up tempo LiteHaus, which is why we call that one the River service.

The Saturday night service is probably the most traditional of all. We try to recreate the traditions of the very early church, right down to having the service in the basement around tables. The early Christians worshipped in the catacombs, right? Wednesday night is our relaxed service. This one is for all those who have to work weekends, or just need a break from a busy week. That’s a lot of music to get ready each week, but we have teams of committed musicians and singers all hooked on Jesus and that’s what makes it all possible. . . .