



THE GOOD NEWS

FROM ST. MATTHEW

The community of St. Matthew exists in the world as a visible expression of God's love

Remembering the Old Church

Submitted by Nancy Jeanne Littfin Newman '70

This issue of The Good News is dedicated to the "Great Fire" that took place on April 15, 1968. We invite you to read the stories shared by some who recalled the events around that day.

I went to Mass every morning before school. Everyone did. And I remember making my First Communion and my Confirmation at the old St. Matthew's Church. On Sundays we would go to church and sit with my Grandma and Grandpa Littfin. We always sat in the same pew. I think it used to be an assigned pew for our family a generation or two before us. It felt good to know that my great grandparents sat in the same pew a lifetime before us. I never felt such a sense of security and a sense of community as I did when I would celebrate Mass, Stations of the Cross, or one of the other Sacraments. It is what formed the foundation of my unwavering faith and beliefs of the Catholic Church.

The Day of the Fire

Then it all came to an end one spring day, April 15, of 1968. I was at my friend Jeannie Haas' house playing outside. She lived at the top of the hill on a corner near Baker and King Streets. We used to climb up on the top of her outdoor shed and look around. That particular day, we noticed a large amount of smoke coming from the direction of our school and church about six or seven blocks away, down the hill. We never saw so much smoke before and it was rising so high. Then we heard sirens from a fire engine coming off in the distance. It seemed like for a moment I stopped breathing.

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ADDITIONAL COPIES AVAILABLE!

You can obtain extra copies of this newsletter to give to former parishioners, alumni or friends of St. Matthew. They are available at no charge and can be picked up from back of the church or at the parish office.



The Last Wedding at St. Matthew's Before the Fire.

Patty O'Day and Richard Clemen's Wedding on February 24, 1968.

MESSAGE FROM **father steve**



Fr. Steve's homilies are available on-line at www.st-matts.org

A few years ago, shortly before Christmas, I received a phone call from a man who told me a childhood friend of his had recently died. He told me this friend had lived a "tough life". He came from a family with a lot of problems, he unsuccessfully wrestled with alcohol and drug issues and he had off and on been in trouble with the law — all in all, a rather tragic story.

He told me that he did not have a lot of contact with his friend over the years, but when the man was dying he asked to see him. In the course of the visit the dying man acknowledged he had been responsible for the fire at Saint Matthew's Church in 1968.

He was a young adolescent at the time. On Easter Monday, April 15th, he went into the church and tried to steal the money from the "poor box" located in the back of the church — near the back confessional and a votive light stand.

In the attempt to "cover-up" the theft from the "poor box" he lit a fire which got out of control and quickly spread through out the church.

This young man kept his "secret" for almost 35 years, and now that he was dying he wanted his friend to call me and tell me that he was the culprit. He knew that there were lots of rumors and much finger pointing at the time. He wanted to "clear" the others who were blamed for the fire. He acknowledged that the fire hurt many people, and he wanted to say that he was sorry.

He hoped that this "confession from the grave" might bring him some forgiveness. I assured my caller that I would pray for his friend and that one day I would tell the story in such a way as to not disclose either his or his friend's identity.

As tragic as the Saint Matthew fire was, perhaps more tragic was the life of this poor adolescent — tragedy that marked his whole life. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord. May perpetual light shine upon him. May he rest in peace.

Yours truly,
Stephen Adrian, Pastor

“ He wanted to “clear” the others who were blamed for the fire. He acknowledged that the fire hurt many people, and he wanted to say that he was sorry. ”

Stained glass windows that survived the fire.



Remembering the Old Church,
continued from page 1

Then Jeannie and I jumped off of the shed in her yard, and started running down the hill toward the church. As we got nearer to the church, we turned the corner and couldn't believe our eyes as our burning church came into view. There were fire trucks and fire fighters running all around with hoses, spraying water at our beautiful church with the red brick. More and more people from our community were arriving, horrified. We all stood around with our heads up and mouths open with disbelief.

"Our Church Would Never Be the Same"

I remember standing in a position where I could see the front of the church on Hall Avenue and the one side on Robie as well. All of a sudden, I saw a huge wrecking ball shaped like a teardrop swinging through the air in the direction of the church. Then all at once, they smashed it into one of the huge beautiful stained glass windows. It made a large crashing noise and shattered and came down to the ground. At that moment, I knew our church would never be the same. That beautiful stained glass window that I used to stare at as a child during Mass was shattered along with my innocence and childlike faith.

When I couldn't take it any longer, I ran home to be with my family. When we went back down to see the state of the church days later, there was nothing left but the bell tower, the bell still in it, and the biggest pile of red brick I had ever seen. It was a very sad day for our parish, one that no one seems to be able to forget.

I remember for days afterward, we would walk through the rubble to find little mementos of our beloved church. I remember seeing charred statues, keys from the organ, but mostly just piles of red brick. A flood of memories went through me re-living: my First Communion, our Confirmation, Mass before school with our uniforms on with matching hats or veils, carrying flowers to the altar on May Day. I remember so well using my People's Mass Book, and really listening to Fr. Stitts, Fr. Wolters or Monsignor Cecka while they celebrated the Mass.

I remember going to Confession and waiting in line to go into the confessional. I always went to Father Wolters because he seemed to give less penance. The Stations of the Cross were so meaningful as

Father would walk around the church, stopping in front of each Station with the altar boys carrying the cross. The old church felt majestic to a younger child with its high ceiling, magnificent altars and statues, and pictures of Jesus and the saints in stained glass.

A New Beginning

Even though the new church that was built was modern for the times, we made many new, wonderful memories as teenagers, singing in the Contemporary Choir, Fall Festivals, CCD classes, making new friends along the way. We became a real community again sharing the new church with our family and friends. But I will always remember the original St. Matthew's Church and hold its reverence forever in my heart. I still come back to St. Matthew's when I am visiting my family in St. Paul throughout the years. St. Matthew's is so very lucky to have Fr. Adrian leading them on their spiritual journey.

You are invited to attend a

40th Anniversary Remembrance

of the St. Matthew church fire

Friday, April 18, 2008

St. Matthew Social Hall

6:00 p.m.

Social Hour and viewing of memorabilia and photos

7:00 p.m.

Dinner

8:00 p.m.

Program: Personal reflections of parishioners past and present

Cost is \$68 per person / \$125 per couple
Proceeds go to St. Matthew Educational Endowment

For more information contact the parish office at 651-224-9793.

To register, use the enclosed envelope.



“The Bell is Ringing as it Falls”

Submitted by Joanne Fischer Hartigan '46

The day is imprinted in my memory, even though it was a disaster via phone from my mom (Viola Fischer).

Our backyard on George St. faced the playground of St. Matthew’s School and the church was very visible from our 2nd floor where my mom was calling from, giving me a tearful account of what was happening.

My mom and dad were married at St. Matt’s. All of us children were baptized, had Confessions, First Communions and marriages at St. Matt’s. My dad’s family, the Fischers, Bastiens, Palons and my mom’s family, the Schmitts, Monzels and Halls were all very active in the parish community. Our whole lives were vested in St. Matthew’s.

The most vivid statement from my mom was, “Oh, no! Oh, no! The steeple is falling! Oh no! My whole life was there! Oh, listen, the bell is ringing as it falls!” How my life flashed before me with each statement, the Baptismal font, the confessionals, the communion rail where we knelt to receive our First Communion and stand at Confirmation (where we were told the bishop would slap us on the cheek if we didn’t answer a question correctly that he might ask us; a story passed on from our older siblings and by us to our younger ones.) Standing at the altar for my marriage and the photos in my wedding album of our beautiful altar and surrounding statues and wood work.

I may not have actually been there to see it, but in my minds-eye, I was there through my mom.

I love you, Mom!

“The Heart of the Church Was Still Present”

Submitted by Vicki Petschauer Baker '68

The class of 1968 was not able to hold the graduation ceremony inside the church that Spring. Instead, a pared down version was held in the chapel downstairs. Graduates were limited to two guests apiece. We made due, but I missed the stained glass windows, the choir singing up in the loft, the organ and pipes, the beauty of it all. But the heart of the church was still present, very much so.



Smoke, water, fire and heat leave little to be salvaged.

“It Was an Eerie Sight”

Submitted by Catherine Lang Fee '57

It was a sunny spring afternoon. My father called from his office at the Devlin Funeral Home to say that St. Matthew's was on fire. The 35 mm camera was near the door and I grabbed it as I left the house, five blocks from the church.

The sky was filled with smoke. A crowd quickly gathered. Several fire engines were already at the scene and more could be heard approaching the area.

Most of the fire seemed to be on the Robie Street side of the church. The stained glass windows were broken, including the large Ascension window on the south. The smoke became very dense and fire could be seen inside the church. It was past sunset before the fire was completely out.

I remember helping to carry chasubles and other church articles to the school. We strung clothesline in the hallways and hung everything up. The smell of smoke and charred wood was pervasive.

Later that evening, we taught our regularly scheduled CCD classes. After classes, Father Whittier let the teachers go inside the church. It was an eerie sight. Light bulbs had been strung across the sanctuary; several statues had fallen and the floor was badly buckled. All the wood was charred — debris and muck made walking difficult. The statues and stations had the appearance of “Black Madonnas.” Easter lilies had withered in their pots. Most of the stained glass windows on the north side of the church remained intact.

I felt very sad. My father had been a parishioner since 1924; my mother since their marriage in 1939. My brothers and I belonged since infancy. I remember how it rained on First Communion and how crowded it was when Archbishop Murray administered Confirmation.

Later that year, the wreckers came to demolish the church. The cornerstone and bell were saved for the new church. Mass was said in the school gymnasium and the old St. Michael's church until the new church was ready for occupancy.

On December 18, 1979 I was married in the new church. Ironically, my husband was a fire captain. His first major fire as a new captain had been St. Matthew's Church on April 15, 1968.



TOP: The interior of the church after the fire including the altar area, choir loft and main church entrance.

BOTTOM: Demolition of the church later that year.



Breaking through the windows to get at the flames.



“Wondered What I Would Have Found”

Submitted by Margarita Abel Probst '64

I remember the day St. Matthew’s Church burned down was a vacation day from school because it was the day after Easter Sunday 1968.

After lunch that Monday, I planned a trip to the library to begin research for a term paper which was due before graduating from Archbishop Brady High School the coming May.

I had to pass the church on my way to the library because the church was located between my family home and the public library on George Street and usually I would stop at church. But that day I chose to walk across the street from the church and not make a visit because I wanted to avoid procrastination and get started on the paper.

A couple hours passed and I was beginning to pack up to go home when I heard several fire engine sirens which sounded very close. I wondered where the fire was. Quickly on my walk home I discovered it was our church that was burning!

I remember standing in a crowd of people on Robie Street watching the beautiful stained glass window being smashed by the firemen and angry, black smoke billowing out!

At times I have wondered what I would have found had I entered the church that day. Maybe I would have smelled smoke or saw fire and called for help. However, my dad told me it was a good thing I didn’t open the church door because of a possible backdraft. Years later I told a fireman this story and he said once a fire gets started in a structure with a high ceiling it is very difficult to save the building.

This is my story of the day we lost St. Matthew’s Church.



The smoke could be seen from all over the West Side.

“The Last Wedding in the Old Church”

Submitted by **Patty O’Day Clemen ‘58**

I have been a lifetime member of St. Matthew’s Church (I was born into the parish in 1944!). I also attended grade school here, where I made many long-lasting and significant friendships. Suffice it to say, I have scores of memories of my life in this parish. But reflecting over the years, I think my fondest memory is the day I married Richard Clemen, February 24, 1968 — the Saturday before Ash Wednesday.

It was less than two months after our wedding day, on Easter Monday, that the church burned down. I remember being in our new apartment (on the corner of Stryker and Stevens) when I heard what sounded like a billion screaming sirens gathering close by. I ran out of the apartment and followed the sirens to the corner of Stevens and Hall where, looking north, I could see smoke billowing from the bell tower. The church was engulfed in flames. I remember returning home in utter disbelief, devastated. My new husband and I had the last wedding in the main sanctuary of the old church. That’s where I was the day the Church burned.

“The Show Must Go On”

Submitted by **Priscilla Finch Quaday ‘59**

My Catholic journey began at St. Matthew’s after my baptism in 1945. I attended the grade school from third through eighth grade back in the 50’s. We didn’t have a lunch room but the principal sold candy in her office. I remember the Charm and Holloway suckers.

Mom, my sisters and I walked the mile to church on Sundays. We attended Stations of the Cross during Lent and of course, there was Confession.

In 1967, I met Charles Quaday, the man I would marry in 1968. I couldn’t wait to get married at St. Matthew’s as I would be the third daughter to do so. That opportunity never came to fruition after the church fire in April of 1968. Luckily, the wedding invitations had not been mailed yet. As they say, the show must go on, so I chose to be married at St. Luke’s. It’s a beautiful church. After our wedding, I moved to Anoka as Charlie worked at Federal Cartridge, so my affiliation with St. Matthew’s had come to an end.



Exterior of the main entrance after the fire.



Main altar area inside the church after the fire.

“Happy is the Bride that the Rain Falls On”

Submitted by Carol Schwartz Koop '61

We remember the day well. Late that evening we heard the shocking news that our family parish had burned to the ground. To add “fuel to the fire” it was approximately 2 weeks before our wedding was to be held in that church — May 4, 1968. What a mess, in more ways than one. Some days later we were informed we had a choice to make; join a neighboring parish or we could have our wedding at the “Old St. Michael’s church” building on Colorado Street. Of course we didn’t want to “join” another parish as we had both attended this church and school since birth, as our parents had, so we arranged to be married in the “old” church building. Well, it was still a church after all. We had to hustle to notify everyone on the invitation list that the ceremony was being moved due to the recent fire so we sent out post cards to everyone. We came to learn the building had been used for years to store old tires and such and so that had to be cleaned out.

We didn’t see the church until the morning of the ceremony and there was no heat. A light rain began falling just before the ceremony and someone quoted “Happy is the bride that the rain falls on.” The wallpaper was not in the best shape, hanging from the upper sidewalls and the inside of the church was darker than usual due to shortage of lighting — but it was still a church and there we were in front of God and everybody. The center aisle was very worn of the finish

and anything but level but down the aisle I did go on the arm of a dear friend (my father was deceased) with my handsome groom at the end of the isle to meet me. The ceremony went well with Monsignor Cecka officiating. We were told early that only “the Monsignor does the marrying and the burying.” The light rain and the blessings of all went with us and now, 40 years later we will celebrate the memories of both a happy day with many, many memories as well as a saddened memory of the destruction of our church by fire.

Our daughter, Christine Koop (Joa) was baptized in late 1969 at the convent chapel which was then being used while the new church was under construction. Years later, Christine became a pre-school teacher and taught for 9 years at St. Matthew’s child care — currently across the street from the school where both her dad and I attended as children. Christine has a daughter Mykala, our granddaughter, who also attended kindergarten at St. Matthews and played in the same room and “Playhouse” I remember playing in back in 1953 with Sr. Rosalie when I was in kindergarten. We shared an open house with Mykala that year and it brought back many good memories. Mykala will graduate next June from our neighborhood high school and then attend college. How history somewhat repeats itself is a wonderful memory.

God Bless you ALL.

“Watching Our Dad in Action”

Submitted by **Nancy Regan Przybilla '81**

I'm the youngest of the Regan Clan. Our whole family graduated from St. Matt's.

My mom recalls standing by Wilder with me on her hip, when someone told her our church was on fire. Of course, everyone in the area went to watch. My mom got to watch our dad (Joe Regan) in action. He was one of the firemen at the fire.

Our dad has passed on, so I called Louis (Chap) Chapdelaine for his memory on the fire. He said he remembers that they fought the fire from the Robie side of the church. And that Chief Pete Monsaur did not want to break though the stain glass windows but had to knock down the flames quickly.



Parishioner and fireman, Joe Regan administers oxygen to Jack Dalton who suffered smoke inhalation.

“Was Never the Same”

Submitted by **Joanne Blaeser Dufour '57**

At the time of the church fire, our backyard, (we lived on George St.) faced the Robie St. side of the church. A neighbor girl came running into our house screaming “The church is on fire!” and sure enough it was. I called Mom and Dad and I remember I was sobbing as I told them about the church on fire. I felt as if the Blaeser family church ancestry was going up in flames. It was devastating to me. Mom and Dad came over immediately. St. Matthew's was never the same to me after it burned down.



Pictures of the fire taken from the home of Joanne (Blaeser) Dufour located on George Street.



“Time for Something New”

Submitted by **Toni Wilburn Bloechl '72**

I was nine years old the day St. Matthews Church burned. I don't remember the details too much. I just remember the devastating feeling of losing that beautiful, old church.

I remember going to church in the basement chapel for quite awhile after the church burned. I really didn't like that. I was very claustrophobic down there!

The new church was very different and I didn't like it. I missed the old pews and stations of the cross and all the stained glass of the old church. I wish that I had photos of the old church. I only have vague memories now, especially of my first communion there.

Last Sunday, we sang "They'll Know We are Christians by Our Love" in my church in Santa Cruz, CA. It brought back many memories of the new (St. Matthew's) church and the modernization of the parish. I thought of the new priests, Father Wegscheider and Father Whittier, who arrived about that time. I thought of the guitar masses that I enjoyed so much. I thought of my eighth grade graduation which was very special to me.

It was really nice to cruise down memory lane like that 40 years later. I realize now, that it was probably time for something new at St. Matthew's. For someone like me, though, who moved away in 1973, it's nice to remember the very old days and reflect on the loss from time to time.

Alumni & Friends of St. Matthew's

3 New Committee Members are Longtime Friends of St. Matthew's

Tom McKeown, a retired executive of St. Paul Companies, was a widower when he was first introduced to St. Matthew's by his current wife, Mary Cullen McKeown, who was also widowed at the time. Mary Cullen and her deceased husband, Tom Cullen, had raised their five children in a house on Congress within walking distance of St. Matthew's School, which all their children attended. After Mary and Tom McKeown got married (1984), they joined a new church but wound up coming back to St. Matthew's. Because of Tom's career, he and his first wife, Pat, moved often and subsequently brought their eight children to many different Catholic churches around the country. But, he says, St. Matthew's is something special. "The inspirational liturgies, Fr. Steve's homilies...It's the only church I've felt so strongly about. It's a real community."



Eileen McMahon just concluded her work as the co-chair of the capital campaign to build the Paul and Sheila Wellstone Center for Community Building where they raised \$7.5 million from the private sector. But her association with St. Matthew's began after she moved to the West Side in 1973. After graduating from the College of St. Catherine, she became the first editor of the *West Side Voice* newspaper. She and her husband, Steve Karbon, were married by Fr. Steve and she has long admired his commitment to the West Side community.



Jim Scheibel, former mayor of St. Paul, has a connection with St. Matthew's that began with his father (Donald Scheibel '41), now deceased, who was an alumni. While Jim was baptized at



St. Matthew's, his family moved from the West Side when he was still young. But Jim returned to work as a community organizer here before becoming a city councilmember and then mayor. Jim has a long-standing commitment to fighting poverty and working for social justice. He serves on many boards and is currently teaching at Hamline University.

Alumni & Friends
Reach 48.67% of Goal
\$73,005 raised to date

*Donations are from parents,
businesses and foundations,
and 64 different alums in
28 graduating years between
1936 and 1981.*

WILL YOU JOIN?

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Reunion Sunday – May 4th

All alumni are invited to our annual Reunion Sunday. Alumni are encouraged to join us for 10:30 a.m. Mass which will be followed by a simple brunch in the social hall and a tour of the school.

We would like to give special recognition to graduates who will be celebrating a special anniversary this year. So if you graduated in a year that ends in a '3' or an '8', please join us. While some of the classes have been planning other events, this is a way for the whole parish to celebrate the long history of our school and the success of our graduates.

For more information or to RSVP, call 651-224-6912 (school office), or email: AlumniNews@st-matts.org.

See you there! Please invite all your classmates!

From the Editor

Thank you!

I want to thank everyone who took time to tell their stories about the church fire and share their photos from that day. The fire took place 40 years ago and many of us never saw the old church except in photographs, mostly black & white. But anyone who reads the stories on these pages, will in some measure, feel the loss the St. Matthew's community experienced that day.

But there's more to it than that. Woven into the memories people shared is another story about a community that moved beyond the tragic loss of a beautiful old church. It's Carol Schwartz Koop who chose to have her wedding in a building that was used to store old tires rather than join a new parish. Or Toni Wilburn Bloechl who enjoyed the guitar masses and remembers with such fondness her 8th grade graduation. Parishioners built a new church, created new traditions

and renewed their community in the process. Vicki Petschauer Baker said it best when she wrote "The heart of the church was still present, very much so."

I'd also like to thank everyone who shared their photos with us. Most of the photos aren't credited because we don't know for sure who took them but many were taken by Catherine Lang Fee, whose photography captured the intensity of the fire as well as documented the damage afterwards. Photos were also submitted by Nancy Regan Przybilla, Joanne Blaeser Dufour, and Patty O'Day Clemen, whose wedding photo brings back in glorious color the beauty of the original St. Matthew's church.

This is a special edition of the newsletter and if you would like to get extra copies to share with others, you can pick them up (no charge) from the back of the church or at the parish office.

- Maggie Lee, Editor

Student Service Projects

At St. Matthew's, students not only learn Catholic values, they live them. During the school year, every student in school will take part in a Service Project that will emphasize the importance of acting on Christian values and beliefs.

6th & 8th Grade Students Help Fight World Hunger

During Catholic Schools Week, the middle school students explored Catholic social teaching by asking the question: "What can I do to make the world a better place and answer my baptismal call to mission?"

6th and 8th graders answered this question by volunteering for a morning at Feed My Starving Children (FMSC) in Eagan on Monday, January 28th.

FMSC is a world-wide organization which packages nutritious meals for hungry children in more than 50 countries. After the students were trained in the process, they set to work, packaging a mixture of soy, rice, vegetables and broth mix, sealing the packages and stacking them in cartons. Students packed over 9000 servings; enough to feed 25 children for an entire year.

In journal reflections back at school, students asked themselves some difficult questions about issues of social justice and made a commitment to continue the very important work of affording dignity to all God's people.



TOP: Packaging meals are 8th graders Sylvia Owens, Alexis Hernandez and Karina Calero.

BOTTOM: Each package, weighing between 380 and 400 grams, will provide six meals for hungry children throughout the world.



PARISH COMMUNITY OF
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St. Paul, MN 55107

Pastor: Fr. Steve Adrian

Parish Office: 651-224-9793

Weekend Liturgies:

Saturday - 5 p.m.

Sunday - 8:00 & 10:30 a.m.

www.st-matts.org

EVENTS calendar

LENTEN FISH FRY — March 7 & 14

Regular serving time is from 5-7:30 p.m. with a Senior Citizen Special from 4-5 p.m. The Fish Fries are co-sponsored by the Rosary Society, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Home & School. Also a portion of the profits is dedicated to the Street Children of Bucharest.

COMMUNAL PENANCE — March 16 at 2:00 p.m. & 4:00 p.m.

HOLY WEEK SERVICES — March 20 – 23

Holy Thursday, March 20, **Mass of the Lord's Supper** 7:00 p.m.

Good Friday, March 21, **Stations of the Cross** 3:00 p.m.; **Liturgy of Word, Cross & Communion** 6:00 p.m.

Holy Saturday, March 22, **Easter Vigil** 8:00 p.m.

Easter Sunday, March 23, **Masses** 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.

SPECIAL FRIENDS MASS — April 9 at 9:00 a.m.

Grandparents and other Special Friends of St. Matt's students are invited to attend an all-school mass followed by refreshments in their student's classroom.

DINNER IN REMEMBRANCE OF CHURCH FIRE — April 18

(See page 3 for more information.)

CONFIRMATION AT THE CATHEDRAL — April 22 at 7:00 p.m.

ATHLETIC BANQUET — April 27 at 11:30 a.m.

The Men's Club sponsors St. Matthew's Athletic Program and will host a luncheon for all students who played on a team at St. Matthew's this year. The luncheon follows the 10:30 a.m. mass and families of athletes are welcome to come.

REUNION SUNDAY — May 4 (See page 10 for more information.)

All St. Matthew's Alumni are invited to attend the 10:30 a.m. Mass followed by a brunch in the social hall and a tour of the school.