

75-Year-Old Woman Stops PLI Leader Dr. Oesch

By Rev. Jack Cascione

Many have wondered why the PLI Executive Leader, Dr. Norbert Oesch, never built a new contemporary mega-church structure in Orange, California. The strange but true account of his inability to realize his vision is the result of the then 75-year-old Helen Eggers' effort to preserve her church. The following events explain why the PLI Leader should read his mail.

Helen Eggers, now age 85, explained this past January 2000, how she, her late husband, Elmer, and others saved St. John's Lutheran Church in Orange, California from the wrecking ball by placing it on the National Register of Historic Places.

Completed in 1914, St. John's Lutheran Church is a magnificent gothic-style structure with a high vaulted ceiling, a 20-foot high ornate white and gold carved altar, and an organ originally installed with 1,475 pipes. Similar in form to the Cathedral at Chartes, France, it is wider than most LCMS churches of its era and can easily be included in the ranks of St. Lorenz in Frankenmuth, Michigan and St. Paul's in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In recent years, a number of pews were removed in front of the chancel, which reduced the seating to about 800 people. Saint John's has a membership of more than 4000 and a grade school of 550.

Without question, St. John's has some of the finest stained glass windows of any LCMS congregation. They were especially designed and crafted for St. John's by a family-owned Belgium company in 1913 and then shipped to America by way of Germany. The process used in making the windows is now a lost art, and the stained glass is so valuable that the congregation cannot afford to insure them. The windows arrived just before the shipping lanes were closed because of World War I. The two largest windows in the transepts are breath taking in scale, detail, and subject - particularly the one depicting Christ and "The Woman at the Well."

Helen Eggers was born on September 22, 1913 in Amhurst, Colorado to Rev. Earnest Drinkgern and Sophia Koeneke Drinkgern. Her father graduated Magna Cum Laude from the St. Louis Seminary in 1912. Her family moved to California in 1931 and became part of St. John's congregation.

In their effort to save the historic St. John's sanctuary Helen states: "It all started a couple of years after Rev. Norbert Oesch, now the Executive Leader of the [Pastoral Leadership Institute](#) (PLI), came to St. John's as its senior pastor. We did not like the rumors that the church was going to be torn down."

The rumors started in 1986 when their new Pastor Oesch had published his vision for St. John's including a new worship facility by the year 2000. Beginning in 1990 the congregation was to organize a building committee for a new worship and music center with construction to being in 1992.

Helen's late husband Elmer, was deeply concerned about saving St. John's. His grandfather, Juergen Schmetgen, was one of the original 13 signers of St. John's Constitution in 1882.

In order to check out the rumors, Helen called the renowned Judson Company in Los Angeles, a company specializing in stained glass sales and repair, and asked if they had had any conversation with Pastor Oesch about selling the windows in the church. The owner of the company said he had been asked about an estimate on the current value of the windows, but could not remember all the details, and neither was there anything in writing.

The questions at that time remained: "Why was Rev. Oesch seeking appraisals on the stained glass and other artifacts in the church, and why were there all these rumors about tearing the church down and putting up 'a more functional building' than the one we now had?"

Helen continued:

We never went to the officers of the church or Rev. Oesch to initiate the historic protection process for fear it would be stopped, before it got started. Instead, we contacted a research specialist, a Mrs. Diane Marsh, who worked in the historical preservation area. Mrs. Marsh was convinced that St. John's should be placed on the National Historic Register.

Elmer followed the instructions given by the people in Sacramento, the State Capital. There was quite a logjam in Sacramento about placing buildings on the Register. However, we received information that we were being given special priority, because we were an 'ethnic group.' We were the first Germans in the State of California to ask to place a building on the National Historic Register.

When the Commission asked who at the church should be informed of the preservation process, we told them to send the information to the head pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church, as well as Mr. Busch, the President of the Congregation, and the Trustees. We also sent copies of all our correspondence to these men at the church. They all had their mailboxes in the Church Office. However, none of them reported ever receiving any letters from Sacramento about placing St. John's on the National Historic Register according to President Busch.

A commission staff woman in Sacramento said: "When you get our final letter, you will notice at the bottom it will say, 'If you do not respond to this letter after a specified amount of time, that will tell us that St. John's is in agreement and wishes to have the church put on the Historical Agenda.'" We told her to send the letter to the same people as before.

We can only assume that Rev. Oesch and the others had either discarded the letters unopened, or not fully read them, or not taken the matter seriously. After the new church status finally became known on October 16, 1991, I received a phone call from Rev. Oesch. He was absolutely livid.

He asked, "Why did I think I had the authority to speak for the entire congregation?" I said, "I didn't. You got a letter. President Busch got a letter. You've all gotten a letter and nobody did anything more about it. Therefore, Sacramento assumed we wished to be on the National Register." His following comments were so loud that I had to hold the phone away from my ear. I responded, "You had your chance; you did not read the fine print at the bottom of the letter. We are now on the National Register of Historic Places and the church cannot be torn down."

Later, in a strange reversal of attitude, I received another phone call from Rev. Oesch wanting to know why his name wasn't on the bronze plaque I had ordered and delivered to the church. I told him that we put Rev. Jacob Kogler's name on it because he founded the church. Once again, Rev. Oesch abruptly hung up the phone.

The Bronze Plaque is now installed in the narthex of the church.

In his farewell letter (Feb. 9th, 1998) to St. John's, Rev. Oesch wrote, "Everyone desires to leave a legacy. Mine is not buildings or portraits. There are no plaques up identifying my time with you." Since his departure attendance figures in St. John's weekly "Access" have shown a marked increase.

Helen Eggers, who along with her husband financed the entire Historic Register process, has for the past 30 years worked as an estate appraiser, handling estate sales.

For more information on Rev. Dr. Norbert Oesch, who is no longer a pastor at St. John's and now heads PLI, logon to www.PLI-Leader.org.

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