

Memories of Principal Jerry Gronholz from the early 1960s

(Ed. Note: these memories were edited from a letter from Mr. Gronholz to Rev. Mark Jeske dated October 24, 2013)

Miriam and I served at St. Marcus from 1961 to 1965. I recall the neighborhood changing from 1962-63 from mostly white to mostly black. The white members were leaving in such numbers that a congregational meeting was called to determine the direction St. Marcus should take. Should we relocate outside the city or should we stay? The younger, more affluent members favored moving, while the older, long-time members wanted to stay in “their church.” Those who wanted to stay at the Palmer location asked if any of the called workers would stay with them. All the called workers agreed to serve at the Palmer location. Consequently the vote was to keep St. Marcus where it was and still is today.

During the planning for the 1963 remodeling, I encouraged the congregation to spend \$10,000 on converting the assembly hall to a gym so that we could have physical classes, some place for the children to play in inclement weather, and to start a basketball team to enhance school spirit. Because most of the remaining members were the old-timers (not to mention the fact that they were German), they balked at the idea. They eventually relented, however, they refused to spend any money on screens to cover the large 4’x8’ windows or to put baskets in the gym.

Nevertheless, we did start a basketball program. We used the stage end where there were no windows. I took a piece of chalk and drew a circle ten feet up on the wall. That was our basket. All our games were away games. We chose the name “Mustangs” and picked Columbian blue and gold as our school colors. The first year in the league we won 8 and lost 4. The kids really got into the program.

One of the boys on the basketball team was Jonathon Maye. His father Lee played right field for the Milwaukee Braves. They lived in an upper flat across the alley behind the school. Mrs. Maye and Jonathon became members. Lee did not. Still, he was always interested in his son’s education and school activities. Lee came to me one day and asked what it would cost to put screens on the windows and baskets on the walls. A few days later he stopped at school with a manila envelope stuffed with cash. Hundreds of dollars! He said he had passed the hat in the locker room and all the guys chipped in. This made it possible for us to have a complete gym.

The neighborhood became very volatile, a powder keg, exploding at the slightest provocation. It was being torn apart by violence and bitterness toward the remaining whites. The blacks were now taking out years of pent-up bitterness and hatred towards the Southern whites on the Northern whites. It was extremely dangerous.

The neighborhood was rapidly becoming a slum. There was not a storefront on 3rd St. or North Ave. that was not protected with chain link fencing. When the school was remodeled, the principal’s office and the 7th and 8th grade classroom was moved to the first floor so I could be there when trouble broke out. I was personally attacked and beaten in school, so we placed a German shepherd in school to roam the halls.

Before school and after school it was necessary to patrol our neighborhood to ensure that our children could get in and out of school. The children, especially the whites, suffered constant harassment—the girls attacked sexually and the boys threatened with knives, bats, and chains by roving gangs. I would often make the rounds and pick up the white children and take them home again after school with my car. Of course, this angered the gangs and I became more of a target. Gun battles between rival gangs were common, bullets whizzing past our school windows, innocent people being shot or even killed in our alley. An 85-year-old woman was beaten on our playground after school, witnessed by our children. The toughs wanted her purse. She later died.

One of the 4th grade girls was accosted after school as she was leaving for home. I ran after the perpetrator, chasing him down Palmer, across North Avenue, and suddenly realized that I was now being chased by neighborhood blacks. I was saved from harm when a black man explained who I was and why I was chasing the boy. Our 5th-6th grade teacher, Fred Berg, had his new car stolen during the noon hour, right before our eyes. It was returned two hours later because one of the 3rd grade girls recognized one of the thieves as her older brother.

One evening during a Lenten service, the church was completely surrounded by hundreds of blacks who threatened to burn whitey in his church. During the spring months of my last year at St. Marcus we had to have a police car with two officers in it parked in front of the school and in the alley behind the school. Their advice to me was to catch one of the bullies at a time, take him down into the basement, and beat the living _____ out of him. Just don't have any witnesses. I never followed that advice.

It got so bad that my life was threatened. Miriam would get phone calls at night when I was attending a meeting at St. Marcus. Very strange that those calls came only when I was not home. Not only were our lives filled with tension, but it was now invading our home. We did not want to leave, but I simply could not take the tension any longer.

I have always considered the years at St. Marcus to be the best and the worst years of my ministry. I never again had the opportunity to do real mission work.