

Parish life flourished. It supported three choirs, three organists, and four full-time song leaders at this time. Judy Meemken coordinated the funeral music and Kim Plante, the wedding music. Many adult education talks and series of talks were offered parishioners; these were coordinated by Bernie Evans. Two community projects were off and running: the Food Shelf and Home Delivered Meals. Matti Feeney coordinated youth ministry. Parents of both public and parochial school children helped in preparing the children for the sacraments of First Eucharist and Penance.

The Church of St. Joseph definitely was alive. It boasted a total of 1,200 families of which some 85% still claimed to be descendants of German ancestors who first organized this church. There were names that endured like the rocks upon which the church was built: Fuchs, Lahr, Linnemann, Lodermeier, Loso, Merklung, Philippi, Rassier, Rennie, Schroeder and Theisen; Nierengarten, Pfannenstein, Bechtold, Reber; Walz, Kapsner, Meyer, Schneider and Schindler. Thus, though the community of St. Joseph was growing in size, it was not necessarily in diversity of its people. The business community, also growing, still provided a strong, traditional base.

The year 1989 ended on a sorrowful note, however, that touched the entire community and every family, old and young.



### Bring Jacob Home

On the evening of October 22, 1989, 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling, his ten-year-old brother and a friend biked to a convenience store in east St. Joseph to rent a video. Then they set off along 16th Avenue Southeast, past some farm fields, on their way home at Kiwi Court. Halfway there, at a side road, the boys were stopped by a masked man who inquired their ages and then grabbed Jacob. It all happened in an instant. The other boys were terrified and rushed home on their bikes. Over the next few hours, road blocks were set up circling the city of St. Joseph to stop every vehicle. Police cars converged on the site of the abduction.

Melvin and Aurelia Ruegemer, who live in the vicinity, remember the night well. Melvin says, "It was around nine p.m. Helicopter lights shone around our house all night. During the course of the next weeks, the FBI checked our house and inspected our car." Everyone in the vicinity was questioned and searched; many phone calls from the sheriff's department interrupted people's lives.

The St. Joseph community was frightened and in shock. Parents kept their children within sight and reach. A pall settled over the area as the search continued for whoever was responsible for this despicable act. Jacob's name was on everyone's lips. Prayer services were held—many in the Church of St. Joseph since it was the largest gathering place at the time. Father Tom met with the Wetterling family many times. "Prayer for Jacob" cards were printed and inserted in all the *Worship* books in church and prayed daily.

A week after the abduction, Bill Wasner recalls still being pulled over on the highway by police. The weeks extended into months. Melvin Ruegemer carved a *Jacob's Hope* wooden train for the Wettlering family's home. The months extended into years. The event claimed state and national attention, and Jacob's mother, Patty, went on speaking tours for the cause of her son and all abducted children. She was appointed by the Governor's Task Force to recommend stronger sex offender registration requirements in Minnesota. Later, the U.S. Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offenders Registration Act.

Today, there are still candles lighted in St. Joseph windows to lead Jacob and all missing children home.



### Trials and Tribulations


The first millennium did not end gracefully for the American Catholic Church. And for the Church of St. Joseph, it was, as well, a "trial and tribulation" last decade. To begin with, in 1992, there was a criminal charge of child sexual molestation by a parish youth minister. The lawsuit was covered by insurance but in 1995 the case was dismissed from court due to insufficient evidence. Father Tom declared, "The whole ordeal was extremely difficult for everyone concerned."

Next, the cancer death of a young Lab School girl, Jackie Schneider, and the suicide death of a young teenage boy, Chris Klehr, added immense sorrow to the parish. Other, less traumatic difficulties emerged at the same time: that of adopting a Discipline and Grievance Policy, parish workers needing to use "time cards," changing to a computerized bookkeeping system (assisted by Jeanette Steichen, Judy Weyrens and Duane Sorenson), the need to constantly "stretch" personnel and funds to meet ongoing needs for space and change, and planning for a Capital Campaign. At this time, the pastor also needed to ask Iver "Bishop" Linnemann to retire as trustee of the parish after his 20 years of excellent service. Iver died about a year later.

All of these trials and tribulations of the 1990s sadly peaked with the sudden loss of the pastor, Tom Gillespie, OSB. Perhaps he couldn't deal with another tragedy, folks thought—but they didn't know. On February 23, 1996, Father Tom was gone. Some recall that there may have been some explanation given by Abbot Timothy, OSB, of Saint John's, but nothing that really answered the people's questions.

Father Daniel Ward, OSB, from Saint John's, stepped in as interim pastor. Pastoral Council president, Brian J. Bechtold, called a special meeting of the council. "As this is a difficult time for the parish," he said, "I feel that we as a council must remain strong. We need to be committed to the parish ... I know we can do this and I am committed ..."45

Thus, parish life went on. During the summer of 1996, Florian Muggli, OSB, was appointed as new pastor. However, only in June 2002, did parishioners receive real information about Father Tom. John Klassen, OSB, abbot of Saint John's, visited with parish-



The Story of St. Joseph Church, St. Joseph, Minnesota  
A Sesquicentennial Celebration  
1856 — 2006  
Sister Owen Lindblad, OSB