History of St. Joseph's Church, Wellman

by Beth Cody

The town of Wellman was established by the railroad in 1879 (on land donated by Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Wellman), and it grew to more than 650 residents by the turn of the century—but it did not have a Catholic church. Wellman's mostly German population was predominately Methodist, with few Catholics (unlike the majority Catholic Richmond and Keota). By 1910, the lack of a church was deterring Catholics from settling there, according to a 1912 article:

> The idea of a Catholic church for Wellman was first broached to Father Peiffer by John Desing in the autumn of 1911…. the Rt. Rev. Bishop Davis… was heart and soul in favor of the idea…. On April 16, 1912, four men of the city met… (and) decided the question favorably by subscribing the handsome sum of $1,600….
>
> Had these men decided negatively, not for a long time, possibly never, would there have been a Catholic church at Wellman; for these very men expressed at this meeting their readiness of leaving at the first opportunity unless they should get a church. Several good families had previously left on account of not having church facilities.



An early postcard photo of the first St. Joseph's Church building in Wellman, taken soon after its construction in 1912. It was located on the NE corner of 8th St. & 11th Ave. ***(Wellman Heritage Museum)***

On May 7th, 1912, a church corporation was established: St. Joseph's Church of Wellman, Iowa. Four days later, a lot was purchased for $675 on the northeast corner of what is now 8th Street and 11th Avenue. On May 28th, the ground was staked out to build a brick church, 32 by 54 feet. A cornerstone was laid and blessed with holy water by Rev. Dean Schulte, in September 1912, at a ceremony in Latin accompanied by the St. Mary's Keota choir. More than a dozen other priests were present, including Father Jacobsmeier of Riverside and Father Peter Stahl of Richmond.

The new St. Joseph's Church was dedicated on June 26, 1913 by Bishop James Davis of the Diocese of Davenport, in the presence of more than 1,000 people. The church was first served for around a year by Rev. N.J. Peiffer, as a mission from St. Peter's Church in Buffalo, Iowa, and then Fr. Lambert Heinen from Keota.

From 1918 to 1925, Rev. James S. Peters was pastor of St. Joseph's, as well as Sacred Heart Parish in Kinross (est. 1905, and the location of the rectory) and St. Patrick's Church, three miles north of Kinross. (St. Patrick's, sometimes referred to as Little Creek, or Liberty Church, was a small, wood-frame mission church, est. 1875; it closed in 1964). This arrangement continued with Rev. Leo Kerrigan (1925-1926); Rev. William Schmidt (1926-1928); Rev. Thomas L. Wolfe (1928-1933); Rev. John Manning (1934-1937); and Rev. Daniel C. Browne (1937-1940).

Father Leo V. Kuebrich, a native of Cosgrove, was the longest-serving pastor of St. Joseph's (with Kinross and Liberty), for eighteen years: 1940-1958. During his pastorship, church attendance grew steadily to twenty families, as did the Wellman population, which reached more than one thousand by 1960. St. Joseph's needed modern updates (there were no restrooms), but there didn't seem to be any easy way to enlarge the original church building, nearly fifty years old. In 1958, Fr. Kuebrich was transferred to Grinnell.

The needed new church was built under the gregarious Rev. Martin B. Manning (brother of the earlier Rev. John Manning), born and educated in Ireland and pastor of St. Joseph's from 1958 to 1969. Dr. Jay and LaVera Miller donated more than an acre of land in the new development of Maplewood Park, overlooking the Wellman golf course (est. 1928). Then, parishioner Howard Greiner set things in motion.

According to his memoir, *Flying High in Iowa* (1999), Greiner, an entrepreneur, builder, and pilot, had been impressed by a new church (St. Michael) he attended in Kahoka, Missouri in 1960. "(I) saw this nice church that they had built there and saw no reason we could not do that at Wellman. So I loaded up Father Manning and two other church members in the airplane, and took them to look at this church in Kahoka." Photos of St. Michael's interior (next page) show very strong similarities in design.




Twins! (Or perhaps *brother* churches.) The design for St. Joseph's Church (left) was clearly *very strongly* influenced by the design of St. Michael's Church in Kahoka, Missouri (right), visited by Howard Greiner and Father Manning in 1960. Kahoka is in the northeast corner of Missouri. *(St. Michael's Church)*

That fall of 1960, Greiner planned the design of the church, obtained estimates for local brick, carpentry, and electrical work, and secured donated materials, including from Wellman Lumber and his own concrete company.

Fundraising began in early 1961, led by a committee headed by Dr. Miller, Greiner, and Louis Kehoe. Pledges from parishioners of $39,000, plus money already saved from church suppers and earlier donations, were enough to cover the total $51,000 in construction costs (equivalent to more than half a million dollars today).

But that reasonable cost was possible only because St. Joseph's parishioners largely built the church with their own hands: physically laboring for the glory of God and the benefit of their community. According to Father Manning, "almost every able-bodied man in the congregation helped in the construction… some contributed an almost unbelievable amount of time and discovered new talents in the process." Greiner stated: "The men of the parish always showed up when we needed them… worked hard, and nobody ever questioned what we were building." The monetary value of the volunteer labor was estimated at $40,000 (over $400,000 today).

Despite the mostly non-professional labor, construction took only one year: ground was broken on June 26, 1961, and the new church was dedicated exactly one year later on June 26, 1962—exactly 50 years to the day after the 1912 dedication of the first St. Joseph's Church.

The church was constructed of brick and concrete block with stone facing in front, 80 feet long and 40 feet wide; full basement with complete kitchen. It was built in the mid-century modern (MCM) style of architecture: with wide expanses, relatively low roofs, open interior layouts, and clean lines without excessive decorative embellishments.

The four prominent interior structural arched beams are particularly characteristic of the MCM style. They are made from glulam, or glued laminated timber, a material first widely used in the US during World War II when steel was in short supply. Less expensive and as strong and fireproof as steel beams, glulam can span huge distances, is far more durable than regular wood timbers, and can be formed into attractive curved arches like those in St. Joseph's Church. The glulam beams contribute a warm, natural, and very modern beauty to our worship space.

The church design is remarkably sophisticated in its simplicity for plans not prepared by a architect (although it's possible the manufacturer of the Kahoka church's glulam beams offered church architectural plans that used their timber to encourage its use). The design seems to have anticipated the simplification of church design encouraged by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

After Fr. Manning, St. Joseph's and Sacred Heart, Kinross (where the rectory was still located, and where religious education classes were held) were served by Rev. Francis J. Lenoch (1969-1970); Rev. Harry Linnenbrink (1970-1976); Rev. Thomas J. Spiegel (1976-1982); and Rev. Nicholas Adam (1982-1988). In 1984, Fr. Adam was also assigned Holy Trinity Church in Richmond, in addition to St. Joseph's and Sacred Heart, Kinross, and after that, priests began to reside at the Richmond rectory.



An early color photo of the new St. Joseph's Church, soon after its construction in 1961. ***(Wellman Heritage Museum)***

Father Richard Okumu, who had narrowly escaped Uganda's murderous civil war, served from 1988 to 1990. He was replaced by Rev. Scott Lemaster (1990-1998); followed by Rev. Mark Swanson in 1998.



Sacred Heart Church in Kinross church closed in 1996, and Father Swanson in 1999 also took on the pastorship of St. Mary's Church in Riverside, the arrangement of our three churches of today. After Father Swanson's tragic death in 2001, the Rev. Rich Adam (Fr. Nick's brother) led our three churches. In 2011, Father Marty Goetz served for a year; and then Rev. David Brownfield, a cerebral man of advanced degrees, served our three churches from 2012 to 2018, the year Father Bill Roush arrived. Father Ben Snyder became our pastor in July 2025.

In 1978, four classrooms and a large open room were added in the basement of St. Joseph's; in 2003, the kitchen was remodeled and an accessible entrance was added; and in 2012, the vestibule was enlarged and remodeled with new restrooms. In 2001, after the statue of St. Joseph that stands in front of the bell niche was stolen by vandals, it was replaced by the children of Howard and Lois Greiner. In July 2021, St. Joseph's Church, St. Mary's Church in Riverside, and Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Richmond formally combined into Holy Family Parish.

God willing, St. Joseph's Church will continue to be an oasis for the small but devoted population of Catholics in Wellman: a church built by the willing and generous labor of longtime parishioners, a parish community that has endured for 114 years.

