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**Neighborhood Theology Lessons:  
Those Pesky Lutherans**

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence  
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*St. Matthew, just a block away from St. Andrew, looked like a regular church to us kids.*

Once we neighborhood kids in Erie, Pennsylvania, had progressed beyond fourth grade at St. Andrew School, our religion classes became more practical and focused. The sisters were our regular instructors but occasionally, there was a visit from a theological “heavy hitter,” one of the parish priests who was introduced as an expert theologian. According to the gentle sisters of St Joseph, regular instructors in matters of catechism memorization, the priests had extensive academic experiences in matters of advanced theological history and comparative religions. They had been to actual out-of-town universities and studied under the spiritual direction of real professors. There were hushed tones when “Father” entered the classroom and took his esteemed position in a comfortable chair at the head of the room. We kids were expected to sit in quiet admiration. Or else.

There was often a general theme within Father’s discussions, and it was far more worldly than Sister’s admonitions to memorize the Baltimore Catechism. He spoke of frightening attempts to lure us away from our faith; attempts that would come from close-by and seemingly “innocent” sources. Often from friends, neighbors, even relatives. We had to be strong. To resist. “Forces of evil are all around us,” Father muttered, as he sipped the cup of coffee and munched the cookies that Sister had prepared for him while us kids sat drooling.

“For example,” he stated, “right down the street there is a church that looks quite like St. Andrew, made from the same kind of stone. Named after a saint, just like St. Andrew. But don’t be fooled. It is not a Catholic church. It is not real.” He became increasingly agitated as he described the “axis of ongoing evil” that lurked only a block away, disguised as an ordinary church. “Lutherans,” he continued, standing as he almost yelled the words, “cannot be trusted. Stay away from them. They will be trying to trick you into going to their church. Whatever you do, never go inside that place.”

That strange introduction soon led to an overly detailed discussion of the Protestant Reform movement, complete with the story of Martin Luther, including his academic history, which include receiving a doctorate in theology. He continued with Luther’s problems with the pope and the Catholic Church — all the topics that resonated with a room full of children wondering about how much longer it would be before they would be released from the bondage of bolted-down wooden desks with ink wells.

Father may have been a theological expert, but he had obviously never taken Psychology 101. If he had, he would have known better than to tell a bunch of 12-year olds never to do something. Anything! When we left school that day, we walked home on West Seventh Street instead of West Sixth so that we could take a look. We had never paid attention before, but there at the corner of Seventh and

Cascade streets, just a short city block from St. Andrew and just like Father had said, was the alleged enemy church, St. Matthew's.



*Inside St. Matthew's Lutheran Church*

Sizing up the allegedly frightening place, we decided to have a look. Several of us stepped up to the front door, pushed and looked at each other when it opened. Why not? St. Andrew would have been open too. Without considering the cosmic consequences of our actions, we walked in where we found pews, an altar, hymn books, and stained-glass windows. Were we committing a sin? Was it mortal or venial? Were we taking preliminary steps on the road to hell?

A pleasant voice startled us as a middle-aged couple approached from the front of the church and welcomed us. The man explained that he was the pastor of St. Matthew and that the lady who accompanied him was his wife. They asked why we were visiting and wondered if they could give us some snacks. Before we knew what was happening, they had escorted us through the church and into a social hall where the pastor's wife opened a giant refrigerator from which she extracted cookies and fruit juice. In minutes, we were sitting at a long table telling them that we had learned about St. Matthew's at school earlier that day. We did not reveal the details of the scary warning, just that we were curious. When we told the nice couple what grade we were in, they began to rattle off the names of boys and girls who were our age and attended St. Matthew. They asked if we knew them, and we did. We left St. Matthew confused. It seemed like a regular church. Several of our friends attended on a regular basis. They went to public school, but we played with them in the neighborhoods, and they were nice kids. How could it have been a bad place? Were we being tricked?

Resolving to keep our ill-advised field trip on the down-low we muddled through the next few days, wondering if we had been victims of a seditious Lutheran plot to convince us that St. Matthew was an innocent place; an obvious evil strategy fueled by cookies and juice.

A few days later, we were hanging out at a friend's house when we blurted out our story. The guilt was apparently too overwhelming to contain. My friend's dad was not a theologian, but he was a catholic who regularly attended St. Andrew. He worked at AMSCO as an assembler and had a high school education as opposed to a college degree in theology. When we revealed our concerns and guilt, he bent over laughing. Summoning his wife, he narrated the entire story of our lesson from St. Andrew School and the dire warnings that had been issued. Then he paused for a moment and offered a reasonable explanation, which was a less-than-theological premise that made a lot of sense.

"Think about Fords and Chevrolets," he offered. "What if there were competing car dealers located just a block from each other. What would the Ford salesman tell people about the Chevrolet dealer?" he asked. "Think of the priest who told you that story as a car salesman, and St. Andrew as a dealership. Imagine the Catholic Church as a big organization, like General Motors, which is trying to hang onto its customers. Think of yourselves as customers."

Thanks to the revelations of an AMSCO assembler-theologian, my understanding of religion made a quantum leap that day.

Time marches on. St. Matthew closed several years ago, a victim of demographics, changing neighborhood dynamics, and a broad social shift in attendance at traditional churches. St. Andrew has not fared much better. Its school closed several years ago, and the Erie Catholic Diocese is currently smuggling with a decision to shutter the church, as well.

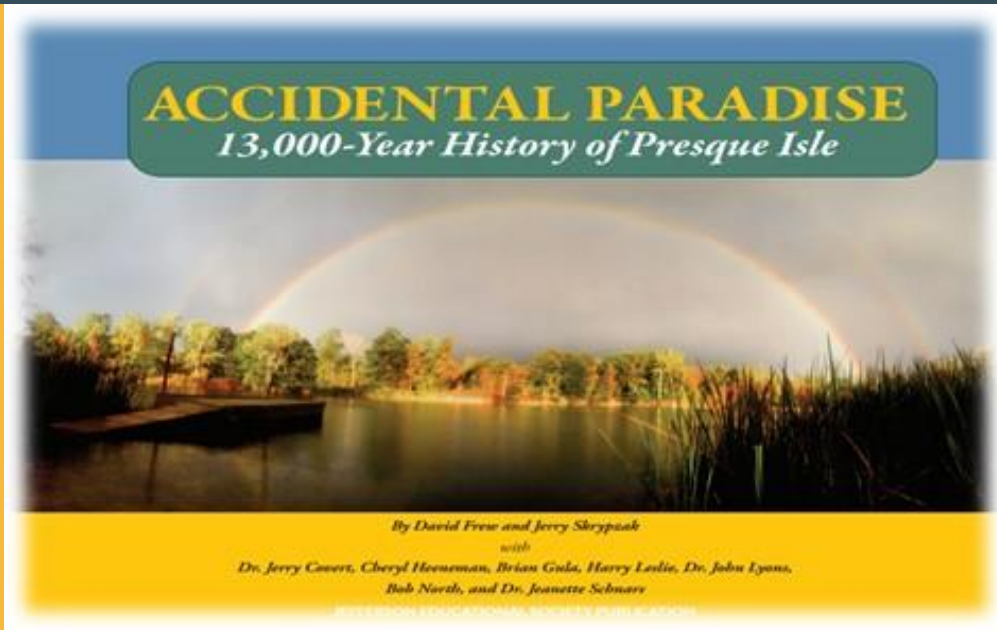
I miss the "good old days" when I could go from a scary theology lesson, to wandering into a Lutheran church, only to be absolved by an assembly line worker from AMSCO. I also miss AMSCO.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.*



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