History of St. John the Baptist Parish.
50th Anniversary 1926-1976 of St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, Dearborn, MI, p. 17-20. CAP at Orchard Lake.

When nine men met at the home of Joseph Bartos of 3902 Jim Daly, composed of Messrs. Joseph Bartos, Albin Bartos, Thomas Niemczewski, Frank Niemiec, Paul Waske, Gielarzyn, Szydlowski, F. Pietrowski and John Lukasiewicz to discuss the possibility of bringing a church to this rural area of Wayne County fifty years ago, they could hardly have had an idea that their discussion would result in the St. John's community we have today. But as we built our church and our school and came to know each other, this is what came to be.

This area, like so many in the metropolitan Detroit area, grew up hand in hand with the Roman Catholic Church. Cadillac built St. Anne's Church when he founded Detroit as Fort Pontchartrain in 1701. Throughout the region, as areas became settled, Catholics built churches to maintain their religious and cultural traditions. The Poles who settled in the Westwood area of Dearborn Township had that same desire for a cohesive religious community.

These Poles came to Dearborn Township with the opening of the Ford Plant in River Rouge shortly after the end of World War I.

In those "Roaring Twenties" the auto industry boomed and times were good. Workers moved away from the city to be close to their place of employment. But many of the newcomers to this area found the trip to Sacred Heart in Dearborn, the nearest church at that time, a long and difficult one over poor country roads. Others found the language difficult to understand. So it was that at the home of Mr. Joseph Bartos, those nine men drew up a petition to the Chancery seeking a church and a Polish-speaking priest for this growing region of Dearborn Township.

The bishop moved quickly on their request and assigned Fr. Bona from Melvindale to meet the needs of the Polish community. The first Mass was held outside on one chilly, wintry day in 1926.

Graciously, the Pokrzewnicki family offered their home as a location for Mass each Sunday until the first church was built.

The early parishioners gave generously of their time and materials as they worked swiftly. And so it was very soon thereafter that they erected the first church of the parish. Mr. Lukasiewicz, one of the nine men who had petitioned for a church, donated twelve lots for use as parish property. Fr. Bona contributed $600 toward construction of the church. On April 4, 1926, about 60 persons proudly attended the first Mass held in the new church. The following week the first
Baptism was performed. Fr. Bona celebrated the first marriage ceremony in the church in May and performed the first funeral Mass in October. Documents show that the parish was officially placed under the patronage of St. John the Baptist on June 4, 1926.

That September the first classes were held when the church doubled as a school during the week. The first class graduated the following June.

Fr. Bona left in the early part of 1927 and was replaced by Fr. John Hewelt. Later that year, the first financial report was filed and the first parish picnic was held. The fledgling parish was on its way.

Fr. Hewelt received permission from the Chancery to build a school in October of 1923. The parish, ready with plans, again moved ahead rapidly and completed construction of the school the following spring. The school, finished on June 23, 1929, was already staffed with three sisters from the Order of St. Francis of Sylvania, Ohio. The first convent was a home across the street from the church.

Students enrolled in the new school in September of 1929. Later that month, the community celebrated the first registered Communion and Confirmation rites. Thirty-two boys and twenty-five girls received First Holy Communion and were also confirmed.

A month later, tragedy struck the nation when the stock market crashed. Many men in the area soon lost employment as industry slowed down. But the strong community commitment that built St. John’s, continued. People responded as generously then as they had before the crash. In 1930, the parish built a convent for the teaching sisters and began a collection to build a rectory. Early that year, Fr. Hewelt left and Fr. John Bartkowiak was named the first resident pastor.

The church settled down now with its first full time pastor, and a school and a convent already built. In the fall of 1931, a new school wing was added and the teaching staff was enlarged with the change to the teaching Sisters of St. Joseph from Garfield Heights, Ohio. With the hard times, funds for the rectory came slowly, but the building was completed in 1934 with help from many parishioners. After living in a house next door to the sisters during the first three years at St. John’s and living in the school for another, Fr. Bartkowiak finally had a place that he could call home. He stayed in the rectory until he left St. John's in 1939. Fr. Theodore F. Kowalewski was appointed in his place.

And then, with increased industrialization at the start of World War II, the community began to grow again and a need arose for another priest. Fr. Edward Skrocki, from St. Mary's College in Orchard Lake, began to assist Fr. Kowalewski on weekends. In March of 1945, Fr. Francis Szaniawski was appointed St. John's first resident pastor. Fr. Skrocki left later that year and was replaced by Fr. Michael Koltuniak for the weekend help.

After the war, the boom continued. Young men returning from the service found this community, with a well established Catholic Church and school, an ideal place in which to settle. St. John's grew even more rapidly. In 1948, a new convent was purchased for the sisters. The young
people moving into the community brought young children with them. The school again was too small. With the permission of

His Eminence, Edward Cardinal Mooney, ground was broken for a new school on May 2, 1948. The modern facility was completed in record time, but not quite soon enough for the opening of school that September. The Archbishop blessed the new facility on October 17, 1948.

School enrollment kept booming and the parish kept growing, but not without change. In 1950, Fr. Francis Szaniawski left as assistant pastor and was replaced by Fr. Eugene Kijek.

A Solemn Jubilee Mass the next year marked the first twenty-five years of St. John’s service to this community. Fr. Kijek left the following year and was replaced by Fr. Leo L. Kulinski.

Meanwhile, the beautiful white frame church that served so well for so many years proved inadequate for the needs of the rapidly growing parish. Just as the area’s population explosion resulted in a need for a bigger school building, the time had come to build a bigger church. Construction began in May 1954 on the new church. His Eminence Edward Cardinal Mooney blessed the new structure on October 27, 1955.

In 1957, Fr. Leo L. Kulinski left St. John’s and was replaced by a new assistant pastor, Fr. Joseph Matlenga. Fr. Matlenga’s stay was short: both he and Fr. Kowalewski left the next year and St. John’s received a new pastor, Fr. Mitchell Witkowski, and a new assistant pastor, Fr. Francis Wahowiak. In 1962, Fr. Koltuniak left as assistant pastor and was replaced by Fr. Anthony Kosnik. The following year, Fr. Wahowiak left and was replaced by Fr. Jerome Swierzb.

With the Vatican II Council in 1963 came new ways in the church. In 1969, a steering committee was formed to draft the outline for a parish council. Later that year, on November 23, the parish was saddened by the death of Fr. Mitchell Witkowski.

Fr. Jerome Swierzb, the assistant pastor, performed the duties of pastor until February 18, 1970, when Fr. Joseph Karasiewicz was appointed pastor. Within a week Fr. Jerome left for another appointment, and was not replaced.

That year marked the end of the construction period at St. John’s. A new baptismal font, donated by the Rosary Altar Society was dedicated early in February. Later that year, the first parish council was held and the first parish council officers were sworn in in December.

On sick leave from his diocese of Marquette, Fr. John Chrobak took up residence at St. John's on August 5, 1970, and performed the duties of an assistant pastor until August 9, 1973, when he was recalled by his bishop.

St. John’s celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1976, and continues to grow in its life in Christ.