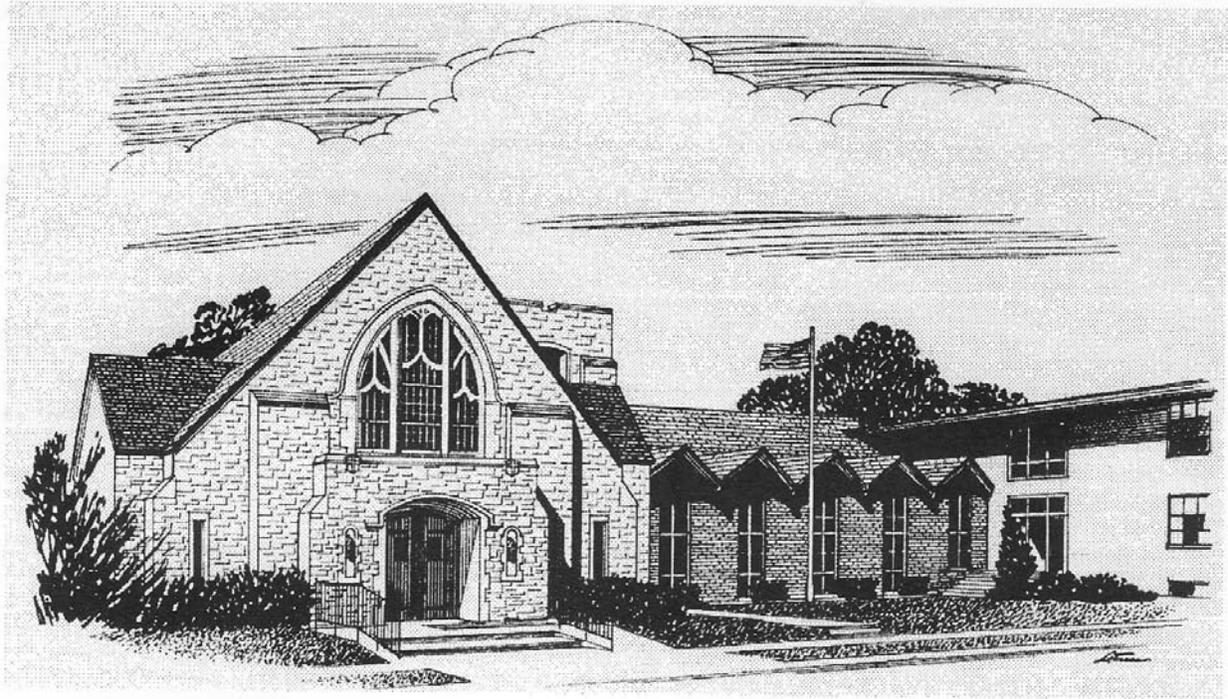


100th Anniversary of Bethlehem Lutheran Church



A Brief History of Bethlehem Lutheran Congregation

A glimpse into the past, from the beginning of Bethlehem Congregation to the present day, reveals the guidance and blessing of our Heavenly Father. In this brief history, not the merits, sacrifices, and achievements of men are to be extolled, but solely the mercy of our God.

The beginning of our Lutheran Church work in River Grove dates back to the year 1896, when



Rev. Emil Zapf

the first Lutheran services were held in this area. Prior to this time, the Lutheran Christians living in and near River Grove would on Sunday mornings wend their way to Harlem (now known as Forest Park), to attend the services of Pastor Grosze. In the month of June, 1896, the neighboring pastor, the Rev. Emil Zapf, pastor of St. Paul's Congregation, Melrose Park, invited the Christians in this vicinity to attend the service to be conducted in the public school building on Thatcher Avenue. The village had been canvassed by Pastor Zapf, and a number of souls accepted the invitation to hear the preaching of the saving Gospel of Jesus. For two years, services were conducted in this manner, when the small group of Christians, under the guidance of Pastor Zapf, decided to organize a congregation and name it Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of River Grove.

On May 8, 1898, a small group of men gathered for this purpose. They trusted in the Lord, and He did not put them to shame. A constitution was read and unanimously accepted. This document was signed by the following charter members: Johann Boeldt, Heinrich Boeldt, Adam

Eltman, Wilhelm Falkenhagen, Friedrich Ofe, Johann Pfeiffer, Fritz Seeman, Heinrich Karsten, Johann Esch, Joachim Burmeister, Heinrich Esch, and Johann Schultz. The faithful few next sought a site upon which to erect a church building. The present site was donated to the congregation by Mrs. Carey, and is to be property of the congregation so long as it is used for religious and church purposes.



On October 15, 1898, the congregation held its first service in which they as a congregation sponsored the Lord's Supper. Following the service, they organized and decided to erect a church building, the cost not to exceed \$2,000.00. The Messrs, C. Frick, H. Karsten, and F. Ofe were appointed a committee to solicit the necessary funds. During July of 1899 the contract to build a church was given to Mr. W. Haase of Maywood for the sum of \$1,675.00. It was then decided to add a sacristy to the church at a cost of \$325.00. This sacristy was to be used temporarily for the education of the children in the congregation; the Messrs, C. Frick, F. Ofe, and H. Karsten were chosen to serve the congregation as trustees, and later the Messrs. W. Falkenhagen and T. Seeman were appointed as deacons.

Laboring faithfully for the cause of Christ and His Church in this vicinity, the members looked forward with great joy to the day of their church dedication. Donations of various kinds had been received, that the church might be fairly complete. The evening prior to the dedication, Mr. Henry Karsten tolled the bell which had been donated by Mr. Carl Frick. It is the same bell that still rings from our bell tower. Chairs for the vestry and church had been donated by Mr. Joachim Burmeister. On the third Sunday of October 1899 Bethlehem congregation was privileged to dedicate its first house of worship to the service of the Triune God. The neighboring congregations had been invited to attend, and cheerfully responded to rejoice with the members of Bethlehem. Three services were conducted. Pastor Zapf officiated in the German morning service, Pastor Ad. W. Bartling of St. Paul's Church, Austin, conducted the German afternoon service, and Pastor K. Schmidt delivered the message in the English evening service.

When Bethlehem Congregation was first established, River Grove was no more than a landmark. There were no paved streets and sidewalks, no running water, no sewer system. Members had to come to evening services carrying storm lanterns to find their way to church. Most of the members were farmers who had to travel quite a distance to get to church. They came by way of horse and buggy.

At first all services were held in German, the language our founding fathers all spoke. It was common among many early German settlers in this country to believe that one could not properly understand theology in the crude English language and that to study theology one needed to know German. This is why German was taught for many years in our school after the

majority of the people were English speaking. Many German people who sent their children to the public school would have them come to our school to learn German. All of the meetings of the church were held in German until the first English meeting March 9, 1927.

The first English service was held on November, 1904. These services were held once a month. English did not become the dominate language of most German Lutheran churches until the beginning of World War I. Bethlehem continued its German services well after that.

Realizing the many duties involved upon a pastor serving two congregations, and desiring to establish a Christian day-school in their midst, the congregation considered the advisability of calling a resident pastor, who could also serve in the school until such a time as a permanent teacher might be called. Pastor Zapf had been active in obtaining subscriptions for the maintenance of a candidate, a Seminary graduate. Soon afterward Pastor Zapf was happy to announce to his congregation that he obtained \$350.00 through subscriptions for this purpose. The congregation, with a fine spirit of helpfulness, voted the necessary \$70.00 to this amount and \$420.00 was the new pastor's salary for the year, average \$35.00 per month.

On May 3, 1900, the congregation decided to call a candidate. The call was sent to the Allocation Committee assembled in St. Louis, Mo., and they assigned the call to Candidate Fred Starke. Candidate Starke accepted the call, and on August 12, 1900, was ordained and installed into the ministry and Bethlehem congregation by Pastor Emil Zapf.

Pastor Starke came with the determination to establish a day-school and conducted his classes in the sacristy of the church, where a number of two-seated benches had been placed in readiness. The first school sessions of Bethlehem congregation were held commencing the third week of September, 1900. Fifteen children responded to the roll call, and by Christmas of that year twenty-three had enrolled. The following year, the enrollment increased to such an extent that the congregation felt the necessity of erecting a separate school building. The contract to build a school was given to Mr. Haase of Maywood for the amount of \$850.00, and was built during the summer months of 1901. The following October, Bethlehem dedicated its new school building. Pastor Grosze of Harlem (Forest Park) delivered the dedicatory sermon.



Pastor Starke served the congregation for four years, during which time he labored most faithfully for the establishment of a Christian day-school. Pastor John A. Schert was called as his successor. He was installed on September 18, 1904, and served the congregation for three and one-half years, and then accepted a call to another congregation. Pastor Otto Gurschke served the congregation from June, 1908 until May, 1911. The current parsonage was built for Pastor Gurschke and his family in November, 1908. It was built for a cost of \$2,197. It still serves as the church parsonage. In March, 1909, a water well was dug. It is assumed that up to that point water was taken from the nearby DesPlaines River. Bethlehem's next pastor was Pastor Carl Eissfeldt, who had charge of the congregation almost nine years. During Pastor Eissfeldt's ministry the Young Peoples Society Hall (Y.P.S. Hall), which stood where the current church stands, was built for the young people of the congregation and recreational facilities. The hall also served many Lutheran congregations in Chicago when they came "out to the country" for their church picnics.

Pastor Walter H. Lippmann served from September 1919 to April 10, 1955, making him Bethlehem's longest serving pastor. He was installed to serve the congregation as pastor and teacher on September 13, 1919, by Pastor Israel of Hanson Park. For six years Pastor Lippmann taught in the day-school, when ill health forced him to discontinue teaching. The congregation decided in the fall of 1925, with the help of the Mission Board of our Northern Illinois District, to call a permanent teacher. The call was extended to Mr. H. G. Ahrens.



Rev. Walter Lippmann

In the year 1927, because of necessary improvements, the congregation was obliged to remodel its church building, placing a basement beneath the structure, and installing lavatories and a central heating plant (coal furnace). The church received new stained-glass windows; a one-manual pipe organ, and an apse or

altar niche was added to the church at this time containing a painting of the town of Bethlehem. The newly decorated and renovated church was rededicated to the service of the Triune God on December 4, 1927. In 1934 the school had grown to 54 students. After a year of study and discussion it was decided the 54 students in a one room school house was too much to expect from one teacher so in 1935 they called their second teacher. The school was the recipient of a wooden flag pole from the 1932 Chicago World's Fair. The flag pole is still in use in front of our school. [It was recently refurbished as part of Mike Kilgore's Eagle Scout



Church with the remodeled front and basement

project.]



Inside of the Church during a wedding, 1949

By the Fortieth Anniversary of the congregation in 1938 the congregation had grown to the point that they realize they would have to expand, so they began a building fund. Twelve years later in 1950 the congregation finalized plans and broke ground for a new church on Easter Sunday of that year. Our present house of worship was dedicated on November 4th, 1951. The guest book stand in the narthex of our church is the lectern from the old church. The branch candelabra and the two pews in the rear of the balcony were brought from the original church building and continue to



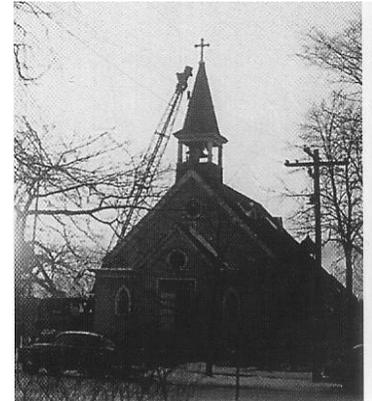
Cornerstone Ceremony, 1951

serve God's people. Two large floor candelabra from the first church are used for the Christmas Eve service. A three dimensional representation of the Lord's Supper that was in the

altar of the old church has been placed in front of the balcony.



For the next nine years the old church building would serve as room for our growing school. In 1952 Howard Suhr was called to teach at Bethlehem. He would serve until his retirement in 1985. He was our longest serving teacher and remains an active member of Bethlehem to this day. [Howard passed away and joined our Lord in 2008. His wife, Linda, joined him three months later].



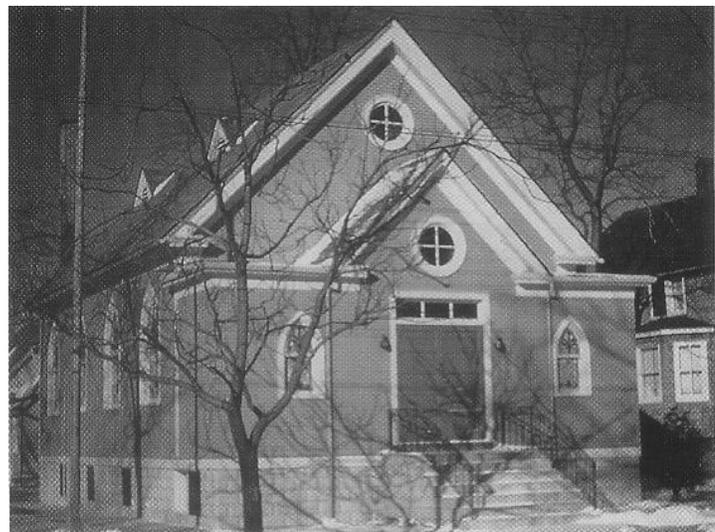
Removal of steeple when the Church was converted into classroom space, 1950



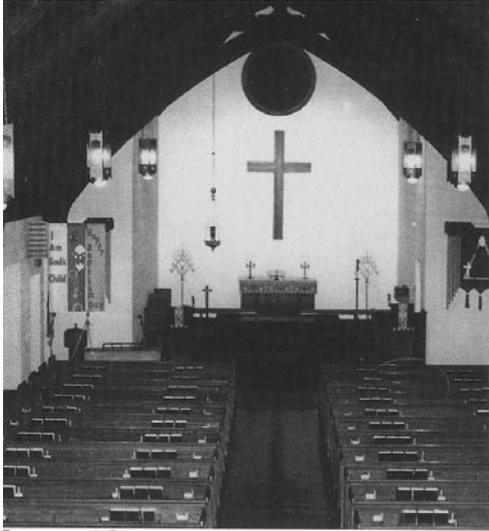
Original One-Room Schoolhouse, 1960

In 1960 Bethlehem opened its present school facility. The school now offers a full program for children that begins with three year olds and goes through the eighth grade as well as a before and after school program. The school has been one of the central foci of Bethlehem's ministry to the community throughout its history. As part of this 100th Anniversary there are two children descended from Johann Schultz who represent the fifth consecutive generation of children in our school.

Pastor A.F. Schroeder served from 1955-1963. It was during his tenure that the current school building was built. Pastor Martin Behling served from 1963-1973. In 1971 the original pipe organ which was in disrepair was replaced by an Allen computerize organ. The organ, which still serves us today, was the first computerized organ west of the Appalachians. In the years 1974-1986, Bethlehem did not have a regularly called pastor. During the first part of this period the congregation was served by Pastor James Schelling of Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church in Franklin Park. During the latter half of the period it was served by several different interim Pastors. These included Pastor Gary Bertels, Pastor Robert Gonzalez, and Vicar Robert Williamson.



A view of the Church after being remodeled into a classroom building



Interior of Church, 1986

In 1986 the congregation called Pastor Roger Gallup from the Ft. Wayne Seminary. He serves up to the present day. During the long period of time in which Bethlehem did not have a full time pastor the membership saw steady decreases. Since once again having a full time pastor Bethlehem has seen its average Sunday morning worship attendance rise from 92 in 1986 to its current level of about 150. [Current level is level at 100]

In 1992 the congregation began a series of steps to renovate the church when the balcony rail was moved to fill in the space occupied by the pipe organ that had been removed many years before. In 1995 the old chimes in the church were replaced with a Schumerich electronic carillon. It plays music twice a day and sounds the hour toll. It can also be used for the call to

worship bell and to play music in church. In 1996 a two year process was undertaken to renovate the chancel area of the church. With most of the work being done with volunteer labor the chancel was extended out into the nave and the communion rail was placed in front of the pulpit and lectern at ground level. This removed the necessity of climbing stairs when participating in the Lord's Supper which was important for many of our members with mobility problems. The old carpet was replaced with Italian ceramic flooring that both beautified the altar and improved the acoustics of the church. Also, during the first year of the project new wiring and microphones for the sound system were installed. In the second year new oak panels were built and installed in the chancel and the cross was giving a "framed" background and was back lighted. New lighting was also installed.

In 1997 the congregation began a process of restoration and improvement of the original stain glass windows of the 1950 church building. The project is now half complete. Those that have been completed are pictured on the cover of this booklet. In the process the windows outside are being removed and completely rebuilt with new lead and installation of a protective and energy efficient cover on the outside. Also, Pastor Gallup has designed color and symbols that are being added. To this point all of the windows on the south side of the church have been completed.



The windows revolve around the birth of Christ theme. They begin in the southeast corner of the nave with the six windows on the south wall and the one behind the organ bench reflecting the "O" Antiphons. The "O" Antiphons have been described as the jewels of the Advent season. They perfectly express the theology of Advent: that the salvation, redemption, justice, and righteousness of God and made manifest in Emmanuel – God With Us – in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ who accomplishes our salvation. They grow out of the Old Testament prophecies that looked forward to the birth of Christ. [See Stained Glass Windows at Bethlehem]