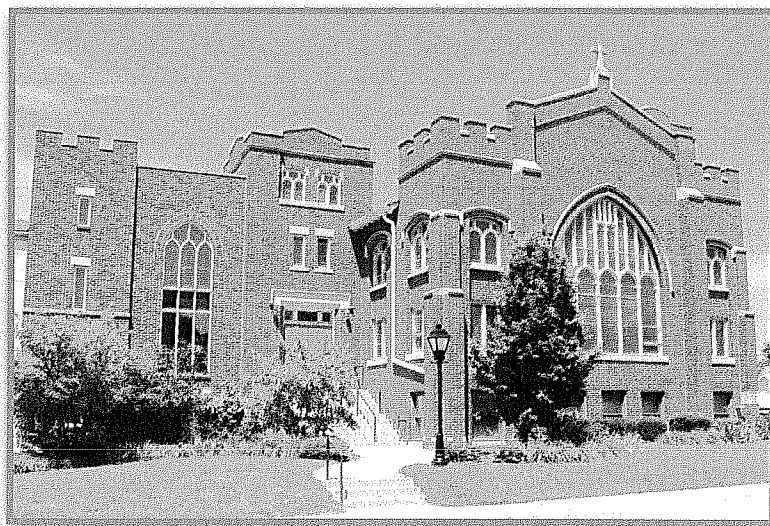


The Oldest Church in the WELS: A History of Saint Paul's in Columbus, OH



Church History 3031
Tim Wilkens
December 8, 2009

The pictures on the cover page are as follows:

Top Left – St. Paul’s rebuilt church after the fire (1958)

Top Right – St. Paul’s original building in its current location (1918)

Bottom – St. Paul’s in its current place and time (2009)

Note: Much of the history and historical facts of this paper, that are not cited, are adapted from Story of St. Paul’s 1821-1998. This reference is found in the Bibliography on page 10.

If you were to ask a group of people, who had a fairly decent knowledge of the history of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, what the oldest congregation in the WELS is, you might get a few different answers. Some might point to the three old Milwaukee churches: Grace, Salem, or St. John's. A few might point you back to the roots of David's Star in Jackson, WI. However, most would probably point you even earlier than that to Ann Arbor, MI and the formation of Salem. While maybe you could make an argument for all of these churches in some way, none of them really hold the position of the oldest church in the WELS. That honor belongs to St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Columbus, OH. This paper will give a history of this church as it pertains to St. Paul's becoming the oldest church in the WELS.

Twenty years prior to the birth of Salem in Ann Arbor, the very first Lutheran service took place in the city of Columbus, OH. Seven years later land was purchased and a church building was built at the site of what is today the heart of downtown Columbus, just two blocks south of the state of Ohio's capitol building. Columbus, which now has a population of around 750,000, was at this time a village of about 500. Twenty-five of those 500 made up the pastor and twenty-four members of this church that would later be known as St. Paul's, who signed a declaration on August 6, 1821. This is the date that will subsequently be used to mark St. Paul's church anniversaries and thus this was the birth of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. However, this was not its original name. It's first name would be "The High German Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed St. Paul's Church of Columbus, OH" as a member of the

“General Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Preachers in Ohio and the Adjacent States” by virtue of their pastor, Reverend Charles Henkel, who was assigned to them by this church body.

After a few years of service, Rev. Henkel accepted a call to serve elsewhere. This left St. Paul’s without a pastor until 1832, which was incidentally when the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary moved from Canton to Columbus.¹ For the next eleven years, St. Paul’s would be served by various professors of that seminary. During this time, a number of different denominations were worshipping at St. Paul’s simply because it was the only German speaking, protestant church in Columbus. Because of the differences between these denominations, the church decided to reorganize by drawing up a new constitution in 1839. Their name was changed to “United Lutheran and Reformed Congregation of St. Paul’s Church in Columbus.” This reorganization led to a logical and necessary division among the members of the church. “One group, the “free thinkers” founded the Independent Protestant Church... A second group founded a German Methodist Church..., a third English group remained independent ..., and the fourth group remained with St. Paul’s and committed the pastor “to preach the Gospel according to the Lutheran and Reformed faiths.””² (The churches that these three groups started all still exist in some form in Columbus today.)

¹ <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2509>

² [Story of St. Paul’s 1821-1998, page 2](#)

After cleaning house, another division played a role in the history of St. Paul's. This division was the break of the Lutheran Church in Ohio, in 1843-1844, into the English Synod of Ohio and the Joint Synod of Ohio.³ The Joint Synod kept control over the seminary in Columbus, but Professor Schaeffer, who was serving as pastor at St. Paul's, went with the English Synod. Because of this, St. Paul's was again in need of a pastor.

This need led to the calling of seminary student Konrad Mees. Reverend Mees was very instrumental in restructuring St. Paul's synodical ties. He did not completely agree with the teachings and workings of the Joint Synod, and so in 1846, he withdrew from the Synod. The church unanimously followed this departure and became independent as well. In response to this, a large group from St. Paul's left to form Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church, which became a part of the Joint Synod and the home church of the Seminary in Columbus. Trinity still exists today as a member of ELCA and continues to receive former members of St. Paul's as they leave in response to St. Paul's many changes.⁴

Despite these divisions, St. Paul's continued to grow and expand. During their synodical break, they purchased land and began to build a new church building about 1000 feet southwest from their previous location. This new building was dedicated in 1847. Having recently broken from the Joint Synod and now being in a new worship

³<http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=O&word=OHIOANDOTHERSTATES.THEEVANGELICALLUTHERANJOINTSYNODOF>

⁴ Personal experience and informal conversations with St. Paul's members

facility, the congregation decided to redefine its identity by altering its constitution to subscribe to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. This new identity coincided with the formation of a Reformed church in Columbus and led to the title "Reformed" later being removed from St. Paul's name and constitution.

While this confessional identity continued at St. Paul's, their new church building did not last long. Just less than nine years after its dedication, the church caught fire and burned down to ruins. Although this was a setback, St. Paul's rebounded. A year and a day later, they completed the building of the new church in place of the burnt one.

In addition to the break from the Joint Synod to an independent church and the building of a new church building, Rev. Mees had a few other contributions to the shaping of St. Paul's future. In 1875, he added his son, Theophilus Mees, who was a professor at Capital University (a school owned by the Joint Synod of Ohio), as an assistant at St. Paul's. This began St. Paul's relationship with Capital University. In 1880, he led the writing of a new constitution changing the church's name to "The German Evangelical Lutheran Congregation as St. Paul's Church" (note the removal of the word "Reformed"). And he joined the Missouri Synod, but later in his ministry at St. Paul's, he left the Missouri Synod and again grew closer to the Ohio Synod because of the predestination controversy in 1882.

Due to Rev. Mees affiliation with the Ohio Synod when he resigned in 1893, St. Paul's, without a synod of its own, turned to the Ohio synod for a pastor. Later that

year they called Rev. Jacob H. Schneider. Pastor Schneider began to wean the congregation off of the Missouri Synod hymnal as he led them toward the Ohio Synod and its hymnal. Finally after sixty-seven years of being independent, he got them to once again join a synod as they rejoined the Ohio Synod in 1913.

After joining the Ohio synod, St. Paul's once again decided to rebuild and this time to relocate as well. They moved about a mile south to the corner of Stewart and Bruck streets, which is where the church is currently located today. On June 9, 1918 the church building was dedicated and is still the sanctuary of St. Paul's to this day.

After moving into their new location, St. Paul's resumed its close connection with Capital University, which during these years became a part of the American Lutheran Church as a result of the merger between the Buffalo, Iowa, and Ohio Synods. Dr. R. C.H. Lenski of Capital University Seminary preached at St. Paul's for Pastor Schneider's fiftieth anniversary. A vacancy in 1946 was served by Professor Liefeld of Capital University. After the vacancy, they called a graduate of Capital University, Reverend E. J. Katterhenrich, to be their pastor. And after Katterhenrich left the church, Professor (of Capital University) John O. Lang accepted the call to serve St. Paul's. Pastor Lang would be the most influential man involved in bringing St. Paul's into the WELS.

Reverend Lang believed very strongly in the complete truth and inerrancy of the Bible. This conviction led him on more than one occasion to change his synod affiliation. He had grown up in the Missouri Synod, and disappointed many of his mentors when he later decided to break from Missouri to join the ALC and become a

professor at Capital. And his conviction led him after fifteen years at St. Paul's to break from the ALC.⁵

A big upheaval came in 1964 when St. Paul's voted 158 to 39 to leave The American Lutheran Church. For some time there appeared articles in *The Lutheran Standard* and other A.L.C. publications suggesting that the Bible was not absolutely errorless, and that it contained scientific, geographical and historical errors, that the first eleven chapters of Genesis might well be a poetical myth, and that Job and Jonah were not historical characters but mythical characters in parables. It was also suggested that God might well have used the process of evolution in forming man. We sent a letter of protest to the A.L.C. signed by 322 persons. We likewise objected to the membership of the A.L.C. in the World Council of Churches and of many of its boards in similar boards of the National Council of Churches. Dr. Frederic Schiotz, the president of the A.L.C. paid us a visit and tried to answer our questions but gave us no real assurance that anything was being done to reverse these liberal tendencies in the Synod. The final outcome of the vote was that on April 15, 1964, we formally withdrew from the A.L.C by a four to one margin of the congregation. Once again, St. Paul's became an independent congregation.⁶

Because of this, Rev. Lang received much criticism from his peers, and in fact, he had his license as a minister revoked in the city of Columbus by some in the ALC who were very upset with his break.⁷ Nonetheless, his convictions could not coexist with the teachings of the ALC. After leaving the ALC, Rev. Lange joined the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod because he saw them as a confessional and scriptural church body, and because he knew his congregation would have needs from a synod

⁵ Informal conversation with Catherine Lang, wife of Rev. John Lang

⁶ Story of St. Paul's 1821-1998 page 10

⁷ Informal conversation with Catherine Lang, wife of Rev. John Lang

after he was gone. St. Paul's remained independent, but they began a relationship with the WELS in 1965.

In 1974, Rev. Lang died leaving another vacancy. Reverend Keith Roehl, who was a 1966 graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, was serving a congregation in a suburb of Columbus. He filled St. Paul's vacancy and later accepted the call to serve as their full time pastor. Rev. Roehl served the congregation faithfully and worked slowly and gently to bring congregation closer to the WELS. One obstacle in doing this was the church's constitution which still contained references to the ALC. In 1978, St. Paul's began to work on revisions to remove those references from the constitution, and as they did, they also proposed a change to put an end to women voting and holding elected positions in the church. When the congregation met in 1979 to decide on these changes, there were not enough votes to amend the constitution and thus the ALC references were left in the constitution. The lack of supporting votes was due mostly to the issues regarding the roles of women in the church. Rev. Roehl, in hindsight, believed that he may have rushed this vote, and wished he had taken more time to instruct before proposing these changes.⁸ It is likely that St. Paul's joining of the WELS took longer to happen because of this vote.

Despite St. Paul's independence, it took its relationship with the WELS seriously and was grateful for the WELS men who served them. They gave financial support to the WELS. They took part in the training of WELS pastors, receiving many vicars from

⁸ These two sentences come from talks with St. Paul's lay leaders at this time.

the time of Pastor Lang to the present. They also created a large trust fund, the sole purpose of which is to help in the training of men studying to be pastors. This fund continues to grant generous scholarships to men at WLS to this day.

Rev. Roehl died in 1991, but St. Paul's continued to receive pastors from the WELS. Reverend Robert Schumann served the congregation from 1990 to 1994. Pastor Michael Nitz, a former vicar of St. Paul's, served from 1991 to 1997. In 1994, under the leadership of pastor Nitz, St. Paul's once again underwent a review of their constitution, again looking mainly at references to the ALC and doctrinal issues that differed from the WELS. After two years of education and prayerful consideration, the constitution was approved by a ratio of three to one on February 18, 1996. "Thus, St. Paul's chose to maintain itself as an independent congregation that stands in full doctrinal unity and fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod."⁹

In 1997 Pastor Nitz accepted a call out of Columbus and St. Paul's underwent a very long vacancy. This vacancy was served by Reverend Mark Koch, a WELS pastor in Grove City, OH and Reverend Joel Jenswold, a WELS pastor in Powell, OH. Finally Reverend Gary Pieper accepted a call to serve St. Paul's. He was installed on March 5, 2000. Rev. Pieper worked with the church council to see if there was the possibility of St. Paul's joining the WELS. Finally on April 22, 2007, St. Paul's made a request to join WELS.¹⁰ At the summer convention of the Michigan District this application for

⁹ Story of St. Paul's 1821-1998 page 13

¹⁰ See Addenda 1

membership was accepted.¹¹ The request was ultimately ratified at the synod convention later that year.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Columbus, OH now stands as the oldest church in the WELS. It is by no means the longest member of the synod, in fact in the summer of 2007, St. Paul's would have been both the oldest member of the WELS, and yet the newest member of the WELS. Nonetheless, if you go into the Statistical Report of the WELS, you will find Grace, dating back to 1849, you will find Salem in Milwaukee, dating back to 1847, you will find David's Star and St. John's, dating back to 1843, you will even find Salem in Ann Arbor, dating back to 1833, but beginning in 2007, you will now find St. Paul's, which dates back to 1821.¹² This concludes a history of St. Paul's in Columbus, OH, the oldest church in the WELS.

¹¹ See Addenda 2

¹² 2007 WELS Statistical Report (St. Paul's is listed on page 22)

Bibliography

Addenda 1*

Addenda 2**

History of the city of Columbus, capital of Ohio, Volume 2 by Alfred Emory Lee, W.W. Munsell & Co. (online version)

http://books.google.com/books?id=8rECAAAMAAMAJ&pg=PA695&lpg=PA695&dq=ev.+konrad+mees&source=bl&ots=gWt29CqE5T&sig=EgwLVqAoCorM_ZAEe8ePGDMMm34&hl=en&ei=AUIcS5SpLZTElAfn6b3yCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAwQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false

<http://www.lcms.org/ca/www/cyclopedia/02/display.asp?t1=O&word=OHIOANDOTHERSTATES.THEEVANGELICALLUTHERANJOINTSYNODOF>

<http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2509>

Informal conversation with many current members of St. Paul's, including Catherine Lang

Story of St. Paul's 1821-1998 found in 1998 Church Directory of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

WELS Statistical Report 2007 and 2008

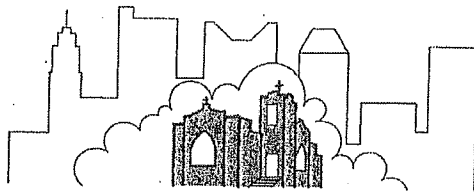
WELS Synod Convention Proceedings 2007

* Addenda 1 is a letter written from St. Paul's to the president of the Michigan Synod requesting membership in the WELS (page 11)

* Addenda 2 is a letter written from President Seifert to St. Paul's receiving them into membership of the WELS (page 12)

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St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church

322 Stewart Avenue • Columbus, Ohio 43206-2726

April 22, 2007

Pastor John C. Seifert, Pres. Michigan District – WELS
907 Mattes Dr.
Midland, MI 48642

Dear President Seifert;

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 322 Stewart Ave., Columbus, Ohio, on April 22, 2007, at a special voters' assembly, voted to request membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

The District's Constitutional Committee has approved St. Paul's Constitution. St. Paul's is currently working on the by-laws, using the synod's model constitution as a guide.

This decision was made with the assurance that the Wisconsin Synod has no legal claims on the property of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

We pray that the Lord bless the Wisconsin Synod and us as we join hands to walk together in the work of the Lord.

Yours in Christ,

William Ratz, President William E. Ratz

James Litterer, Secretary James E. Litterer

Barry Weber, Head Elder Barry Weber

Rev. Gary L. Pieper, Pastor Pastor G. L. Pieper

Proclaiming the Changeless Christ in a Changing City

Addenda 1

Michigan District

Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pastor John C. Seifert, President
907 Mattes Drive
MIDLAND MI 48642-3708

Pastor Paul S Naumann, 1st Vice President
1927 Broadway
BENTON HARBOR MI 49022-6523

Pastor Carl T Otto 2nd Vice President
2745 W Genesee Ave
SAGINAW MI 48602

Pastor James P Seclow, Secretary
3246 Fanone Dr.
PORT HURON MI 48060-2498

17 July 2007

St Paul's Lutheran Church
322 Stewart Ave.
COLUMBUS OH 43206-2726

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

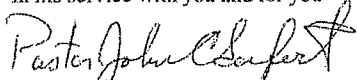
This June our Michigan District Convention met in special session for the 106th time. It was our privilege to meet under the theme "Stand Firm in the Faith." As the delegates from your congregation will be able to tell you, our devotions and worship were based upon portions of 1 Corinthians 16:3, reminding each of us: Be on your guard. Be men of courage. Be strong. Do everything in love.

An important part of the convention was to recognize how the Lord has led you as a congregation to fulfill those words of God.

Our convention rejoiced in the privilege of being able to receive you into membership in the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and therefore into the WELS, as well. It was a great joy to do so based upon your confession and request.

God bless your worship and service to our Savior.

In his service with you and for you


Pastor John C. Seifert, President
Michigan District - WELS