

Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin

Aaron Winkelman
CH 3031
13 December 2004

“We the members of Bethany, brothers and sisters through our Lord Jesus and His ambassadors, have as our mission to spread the good news of Jesus as Savior to all people. Using only His holy Word, the inerrant and inspired Scriptures, we seek to prepare God’s people for works of joyful service so that the body of Christ may be enlarged and built up. To this end we pray for the guidance of the Holy Ghost, that through study of God’s Word we may reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. May Bethany be a house of God, a place to be strengthened with the Gospel as we live on toward glory.¹”

Chances are, there are many mission statements of various churches that sound a lot like the one above. Chances are, there are many churches like Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Chances are, you have heard their story before, not because their story is unique; not because their story is that of a trendsetter; not because their story is dramatic. And yet, the story of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church is a beautiful one that deserves to be told because it is the product of a gracious God actively blessing His people and abundantly producing fruit among them. It is the story of a group of Christians united by their Savior’s love for each of them individually that in turn has enabled them to reflect that love in their community.

That story began at the urging of the District Mission Board. Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin was growing rapidly as a community due to its convenient location between Madison and Milwaukee. With this new influx of families, came great opportunity to serve them spiritually. There was only one Wisconsin Synod Church in the town at that time, and there was no Missouri Synod Church. Since this was the case, the District Mission Board made the suggestion to start a second Wisconsin Synod Church in town. They asked Pastor Richard Jungkuntz, who was serving a mission church in Janesville, Wisconsin at the time, if he would assist in organizing this new venture. Pastor Jungkuntz agreed, and in August of 1942, he conducted the first worship service for what would become Bethany Lutheran church.

¹ Statement of Mission. Taken from the 2003 Membership Directory of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Atkinson, WI.

(Oddly enough the exact date was never recorded.) Worship was held in a rented store with six families in attendance².

During the fifteen months following the initial worship service, those six families were busy witnessing to others in the community. Things continued in this informal fashion until 21 November 1943 when the members of Bethany (this name had been suggested by Mrs. Edward (Mabel) Zecor) held their first organizational meeting. At this meeting the congregation, which now numbered twenty-five baptized souls and eighteen communicants, adopted a constitution. The charter members were Sam Johnson, Herman Raddatz, Ernst Riemer, Louis Schneider, George Van Hoosen, and Edward Zecor, along with their families. In addition they elected Mr. George Van Hoosen to be the first president of the congregation. And they established a Sunday School for eight children. Following this, official applications were made to become a recognized congregation. On 5 May 1944 the members of Bethany filed a formal application for membership in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. On 17 July 1944 the congregation filed articles of incorporation with the state of Wisconsin³.

The congregation continued to grow steadily and it soon became apparent that they were going to need more room than the store could offer them. As a result the council began to look for places to build their own worship facility. A number of sites were explored, but the congregation finally found a deal they could not pass up. On 9 May 1945 the Council resolved with the voters approval to purchase two lots at the corner of Charles and Roosevelt Streets. The purchase price was \$750⁴.

Now that they had land, it was time for the members of Bethany to do some work of another nature. In 1946, Pastor Jungkuntz was called to be the full time pastor of the fledgling congregation. Along with Pastor Jungkuntz's leadership, came a concerted effort to reach out to the community with the Gospel. As had been the case in the founding of Bethany, their efforts were coupled with the help of their neighboring congregations as they undertook to canvas the entire north side of Fort Atkinson. With the

² Bethany Lutheran Church Council Minutes, 1942.

³ Bethany Lutheran Church Council Minutes, 1944.

⁴ Bethany Lutheran Church Council Minutes, 1945.

help of their neighbors, the members of Bethany found sixty families who had no church affiliation at all and quickly worked to reach out to these families and eventually some of them became members⁵.

Along with the work of evangelizing the community, was the work of continuing to plan for the future. Now that the members of Bethany had a full time pastor in Pastor Jungkuntz, they thought it appropriate to secure housing for him. They did exactly that when they purchased a parsonage at 418 Edwards Street in October of 1946. Already by 1946 Bethany had grown significantly. The membership had jumped from twenty-five souls, eighteen of whom were communicant members, to 109 souls, seventy-eight of whom were communicant members. With this growth in membership also came the need for additional worship space. This need led the members of Bethany to remodel the store in which they were worshipping⁶.

However, one thing couldn't escape from being noticed, the store they had remodeled was just that—a store. The members of Bethany agreed that the store had served them well in their early formational years, but there was a definite need to build an adequate house of worship that would both serve the growing congregation, but more importantly would reflect their thanks and love for God for being their gracious Savior. They had plans to build a basement church on the land they had purchased a couple years earlier, however nothing ever came of this. Instead, the congregation was content to add another lot to their holdings at the corner of Charles and Roosevelt Streets⁷.

What did not come to pass in 1947, would happen in 1948. Through the hard work and generous offers of one of the members, the congregation was presented with an opportunity to build a pre-fabricated chapel on the land they had purchased. The price they would pay for the chapel would be \$13,000. It would have been significantly more, but the members of the congregation, both men and women, were determined to construct the chapel entirely by themselves, and that is what they did. In addition to the pre-fabricated chapel they had purchased and erected, the members of Bethany purchased

⁵ Bethany Lutheran Church, "History at the Twentieth Anniversary." 1963.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

a new Hammond organ to go along with their new worship facility. They also bought another lot at the corner of Charles and Roosevelt Streets to bring their total holdings to four lots⁸.

On 12 June 1949, the members of Bethany dedicated their new chapel and their new organ to the Lord. It was a festive day. However, the festivity would be somewhat short-lived as Pastor Jungkuntz was issued and accepted a call to teach at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. The congregation had never known another pastor in their history. Pastor Jungkuntz had been there from the beginning and had grown with them through their struggles and successes. He had built a solid foundation, now it was time for another to build on it⁹.

With the departure of Pastor Jungkuntz, the members of Bethany were faced with calling a new pastor. That call was filled by Pastor Gerhard Franzmann of Dale, Wisconsin. Pastor Franzmann was installed as Bethany's pastor on 18 September 1949. Pastor Franzmann served Bethany faithfully for two and a half years. During that time the congregation benefited from the introduction of a choir. Through that group, the congregation's worship took on a new life. The service of Pastor Franzmann at Bethany ended on 29 April 1952 when he accepted a call to Seattle, Washington. Again Bethany needed to call a new pastor. They called Pastor Eldor Toepel who accepted the call and was installed on 20 July 1952. Not long after Pastor Toepel accepted the call to Bethany, he received another call to serve the small congregation of St. John's located just outside of Fort Atkinson in Cold Spring. After presenting the situation to the Council, Pastor Toepel accepted the call and began to serve both congregations in a dual capacity¹⁰.

The years 1953 to 1957 mark a heightened involvement on the part of Bethany congregation in the area of Christian education. From the inception of Bethany, they had a working agreement with St. Paul's Lutheran Church, its sister church in Fort Atkinson, to share their parochial school. This sharing took on a new level during these years. One could say that the heightened involvement in Christian education really started by becoming involved in the Lakeside Lutheran High School Association in 1953.

⁸ Bethany Lutheran Church, "History at the Twentieth Anniversary." 1963.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bethany Lutheran Church, "Onward to Eternity." A History at the Fiftieth Anniversary. 1993.

This involvement allowed the members of Bethany to see first-hand the benefits of Christian education. This involvement in Christian education continued in the following year as the members of Bethany decided to participate in the fund drive for the building of a new St. Paul's Lutheran School facility. This would be Bethany's first significant contribution in their partnership with St. Paul's even though they had an advisory member on the school board since 1949. The fund drive resulted in a sum of \$15,000 to be donated to the new school along with furniture given by the Missionary League for the teachers' lounge. Finally, in 1956, Bethany had fifty-six children enrolled at St. Paul's School. There was a dire need for another teacher at St. Paul's and Bethany was given a tremendous opportunity. The members of Bethany solidified their involvement with St. Paul's School by calling their first teacher, Mr. Don Hartwig. Mr. Hartwig was installed on 9 September 1956. With the arrival of a new teacher came a need for additional housing for Bethany's newest called worker. They secured this housing with the purchase of a home on 301 Monroe Street¹¹.

While doing all this work in Christian education, the congregation also kept an eye to the future. They continued gathering holdings around the three lots they had purchased earlier. Those holdings included the parsonage that is still in use today and three additional lots all of which were adjoining to the holdings Bethany already had. But even amidst all this activity there was struggle and sadness. On 13 October 1957 the members of Bethany found themselves without a pastor again, as Pastor Toepel accepted a call to Jerusalem Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin¹².

This time it took Bethany a little longer to get their next pastor. But the Lord took care of his flock and sent them their fourth pastor. That man was Pastor Robert Hoenecke from Firth, Nebraska. He was installed on 12 January 1958. That year, 1958, also marked the fifteenth anniversary of Bethany. For many of the members it was bittersweet. It was sweet because the Lord had blessed them through fifteen years of ministry with the ability to witness His love to hundreds of people. In fifteen years, the membership of Bethany had grown from six families to 436 souls, 266 of whom were communicant

¹¹ Bethany Lutheran Church, "Onward to Eternity." A History at the Fiftieth Anniversary. 1993.

¹² Ibid.

members. However, it was also bitter because the members of Bethany had still not been able to build what they considered an adequate house of worship. For this reason, 1958 became a year in which to rededicate themselves and to get organized. That year the Long Range Planning Committee was formed along with the Stewardship Committee. The children of the congregation were not left out of this organizational phase as the Lutheran Boy Pioneer program was also introduced. By the end of the year the organization could already be seen with the introduction of a Building Fund proposed by the Stewardship Committee¹³.

With the increase in membership there was an increase in the enrollment at St. Paul's School. And with this increase in student enrollment Bethany was again given opportunity to call another teacher. They called Miss Marjorie Mumm who accepted that call in February of 1960. Also in 1960, the members of Bethany continued their support of Lakeside Lutheran High School. Lakeside had decided to remodel their facilities and needed support from the federation of congregations that ran the school. Bethany pledged \$30,000 for the effort. Miss Mumm had only been called for the 1959-60 school year, and so again the members of Bethany issued another call for a second teacher. They called Miss Ardyce Benning who was installed 11 September 1960. Soon Miss Benning was married and left the congregation with a teaching vacancy again. On 17 September 1961 Miss Lucille Schmidt was installed as Miss Benning's replacement¹⁴.

Affairs at Bethany continued through 1962 and 1963 with little significant activity. Bethany did purchase another lot that completed the holdings of the church in 1962. They also asked St. John's Cold Spring to dissolve the joint parish they had held between them so Pastor Hoenecke could be Bethany's full-time pastor. St. John's agreed. And yet, as uneventful as these two years were in Bethany's history, they were crucial in paving the way for the watershed year of 1963¹⁵.

Going into the twentieth anniversary of the congregation's existence, there was only one thing on everyone's mind: an adequate worship facility. The discussion had been ongoing for five years, and still

¹³ Bethany Lutheran Church, "Onward to Eternity." A History at the Fiftieth Anniversary. 1993.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bethany Lutheran Church, "History at the Twentieth Anniversary." 1963.

the members of Bethany had not resolved to build a permanent church building. That all changed in 1963. By 1963, the congregation had taken another leap in membership up to 553 from 436. Of that number the communicant membership now totaled 330 members. The chapel simply could not function any longer. And so, in January 1963 the members of Bethany resolved to build a worship facility and formed a Building Committee. The members of the Building Committee were Donald Peterson, Chairman; David Bielefeldt; Henry Hamer; Francis Heth; Herman Raddatz (who entered eternal life in 1966 and was replaced by his son Gene Raddatz); Elof Ringlund; and Karl Schlender¹⁶.

The chapel the congregation had used as its place of worship for twelve years was razed in the Fall of 1966. A good majority of the lumber was salvaged and put to use in building an addition and garage at the parsonage. Mr. Harold Schneider, a member of Bethany, drew up the plans and construction was headed up by Fred Neuberger, also a member. The official groundbreaking for the new church took place on 4 December 1966. By all accounts it was a cold and blustery day, but it did not hinder the enthusiasm of the congregation as it moved forward into this new stage in their history. The date stone was laid and dedicated on 23 April 1967. Overall the entire project was aided by more than 2,000 volunteer hours of labor donated by the members of Bethany. They were thrilled to finally put up the worship facility they had wanted for years¹⁷.

Karl Krauss, Jr., the architect who designed the church, was a member of Bethany as well. He designed the church with an eye to the future. The total square footage of the building would be 12,300 of usable space. It would feature a sanctuary large enough for 320 worshippers with a balcony adding another eighty persons to the total capacity of 400 worshippers. The plan also called for a Parish Hall in which activities of all kinds could be held. This room offered enough space for the comfortable dining of approximately 250 and comfortable seating for 300 in other assemblies. But for me the most beautiful part of the church has always been the Chancel wall where a large redwood cross hangs. Situated around that cross are twelve circular windows which carry a dual symbolism I had not known about before.

¹⁶ Bethany Lutheran Church, "History at the Twentieth Anniversary." 1963.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Those twelve windows symbolize the Twelve Apostles, whose teaching about the life and death of Christ forms the foundation of our faith. The second symbolism is one of color. Those twelve windows are a myriad of color and were intended to reflect the words of Revelation 4:2-3, "At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." Bethany's worship home was finished and dedicated on 21 January 1968. The total project cost \$254,000. Throughout the 1970's the congregation gave their full effort and attention to paying down the loan. The congregation continued to add members, but did not undertake any significant new projects¹⁸.

This phase of the Bethany's history came to an end with two events in the early 1980's. In 1983, Bethany celebrated the complete payment of their loan with a loan burning festivity. The second event was the retirement of Pastor Hoenecke in 1984. Pastor Hoenecke had served Bethany for twenty-five years. During those years Bethany had grown tremendously both in numbers and in grace, but those years were not free of troubles¹⁹.

With the retirement of Pastor Hoenecke, Bethany called their fifth pastor in August of 1984, Pastor Mark Zarling from Danube, Minnesota. Pastor Zarling was the pastor of my youth, and is a great part of the reason that I am where I am today. I talked with my former pastor, who now serves the Lord as a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, about the challenges that faced him as he began his ministry at Bethany. Professor Zarling told me that there were two challenges. The first challenge was that of following a pastor who had been there for twenty-five years. As can be expected, during those years quite a few members of the congregation had formed some strong ties with Pastor Hoenecke. And, as also can be expected over twenty-five years, there were some who had not formed such close ties. The challenge came in what could very easily be considered starting fresh and putting away twenty-five years of history²⁰.

¹⁸ Bethany Lutheran Church, "History at the Twentieth Anniversary." 1963.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview with Prof. Mark Zarling, 9 December 2004.

The second challenge, according to Prof. Zarling, was one of perception, if not within the church body itself, then most certainly within the community at large. The perception held among some was that Bethany was the more lenient of the two Wisconsin Synod churches in town. Bethany was the subject of this perception for two reasons. First it was the newer of the two churches in town. Fort Atkinson still did not have a Missouri Synod church in town. At the time Bethany was founded, Missouri was already heading down the road of liberalism, but it had not led to a split between the two synods. Since this was case, Bethany was perceived by many as the liberal leaning extension of the Wisconsin Synod. Another reason for the perception could also be characterized as one of the congregation's greatest strengths according to Prof. Zarling. That reason was a willingness to try new and different things. The members of Bethany did not shy away from trying different methods to spread the same unchanging message of Christ crucified for sinners²¹.

These two challenges would ultimately be resolved during the course of time that Prof. Zarling was pastor at Bethany. I asked him how those challenges were met. He told me that really there were three means by which Bethany worked through their challenges. The first was through prayer. It is always best to turn over our problems to our Lord, who can and does solve our problems. The second was through patient instruction. By getting the members of Bethany involved in the Word, by preaching Law and Gospel, they were able to face the challenges before them with the principles of God's Word. The third means was again that willingness to try something new. That coupled well with the congregation's willingness to learn and let God speak in matters of faith²².

As Bethany overcame their challenges, the Lord continued to bless them with growth, both physically and spiritually. The second set of challenges, ministering to a growing flock and a small lack in foresight, were met with the same means as the first challenges. Perhaps one other factor contributed to the meeting of these challenges as well. According to Prof. Zarling, Bethany never lost its sense of being a small family church. (This was a bit of naïveté on the part of the members because the

²¹ Interview with Prof. Mark Zarling, 9 December 2004.

²² Ibid.

congregation had grown to 1081 baptized souls, 781 of whom were communicant members by 1989). Ultimately this small family atmosphere led the members to actively seek out newcomers and invite their friends to come and see what Bethany was all about²³.

The church had been growing steadily since the arrival of Pastor Zarling in 1984, when the church decided to call a second pastor in 1989. A graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was assigned to them in that same year, Pastor Ethan Steinbrenner. With a new pastor came added responsibilities of supporting him. Bethany's history would come full circle as they purchased the land situated at Eighty-Five Monroe Street, the site of Bethany's original storefront worship home. There they built a second parsonage for Pastor Steinbrenner in 1991, all with volunteer congregational labor²⁴.

With an eye to the future, and increasing membership of families with school age children, the members of Bethany resolved to build an addition to their worship facility built in 1968. The idea was to add a building comprised of classrooms that could serve any number of educational pursuits in the future. The addition was built in 1995 and 1996. With the addition of classrooms, came the opportunity to begin some new programs. This new building soon became the site of Bethany's and St. Paul's joint preschool²⁵.

That year, 1996, was also a sad year in the history of Bethany as Pastor Zarling accepted a call in August to become a Professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The congregation once again needed to place a call for another pastor, this time they called Pastor Steven Wilkens from Rio Rancho, New Mexico²⁶.

Bethany has continued to grow over the last ten years. The preschool, started as a joint effort between Bethany and St. Paul's, has now become two preschools, one for each church. Bethany continues to make strides in reaching out to the lost by means of friendship evangelism. The small family atmosphere that marked Bethany at its inception fosters fellowship between the now 1272 baptized souls,

²³ Interview with Prof. Mark Zarling, 9 December 2004.

²⁴ Bethany Lutheran Church, "Onward to Eternity." A History at the Fiftieth Anniversary. 1993.

²⁵ Bethany Lutheran Church, 2003 Membership Directory of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church.

²⁶ Ibid.

1012 of whom are communicant members. By God's grace Bethany will continue to be a place where His Word is preached as sinners are crushed by the Law and comforted with the Gospel for many years to come. To God alone be praise!

Bibliography

Bethany Lutheran Church Council Minutes, 1942-45.

Bethany Lutheran Church, 2003 Membership Directory of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Bethany Lutheran Church, "Onward to Eternity." A History at the Fiftieth Anniversary. 1993.

Zarling, Prof. Mark. Personal Interview, 9 December 2004.