

THE BEGINNINGS OF CENTENNIAL EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has its roots in the city of Milwaukee. Milwaukee is the location of its first congregation--Grace, founded in 1850. As our Synod expanded throughout the city in subsequent years, various other congregations were founded. Consequently, when one considers the Wisconsin Synod congregations in Milwaukee, one generally thinks of long established congregations steeped in tradition with large beautiful edifices.

Centennial Evangelical Lutheran Church would not meet such preconceived notions. Its story goes back a little more than 30 years. Following World War II, America as a whole experienced a period of great prosperity. Soldiers came home to marry, find jobs, and settle down. New housing was needed to accommodate this sudden growth in population. Therefore a number of housing projects were started. One such housing project began south of Milwaukee, in the Wilson Park area. Although many of these houses were small and poorly constructed according to today's standards, they found ready occupancy. In addition, the area of 27th Street south of Oklahoma Ave. was lined with trailer courts.

With so many people settling in this area, the potential for mission work was great. Pastors in the area recognized this need already in the 40's. Pastor Emeritus Herman Cares, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, relates that there was at one time talk between Christ congregation and St. Jacobi congregation of starting

a joint school in this area. Although this plan never materialized, the Mission Board of the Southeastern Wisconsin District of our Synod took a great interest in this area. In 1949, they engaged a Seminary student to canvass the area. The results clearly indicated that there was a need for a Lutheran church and school to serve the many young families in the area.

On December 12, 1949, the Mission Board extended a Call to Rev. L. A. Tessmer to start a new mission in this area. At the time Pastor Tessmer was serving a mission in Grand Island, Nebraska. His experience as a home missionary made him qualified to tackle such an undertaking. He accepted the Call and arrived in Milwaukee in March of 1950. Although he was not formally installed until June 30, 1950, he immediately began calling on prospective members for the new mission.

The first worship services in the area were held on April 2, 1950 in the entrance lobby of the Palomar Rollar Rink, located on 27th Street just south of Oklahoma Ave. Mr. Claude Drew, a charter member of Centennial, tells a rather ironic tale on how this little mission secured the Palomar Rink as its initial place of worship. Mr. Drew credits a certain Roman Catholic priest named Father Joseph of Our Lady Queen of Peace, for playing a vital role in "opening the door" so that this little Lutheran group would have a place to assemble. The south side of Milwaukee had been and continues to be a stronghold for Polish people and quite naturally, for Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, this Roman Catholic priest must have recognized the changing character of the community and the need for a Lutheran congregation. On the other hand,

it might be noted that the Palomar Rollar Rink wasn't the most ideal place for worship. The owner of the establishment kept two large police dogs to protect the premises, and a number of cats to control the mice. Every Sunday morning the worshipers would have to sweep up the "calling cards" these animals had left behind.

The lack of a place for worship posed a number of practical problems for the little congregation. For example, a portable organ had to be used for the church services. Confirmation and adult instruction classes had to be held at various homes in the area. The same was true for congregational meetings. The need for a permanent place of worship was imperative.

The first organizational meeting was held on October 15, 1950. The minutes read: "Pastor Tessmer presented the sample constitution of the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran Church. . . . The Preamble and the articles following were all voted on separately and each was approved in order with the exception of article # one which has to do with the name of the congregation." The naming of the congregation was tabled until the next meeting.

In 1950, our Synod was short on funds for mission work. In fact, this new congregation was the only mission congregation established by our Synod in 1950. This surely played a part in its naming. Up until this time the group was known as "Wilson Park Area Lutheran Church." In the next meeting on October 29, 1950, a number of possibilities were tossed around as names for the new congregation (St. John's, St. James, etc.). Finally, Pastor Tessmer offered the name "Centennial". This had been suggested to him by one of his daughters, in honor of the 100th

year of our Wisconsin Synod. The congregational minutes relay what happened: "A motion was made and passed unanimously that the name of the church shall be 'The Centennial Evangelical Lutheran Church.'" "

The congregational minutes of the next few months expressed the concerns of the members of Centennial. In the meeting of December 3, 1950, contribution envelopes were ordered. Three envelopes every month would be designated for the Mission Fund of Synod. It was decided to purchase 50 desks. The first communion service would be held on January 1, 1951. In the January 7, 1951 congregational meeting, the time and date for the congregation's quarterly meetings was established. In the March 11, 1951 congregational meeting, the congregation decided to have a special collection for the Wisconsin Synod Building Fund, to be held on Misericordia Sunday, April 8, 1951. On October 29, 1950 the first meeting of Centennial's Trustees and Elders was held. They also met periodically. The first recording of congregation members lists the number at 96.

Yet Centennial's greatest need was for a permanent structure. In October of 1950 land was purchased from the Strohenke estate. Located just south of Morgan Avenue between what is presently 23rd and 24th Streets, the parcel of land covered an area of 258 x 309 feet. The purchasing price was \$5000. At this time a contract was signed for the construction of a chapel with a one room school attached for \$32,709.

In those days, the land south of Morgan was all swamp. There were no streets south of Morgan from 20th to 27th Street. So Synod

officials decided to erect the structure on the highest spot on the sight, ~~ir~~regardless of location. This explains the rather unique position of the structure today in relation to 23rd and 24th Streets. In front of the church facing 24th Street stood a duck pond. Because of the marsh, problems were sure to arise due to water seepage. The winter of 1950-51 was very severe. This delayed construction many times. Standing water in the basement of the structure froze and cracked the foundation walls and masonry above the grade. Yet even before the roof was put on, many were planning for a larger and more spacious structure that would take its place in a few years. Nonetheless the original building still stands almost 32 years later.

On December 8, 1950 Centennial Ev. Lutheran Church became a legal entity. On that day the Articles of Incorporation were filed with the State of Wisconsin. The Cornerstone Laying Ceremony took place on December 10, 1950. Mr. Drew remembers the day well. It had recently snowed and the day brought bitter cold and temperatures around the -20° mark. The men had to shovel so that the people could gather in the area. The guest speaker for the ceremony was Pastor Halboth. In spite of the bitter cold, he had a rather lengthy message. Many of those present became sick due to exposure to the severe cold. Not until summer was the structure completed. The chapel was used for the first time on July 29, 1951. Both the chapel and school were dedicated on November 4, 1951.

Establishing a congregation is no easy task. The mere presence of a church building isn't going to immediately draw people to your

doors. Many long hours were dedicated by clergy and lay people alike to get Centennial congregation off the ground. The biggest task for this congregation was to familiarize others about their existence. Such mediums as the Milwaukee Sentinel newspaper were used as a promotive tool. However, the heart of mission work is the personal contact. Most of the "leg work" can be attributed to Centennial's first pastor, Pastor Tessmer. Mr. Drew says, "Pastor Tessmer was the whole evangelism committee." He was the one responsible for canvassing new housing projects in the area. He visited the people in the nearby trailer courts. The Lord blessed his labors very richly. However, many people in this area were transients with no intention of settling down permanently. Surely this had to be a disappointment when new members and prospective members would move away.

Yet Pastor Tessmer maintained a great zeal for mission work, as evidenced by a rather humorous story told by Pastor Cares. Centennial wasn't the only church body interested in the new people in the area. There was a certain ULC pastor who would canvass the area. Pastor Tessmer would learn where he was and follow right behind him to refute what he said and encourage the people to become involved with Centennial.

As previously mentioned, many of the settlers in this area were World War II veterans who had recently married and begun to raise families. With so many children in the area, the Southeastern Wisconsin Mission Board recognized the need for starting a school. This was the rationale in building a one room school along with the chapel. The minutes of a 1951 congregational meeting record: "A

motion was made to send a Call to Miss Mc Farrland to be our first teacher in our new Christian Day School." When she failed to accept the Call, the congregation received a graduate from the assignment committee of the Synod, named Miss Dorothea Jaster. On September 12, 1951, the one room Christian Day School opened with one teacher, 8 grades, and 24 children--but no running water!

Because of its location, Centennial Congregation found itself caught in the middle of a political struggle. At the time, the site was located in the Town of Lake. The city of Milwaukee was growing and wanted to annex this land. In those days, annexation by the city of Milwaukee was quite a heated issue. The Milwaukee Journal, for example, opposed Milwaukee's annexation plans vehemently in its editorials.

It seemed inevitable that the land would eventually be annexed to Milwaukee. All the land developers in the area were in favor of annexation. But the Town of Lake was bound and determined to put up a tough fight. It tied up the matter in courts and was very insensitive to any newcomers in the area under question.

Centennial was in need of water for its new school. When Centennial's councilmen met with Town of Lake officials to bring the matter to their attention, the town officials were adamant and refused to give them any sewer and water. They even forbade Centennial from using a nearby fireplug. Some of Centennial's councilmen were so incensed that they erected a pea-green tin outhouse in a prominent location on their property--a most hideous sight! Nevertheless, the battle continued well into the school year. Pastor Tessmer was kept busy writing to elected officials, urging

them to settle the matter so that the school could be furnished with sewer and water. Following is an undated letter written to an alderman by Pastor Tessmer:

By written applications for enrollment our school will be filled to capacity this fall. The teacher that is to assist the pastor will arrive to assume her duties this month. We have proceeded with our work in good faith. We have made a substantial investment for the welfare of Milwaukee not only in the construction of an adequate and beautiful plant but also in maintenance of personel.

As I have demonstrated on a previous occasion at Madison, we have already suffered losses in many ways due to a previous suit by the Town of Lake.

In the name of the hundreds of citizens of our church and especially, in the name of the children that will attend our parochial school this fall, we plead with you to do something immediately to provide sewer and water to our facilities. After over a year of waiting, our need is desperate.

You can rest assured that in case the pending annexation is upset, we will not hesitate to again sign any and all petitions for annexation. I am authorized to make this statement by a resolution of our church.

Centennial Lutheran School did open without sewer and water. The students had to accomodate themselves to outdoor toilets and bottled water. This and other difficulties led to the resignation of Miss Jaster at Christmas of 1951. This was a great loss to the upstart school as the Proceedings of the 18th Biennial Convention of the SE Wisconsin District of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, (June 23-26, 1952) records:

"The teacher who had been called resigned in the middle of the year. This harmed the school as well as the mission. We were forced to emergency measures. One teacher conducts the classes in the morning and another in the afternoon."

This report also lists the statistics for Centennial: Souls--212; Communicants--105; Voters--22; Average Church Attendance--75; 23 in day school; 96 in Sunday school.

Subsequent History

Centennial Congregation grew rapidly. The 1954 district report lists 340 souls, 160 communicants, and a Christian Day School enrollment of 45. The growth in attendance made it necessary to conduct a second worship service. In June of 1954, a contract was made for a one schoolroom addition with a basement and parsonage on the site. Both were dedicated on May 15, 1955. By 1956, Day School attendance was 86 and the Kindergarten began as a separate class. By 1957, a third full time teacher was called, as school enrollment climbed to 100.

At the end of 1960, Pastor Tessmer accepted the Call to Iron Ridge, Wisconsin. After a three month vacancy, Pastor Paul Nitz was installed as the congregation's second pastor. During his pastorate, school enrollment continued to rise. This necessitated the construction of two additional classrooms in the summer of 1963. On January 1, 1964, Centennial became a self-supporting congregation, yet continued to pay off its debt to Synod. As membership continued to grow, a third worship service was added in 1965. The Day School continued to grow. By 1968, enrollment had reached 120 and a fourth teacher was added.

When Pastor Nitz accepted a Call to a congregation in La Crosse, the congregation faced a vacancy of over a year. When calling from the field proved unsuccessful, the congregation decided to go to the Seminary for a graduate. Candidate Robert Hoepner received the Call and was installed on July 16, 1972. During his pastorate, a week night Vesper service was begun to replace the 9:15 Sunday morning service.

Since September of 1978, Centennial has been served by Pastor Kirby Spevacek. Current statistics are: Souls--410; Communicants--

362. The Christian Day School is served by 5 teachers and has an enrollment of 93.

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