

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FIRST LUTHERAN CONGREGATION
ELKHORN, WISCONSIN

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Senior Church History
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One hundred and twenty years ago a group of people in the area of Southeastern Wisconsin known as Walworth county gathered in a small house near the city of Elkhorn and formally formed a congregation of confessional Lutherans known as the Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische Friedens-Gemeinde. This small group consisted of a gathering of Lutherans that had come to southeastern Wisconsin from New York and Pennsylvania in search of more land to live on and more fruitful fields to farm. Many of those who initially formed this young congregation were Norwegians, others were German. This small group began settling in Elkhorn and the surrounding townships of Sugar Creek, La Grange, Delavan and Richmond during the 1860's. It was at this time that God sent them a shepherd to gather this small flock in the person of Pastor Duborge of Whitewater Wisconsin.

Pastor Duborge was what this small but mixed group of Lutherans needed at this time. He was able to speak many languages, including German and Norwegian, so that the congregation could gather as one group even though they initially used different languages. The group began quite small indeed, in fact, there were only four people who were originally served by Pastor Duborge in Elkhorn, they were "Jakob Bauermann who emigrated in the year 1856 from Germany's Rhineland to Wisconsin, C. Winter, Mrs. August Voss and Mrs. Edward Francis. The number soon rose to nine with the coming of Carl Duesing, Peter Bauermann (1866), John Granzow, Fred Warning and Herman Dopke."1 At this time the small congregation had no strong ties to other congregations or to a synod, probably

due to their mixed backgrounds.

Pastor Duborge would hold services in the homes of the people at first. At a Baptism in 1870, Pastor Duborge urged the members to consider finding a suitable church site in Elkhorn. They purchased the Rockwell school building on the corner of Church and South streets. This site would serve as the home of the congregation for over 100 years. At the time they paid \$600 for the lot and for the building. This school became their first permanent church home at which Pastor Duborge would conduct services once every three weeks.

"The congregation was incorporated February 23, 1871. Elders: Jakob Bauermann and E. Winter. Trustees: Fred Warning, G. Voss and H. Duesing."² These are the first words recorded in the parish register of Peace Lutheran, Elkhorn. This young congregation was growing in the early 1870's in spite of some fierce opposition. The small group of confessional Lutherans were laughed and scoffed at by the Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists and Catholics who already had flourishing congregations in Elkhorn. They would say, "Why establish yet another congregation and make greater division among the Christians? We all believe in the same God, and God's Word is preached in our churches too."³ God was gracious to this small group in leading them to see that they were not the same as the other churches in town. He became their fortress as they withstood these temptations from all around and remained true to God's Word.

At the time of the incorporation of this small congregation there was no formal liturgy, no constitution and no resident Pastor

to serve the congregation. This situation soon became worse in the year 1874 when Pastor Duborge accepted a call to Chicago and could only come to Elkhorn once every six weeks. During his absence Mr. Peter Bauermann would conduct a layman's service, but the congregation wanted more. That is when they called Pastor J.J. Meier of Slades Corners.

Pastor Meier worked out of his home in Slades Corners and served the young congregation in Elkhorn and also a small group in East Troy. When Pastor Meier took over the care of the congregation some necessary matters were taken care of. On March 29, 1875 the congregation adopted its first constitution consisting of nineteen paragraphs. On Easter Monday of that same year the congregation held its first regular meeting. At this meeting the matter of membership in a synod was addressed. The minutes read, "It was agreed that at the next meeting of the revered EV. Luth. Wisconsin Synod, the congregation would seek acceptance as member; to achieve this goal, Mr. J. Bauermann would travel as delegate to the synodical conference held in Milwaukee that year."4 At this same meeting it was decided to modify the old Rockwell school building to serve as both their church and Sunday school. We see a concern for the Christian education of the young people of the congregation already at this early date..

In the spring of 1876, Pastor Meier was called to be the first full-time pastor of the congregation in Elkhorn. It was then that he moved to Elkhorn and the congregation bought its first parsonage for \$700. This was an important step for the congregation in that it gave them their first full-time pastor to lead them. We see in

the parish register of the congregation how important this step was. In the years from 1876-1883, the congregation experienced a rapid growth so that the membership grew to forty.⁵

Pastor Meier served the congregations of Elkhorn and East Troy until 1879 when he accepted a call to Waterloo, Wisconsin. The congregation then called Pastor W. Buehring as their pastor. During his short time in the congregation, from 1879-1881, he began services in Burlington every 14 days. During his ministry in Elkhorn, the minutes of the voters' meetings show that times were difficult for this small congregation. There were difficulties in paying the pastor's salary and even the debt on the parsonage. After much effort the debt was paid off in 1882.

God continued to bless the congregation in Elkhorn with growth. This growth brought about a number of important developments during the ministry of Pastor Joh. Dejung. He began his ministry in Elkhorn in late 1881 and already at the January meeting in 1883 we read that the congregation voted unanimously to construct a new worship facility because they were no longer able to fit into their old building. Everyone became involved in this undertaking, "The farmers willingly bound themselves to the job of hauling stones and sand; and the city folk promised to help zealously with the construction...Contributions for the building were willingly subscribed. Everyone wanted to lend a hand."⁶ The building was completed at a cost of \$2,800.00 and was dedicated to the Lord's service on October 26, 1884.

By the end of the year 1885, Pastor Dejung accepted a call to another congregation. The congregation then called Pastor Timothy

Sauer, a candidate from the seminary. He was, of course, a young man when he came to Elkhorn but under God's direction he accomplished a great amount of work. He devoted much of his time and effort into creating the congregation's first parochial school. He was the teacher for this school which began with 12 children and which grew to 30 in the seven years which he served in Elkhorn.⁷

Pastor Sauer was also active in other areas of the congregation's work. He began a group for young people which exists to this day. He also began a choir and even a brass ensemble. During his ministry the congregation began supporting their synod in a much larger way than was previously done. They did this by introducing special collections for synod on the main festivals of the church year.

"Pastor Sauer was also one of the first in our synod to preach in English from time to time. Because the congregation did not have a uniform hymnal, she decided on October 10, 1886 to procure Wisconsin Synod hymnals and at the same time to employ the same liturgy as that used in other Lutheran congregations."⁸ From these many activities of Pastor Sauer, it is clear that he was indeed a tremendous blessing to the congregation in Elkhorn. Another indication of the great strides the congregation was making is found in the minutes of the voters' meetings in the early 1890's. It appears that there arose a great need to build a schoolhouse separate from the church. However these were difficult times for the members financially and this was unable to be done. We read in the minutes the tremendous effort that went into the effort,

...ever. "The construction of a new school building was discussed...The purchase of the lot next to the church was debated...It was resolved that the pastor be permitted to gather subscriptions in the congregation for school construction...It was resolved that a school house should be built. All subscriptions should be paid to Mr. C. Lindow before September 1, 1892."9

Another reason that the congregation was in financial difficulty at this time was because of the large influx of immigrants from Pomerania in Germany. These people were not able to support their own families, much less the church. However the Lord saw to it that their spiritual needs were met by this small congregation in Elkhorn.

In November of 1892, Pastor Sauer accepted a call to Bay City, Michigan. Shortly afterwards, in January of 1893, Pastor C. H. Zuerwald was installed as the next pastor in Elkhorn and East Troy. This was a time of repairing the old and getting ready for the new. The old parsonage was repaired once again because of the lack of funds to buy a new one. The church received some cosmetic repair also in the form of paint for the exterior and the interior.

But a more meaningful change came about in 1894. For twenty years the congregations in Elkhorn and East Troy had constituted one parish. By 1894 the congregation in East Troy had grown large enough to become independent of Elkhorn. So we read in the minutes of the July 15, 1894 voters' meeting that the congregation of East Troy sent a delegation to this meeting requesting permission to withdraw from the parish. The request was granted and the congregation in Elkhorn now had its own pastor.

This young congregation had indeed received countless blessings from God, but the most important blessing they received was the firm standing they had on the doctrines of Scripture. This stand was put to a severe test during the late 1890's. This is when a serious lodge problem arose in the congregation. The problem was so severe that President Von Rohr was called in to help settle the matter. In the minutes of the November 10, 1897 special meeting of the voters' assembly, this was resolved, "In accordance with church discipline, the judgment of the president was that those members who joined the lodge automatically excluded themselves from the congregation."¹⁰ The matter continued to be dealt with, as the minutes of the January 4, 1898 meeting showed, "A motion was made, that those members of our congregation who joined together with others of the Methodist Church for the purpose of forming a rival congregation should repent from their error...Fourteen showed themselves repentant."¹¹ By the grace of God the congregation withstood this test to her confessional position and has remained solidly bound to the doctrines of God's Word ever since.

During this crises, Pastor Auerswald received a call to Ludington, Michigan and accepted it. On July 31, 1898, the congregation granted him a release. On September 11 of that same year, the congregation extended a call to Pastor Chr. Gevers. Pastor Gevers would serve the congregation in Elkhorn for the next 20 years.

Soon after he arrived in Elkhorn, the congregation decided to finally build the long-awaited for school building. On January 3,

1898, planning for the building and solicitation of subscriptions began in earnest. On February 5, 1899, the congregation resolved the following, "1. That a school house should be built which should stand next to the church...4. That, concerning the construction, only the lowest bid of a parishioner should be accepted, and only parishioners should work on the building."12 The building, costing \$1193.00, was ready for use in June of 1899. At this time a vacant lot south of the church was also purchased in which the congregation wished to build a parsonage.

The congregation continued to grow and flourish during the next ten years. As the debts were being paid off, a new project came on the scene. In 1911 the congregation felt that further repairs on the parsonage were not wise and instead decided to sell the old parsonage and build a new one. The parsonage was completed at a cost of \$4,000.00 and was dedicated on November 24, 1913. The church also received renovation in 1919. The church was furnished with central heating and electric lights at this time.

On July 29, 1920 Pastor C. Gevers was released from his call. On September 12 of that same year Pastor W. Reinemann was called. He accepted the call and was installed on November 7, 1920. During the pastorate of Pastor Reinemann, the congregation celebrated its 50th anniversary. During these years another important change took place in the congregation, English began to take over as the official language of the congregation with English services being held every other week. One aspect of this change was the change of the name of the congregation. This occurred between the years of 1924 and 1933. The date and reason for the name change is not

From interviews with some of the current members who were around during this time it is clear that the congregation had been referred to as First Lutheran before the time of the 1924 constitution in which Article two states that the name of the congregation is "Friedens" Ev. Lutherische Gemeinde. The first official reference to the congregation as First Lutheran is in the annual report of 1933. When and why the name changed remains a mystery with no record of it in the voters' assembly minutes.

During the years of 1920-1934, the pastorate of Pastor Reinemann, the congregation continued to grow and prosper. However the congregation also began to suffer greatly with the rest of the country during the depression. The minutes of the voters' assembly of April 2, 1930 contain a discussion concerning the purchase of a new organ. The question was whether to buy a pipe or reed organ. At the time the Ladies Aid was willing to offer \$250.00 for the purchase of a pipe organ (nothing for a reed organ). However the cause soon became pointless as the depression took its toll on the congregation. No organ was purchased until 1938 when the congregation went with a reed organ for \$330.00.

Further evidence of the effect of the depression on the congregation can be seen in the salaries of the pastor and other workers. At the January 1, 1931 voters meeting, it was decided that the pastor's, organist's and janitor's salaries would be adjusted downward. "With a budget not to exceed \$2,100. Pastor's salary - \$1,200/year (from \$1,500), Organist and Janitor - \$70.00/year (from \$100)" 13

On August 24, 1934 Pastor Reinemann was granted a peaceful

Wisconsin. Pastor W. A. Diehl became the congregation's next pastor. He was a candidate from the seminary, son of the vacancy pastor from Lake Geneva, WI, Pastor H. J. Diehl. On October 13, 1935, he was given permission to hold English services in the evening on the German Sundays. On May 17, 1936 the voter decided this, "To hold German services at 9 o'clock, Sunday School at 10, and English Services at 10:45."¹⁴ In July of 1941 the voters decided, "To see Germans about dropping two German Services a month."¹⁵ It is quite obvious that the congregation was fast becoming an English congregation.

The reason for this can be seen in the records of the membership of First Lutheran during the pastorate of Pastor Diehl. In 1934, when he became pastor, there were 298 souls in the congregation. By 1949 when he accepted a call to Arizona for his wife's health, the congregation numbered 560 souls.¹⁶ It is clear that Pastor Diehl spent a great deal of his effort in reaching out to the community in Elkhorn with a large number of converts each year added to the list. It is also clear that the change to English helped this effort.

During his pastorate he also established the first adult Bible class in 1941 which met the last Thursday of the month. A form of this class still exists today in the women's Wednesday Bible class. Pastor Diehl also began to hold services at the county nursing home. It is clear from the records of the congregation and from interviews with members who knew Pastor Diehl that he was a shining light in the congregation. He was indeed missed when he left the congregation in 1950.

Before he left the congregation began a major remodeling effort on the church and school. The school was moved to become attached onto the church over a new basement. This provided more room for the expanding needs of the congregation. With a church that was only 34 by 52 feet, it is quite obvious that more seating capacity was needed in the church at this time already. This, however, would not take place for another 25 years and plays a large part in the developments of the next 35 years of the congregation's history.

After Pastor Diehl departed, Pastor Herbert Lau accepted the call to serve First Lutheran in Elkhorn in early 1951. Pastor Lau began a newsletter for the congregation, a men's club, and a softball team. However the congregation felt many growing pains during his years of service. By 1959 it was painfully obvious that a new church home was needed. The congregation was still plagued with a large debt from the remodeling done in 1950 and another remodeling and redecoration of the church in 1956 which cost the congregation \$8,100. For these reasons no land was purchased in the early part of the 1960's. This was a growing problem as can be seen by some of the attendance records of these years. In 1960 there were 638 souls in the congregation with an average attendance of just 145.17. By 1967 the number of souls had dropped to 575.18. At this time Pastor Lau became ill. He was 70 years old and unable to keep up the pace of shepherding this large congregation. Due to heart problems, he took a leave of absence in early 1967 and returned by the summer. It was not until August of 1968 that the congregation again had its own pastor. The reason it took so long

... what they wanted someone who was able to preach in German (which was discontinued within two years). Pastor Frederic Kosanke was the one who accepted the call to serve First Lutheran. By the time that he arrived, the congregation had purchased a new parsonage for \$25,300 about 6 blocks away from the old church. In May of 1969, the congregation purchased 3.82 acres across from the parsonage for \$18,000 on which the new church would be built. Things seemed to be rolling along quickly as the debt was paid off by February of 1970.

But the congregation soon became bogged down in building plans. A building committee was formed to purchase the land, when they did they disbanded. Another was formed and soon also disbanded. Four building committees worked on this project.¹⁹ It is clear that this was a major undertaking for the congregation, one that they did not enter into lightly. At this time of change, the congregation took time out in 1971 to observe 100 years of God's gracious and loving care which he had shown to the congregation in Elkhorn. Finally in 1972 the architect was chosen and plans began to move along. The plan was to build a worship facility with an educational wing. A fellowship hall was considered and even approved to be built as a temporary worship facility, but the voters reversed their decision on this. The result was a very functional and well-planned building which serves the congregation well. On June 9, 1974 this new worship and education facility was dedicated to the Lord's service. The final cost was \$372,000.

The congregation had spent years and years planning for this

ity special day. When it was past they began to focus on paying off the debt, which they did in just 10 years, quite an achievement.

During those ten years other events were taking place at First Lutheran. In 1976, the congregation decided to call a Senior Assistant for the first time to help with catechism class, shut-in calls and the youth group. The first Senior assistant was James Oldfield. He was followed by James Witt III, Paul Wendland, Mark Gieschen and Carl Busse. The congregation suspended the weekend work program for a number of years because of the new project they undertook.

That new project was to form a Lutheran Elementary School. The records are unclear when the original school disbanded, but it is likely that it happened before the turn of the century. In January of 1981, the congregation voted to form a school by the small margin of 39 in favor, 32 opposed. The numbers show that the congregation was rather divided on this issue. But the school began strongly. In March of 1981 the congregation called Mr. David Noack as its first principal and teacher of all grades. Soon the enrollment was so large that a second teacher, Miss Stacie Hartman, was called. In July of 1982, the congregation saw the need to call Mrs. Linda Noack as the Kindergarten teacher. Truly the Lord blessed this young school.

At the end of the 1984 school year, Stacie Hartman resigned her call and Miss Kristy Watchke received the call to be the primary grades teacher. Mrs. Kathy Szmanda was called to be the Kindergarten teacher. By 1986, the congregation saw the need to

call another full-time teacher and called Mr. Thomas Banaszak to fill their need. However, by the spring of 1987, the enrollment had reduced to the point that Mr. Noack was not replaced when he accepted a call. The school presently has an enrollment of 50 students and has celebrated its 10th anniversary.

In the fall of 1988, the congregation again called a weekend assistant, Bruce Mueller. He has been followed by Timothy Blauert and Wayne Schoch. In June of 1988, Pastor Kosanke received a call to a mission congregation in North Carolina which he accepted in October of that same year. In January 1989, Pastor Mark Kipfmiller was installed as the new pastor at First Lutheran in Elkhorn.

The congregation at present is undergoing some changes. The congregation is in the planning stages of building a fellowship hall. They are being encouraged to become more regular in their attendance at worship and Bible class. The work continues.

Looking at the history of a congregation can reveal a lot about the personality of that congregation. Such is the case with First Lutheran in Elkhorn. The one thing that stands out in the history of this congregation is the fact that God has indeed blessed this congregation richly. He has kept them true to his Word in a city that has been strongly ecumenical for all of its history. To do this took the time and care of many dedicated and talented workers.

But sin and its effects are present in this congregation as well. The emphasis on building projects is quite evident throughout the congregation's history. With building projects come the usual problems. There was the long delay in building a new

church home because of lack of money, which seemed to cause the congregation to become quite stagnant for almost 20 years. There was a push to pay off the building but a lack of good stewardship for general purposes. There was a tendency to concentrate more on the building than on the work that needs to be done inside and outside of the building.

Another longstanding problem, which began because of the lack of a proper building, is the failure of many of the members to use the opportunities they have to grow in their faith. This has been a problem for at least forty years. Another cause of this problem may be the fact that most of the members are third, fourth or even fifth generation members of the congregation which has caused some to take the blessings the congregation has to offer them for granted.

But God will see the congregation through these problems also. That is the one thing that stands out in the history of God's church - God will take care of it and he will give the increase. The rich history of First Lutheran in Elkhorn is another testimony of that fact.

ENDNOTES

- 1 In Remembrance of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Peace Ev.
Luth. Church - Elkhorn, WI: 1871-1921. p.5
- 2 Parish Register of Peace Lutheran, p.1
- 3 Fiftieth Anniversary, p. 4
- 4 Parish Register, p. 1
- 5 ibid., p. 8
- 6 Fiftieth Anniversary, p. 10
- 7 ibid., p. 12
- 8 ibid., p. 13
- 9 Parish register, p. 54
- 10 ibid., p. 62
- 11 ibid., p. 63
- 12 ibid., p. 74
- 13 Minutes of the Voters Assembly: 1921-1949, Jan. 1, 1931
- 14 ibid., May 17, 1936
- 15 ibid., July, 1941
- 16 Annual Report, 1934, 1949
- 17 Annual Report 1960
- 18 Annual Report 1967
- 19 Personal interview with James Mowery, 27 April, 1991

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