

The Reasoning Behind Beginning a Congregation in Thiensville
with Several Lutheran Churches Already Existing in the Area

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How does a church body find its beginning? Why would a church body be established in a location which is so close to others churches of the same belief? Questions like these are difficult to always answer from history. In the Milwaukee area in general, many WELS churches are located within walking distance of another WELS church. Calvary, Thiensville, is no exception. It is located in the village of Thiensville which is surrounded by the city of Mequon which has as its inhabitants four Lutheran churches established here in the early and middle 1800's. With such a strong settlement background, why in 1931, would a group of people break away from one of these Lutheran bodies to form a new one? This is of main concern in this paper as the formation of Luther Memorial Congregation, later changed (in the same meeting) to Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church is discussed.

There are many congregations which, when we look at them, appear to us as if they always appeared that way to others in the past. It is difficult for us to picture Calvary as a small mission starting out in 1931 with just a handful of members. Today, by God's grace, its membership exceeds 800 souls. That is a direct result of willingness and foresight to spread God's Word to both German and English speaking people in the vicinity of Thiensville. A glance at Calvary provides willingness and foresight for mission work being done today to spread God's Word into all the earth.

In digging through the history of even a church body we discover that sin is also present here. Our hindsight tends to be 20/20 vision. We might think it impossible for the turn

of events to have happened the way that they did. People do become set in their ways. That is especially true sometimes in the church. This became a controversy decided by a vote. That is a controversy not easily laid to rest. As members of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Mequon asked for and was granted a peaceful dismissal so the idea of a mission church in the area was planted. With the cooperation of the Mission Board this seed soon became a reality.

I. The Situation in Thiensville 1929-1931

It is interesting to note and, I believe, more than coincidence that the dedication of the new Seminary in Thiensville would take place approximately two years before the official organization of Calvary. On August 18, 1929, the Seminary held its dedication. On August 16, 1931, Calvary was organized with 11 voting members and 27 communicants.¹ On the third of May in that same year services were already being conducted by the Professors and students of the Seminary in the chapel until a pastor could be called to serve the congregation. While the intentions of these members of Calvary were very strong it certainly was an additional help to have the Seminary so close by. This aided greatly their attempts to have English services on a regular basis without having to always arrange for an English-preaching pastor from Milwaukee. It also gave great support to the organization of the school. The church and the school were to be one in the same.

In addition to the Seminary there were already in the immediate area of Thiensville four other Lutheran churches. One previously mentioned is Trinity South Mequon about 1

and 1/2 miles south of the property purchased for Calvary. Trinity was formed in 1853 and shared its pastor with St. John of East Mequon which was formed in 1861.³ St. John is located about 3 and 1/2 miles east of HWY 57 on Mequon Rd. This places about 5 miles in between Trinity and St. John. Another Lutheran body was located just southwest of the Seminary campus. This church body, Trinity of West Mequon was formed in 1867 and became a member of the WELS in 1923. Shortly after the Seminary moved to Mequon Trinity became self-supporting.⁴ This congregation received support from the Seminary and benefited from its presence. One more church Trinity of Freistadt was formed in 1839 by immigrants from Saxony and Prussia. These people also were strong Lutheran people deeply rooted in their beliefs. The main cause for their migration was caused by unfair church-state relations in the homeland.⁵ However when Calvary was to be formed Trinity Freistadt did not really enter the picture because of its distance from Calvary and its ties with LCMS. There were relatives upholding membership in different congregations but that was not a big factor since at that time WELS and LCMS were in fellowship.

With the idea of a new congregation forming in the area these congregations, especially the three in Mequon, passed around the idea like a hot potato. People at St. John really had their hands tied because of their connection with Trinity South Mequon in sharing a minister. They would have liked to start a school and eventually did after they had their own minister and they became self-supporting. But there were relatives and other ties involved, still great apprehension was shown from all as to getting involved in one way or another.

Trinity of West Mequon also showed apprehension to get involved and basically for the same reasons. No one wanted anyone to get upset with them for taking one side or the other in this controversy. Some considered members of Trinity stubborn for not allowing further development for the English mission in the area while they held the same views! Others considered the people asking for a peaceful release to be crazy to attempt this far fetched venture with so many other churches in the area. Still others were amazed at the persistence of those who wished to care for the education and instruction of their children more effectively in English.⁶ This work, they thought, was not only to be done in the home but it was to be done in German.

II. The Controversy

The area in and around Thiensville was basically a farming community. The people who had moved here were here to stay. The land was good and so was the water supply. The wildlife was plentiful and the resources untapped. As young as the area seemed it was already very settled. These other Lutheran churches in the area had all come into existence in the middle 1800's. Thiensville was ^{at} pst the pioneer stage. There was little that could be done to change that fact. The people were set in their ways and now in 1931 with the Seminary changing the complexion of the area the time was right for more change. A controversy that had been cooking for a few years was now at a head.

The controversy took place within the membership of Trinity of South Mequon. This church body, consisting strongly of German Lutherans, chose to accomodate its English

members by holding English services and the 1st and 3rd Sunday of every month. In 1931 Easter Sunday happened to fall on the 1st Sunday in April. After a vote was taken the resolution for English services was overruled and a German service was planned for Easter. This ruling was not received well by the English speaking members and, with the consent of their pastor, Pastor Burkholz, these members canvassed the church to find a gauge of true interest for an English Easter service. After finding strong member support in favor of the English service, it was decided to conduct both an English and a German service on Easter.

At this point in time, there seems to be no evidence of rebellion but a strong conviction by the English speaking members of Trinity to bolster its efforts for more English mission work in the community. A written plea was given to Pastor Burkholz and the church council seeking a solution for existing tension. Several meetings followed. Finally, it was decided to meet with the Mission Board of the Southeast Wisconsin District on March 22. Upon hearing the plea, the Mission Board approved the suggestion of the English mission work and proposed a plan where these two parties might supply the wants and needs of the English speaking people in the community.

Upon this decision, the contents of the plea were sent in written form to all members with remarks sanctioned by the pastor and church council. Upon the suggestion of the Mission Board the plea was read at the quarterly meeting on April 12. The proposal was presented of the plan of the Mission Board to cooperate with Trinity in its efforts of English mission work. After much discussion, a vote was taken. This vote revealed a

large majority of the voters was not in favor of this presented plea.

A smaller group, feeling that this plea had not been given justice, invited the Mission Board to meet with them on the evening of April 13. Rev. Wm. Mahnke, chairman of the Mission Board, received at this meeting a written petition to take whatever steps necessary toward solving this problem of defining what the English mission work was to be in the area. Pastor Mahnke's suggestion was that a committee meet with Pastor Burkholz requesting another meeting of the congregation. This request was granted and a meeting set for April 26.

At this meeting Pastor Burkholz, voting members and the Mission Board were present. A proposal was again made by Pastor Burkholz which would provide for English mission work. This proposal again drew little interest from the congregation. The lack of interest was mainly due to a lack of willingness to accept some change as good and a lack of having a pastor who could carry out this English work. Pastor Burkholz did not preach in English and up until this time a pastor was coming to Trinity from Milwaukee on the 1st and 3rd Sunday of the month. Seeing this lack of interest in such a project, the Mission Board proposed to begin a mission congregation in Thiensville. It is noteworthy and clear that every effort was made to try to solve this controversy with the extended hand of outreach to Trinity and to the community from the Mission Board. There was no controversy over whether or not there was a need but rather, how the existing needs would be filled. It is also very noteworthy that this matter was handled in a very short period of time. This controversy coming to a head in

March and the first services being held at the Seminary chapel on May 3.

III. The Solution

As has been mentioned, the Mission Board was in favor of and in agreement with the plea of this small group of people and also promised to aid them in their venture they wished to undertake--the building of a church and school in Thiensville. The motive was made clear. It was to meet the need of more English service and thereby care for the education and instruction of their children more effectively.⁷

In June, 1931, the Mission Board called candidate S.E. Westendorf to be pastor of the congregation. Because of the mission status and the time in history (1931), the months which followed were difficult financially. The body was resigned to building a building that would serve as both a church and a school. This project was begun and by God's grace school was started in September and the dedication of the church building was held on November 8, 1931. The school classes were held for a time at what is presently the American Legion Hall. This building would again be used later when enrollment would exceed space until a separate school building could be built and dedicated in 1962.

On May 3, 1931 the solution to serving the English mission in the area of Thiensville was set in motion. On that day Pastor John Jeske of Milwaukee conducted the first services held in the Seminary chapel. A Sunday School and Bible Class were also begun. The Sunday School was conducted by Seminary students under the supervision of H.J. Vogel also a student.⁸ Pastor Victor Brohm also of Milwaukee conducted the

Bible Class in the home of Dr. H Scholz.⁹

While it seemed as though very little support was being given to this new church from the immediate area there was however, strong support. A member of Calvary who is to date a charter member, remembers the difficult times that faced Calvary shortly after its beginning. The support that was received from pastors from Milwaukee, professors and students of the Seminary and also from the Mission Board really made the difference sometimes when the going got tough. This person claims that the one factor that really kept up their spirits was the opening of the school in connection with the fast action taken by the original members and the Mission Board. This person recalls it truly an act of God that all of these events would have taken place in less than a year. The solution to this problem of providing for the English mission work in the area of Thiensville was actually taking place. It was happening through a method that none of these people thought would take place when the subject was first raised at meetings of Trinity Church.

IV. The Role of the School

As has been previously mentioned, the idea of forming a congregation in Thiensville included the strong interest of the congregation in the Christian Day School. The founders of Calvary were convinced that the school was the best agency a congregation had for fulfilling the Lord's will in regard to educating the children entrusted to their care. The first school year at Calvary began in September of 1931. Pastor Westendorf began as the first teacher of the school with 16 students and each grade being represented.¹⁰ One charter

member remains very thankful for the school at Calvary. To date, she has seen not only her children attend Calvary school, not only her grandchildren attend Calvary school but even her great-grandchildren are now attending Calvary school. She considers that to be a great blessing and a privilege. Three words which this lady uses to describe Calvary school and the history of its formation are: "Feed My Lambs."

A significant factor in the success of Calvary school is that from its beginning it was made part of the church. Many writings and anniversary booklets contain information about the start of Calvary in 1931. In any of these writings this establishment is never referred to as Calvary church but Calvary church and school. It's almost as if those first members were living in the 1980's with all of the emphasis placed on education today.

The school at Calvary has always welcomed all children to attend its school. A number of members from sister congregations in the area were eager to take advantage of the opportunity to send their children to a Lutheran school. By 1941 the enrollment had reached 39 students and 15 of these students were from sister congregations." These ten years had, by God's grace done significant healing among the people of the area. The need for Christian educational training of the next generation was of prominent interest to many even outside of Calvary church.

Already in the 1940's, before the church/school building was totally paid for, ideas were set in motion to begin plans for building a separate school building. There was plenty of room for a building and current school enrollment was exceeding existing space. Pastor Martin Albrecht, then pastor

at Calvary, recalls that many were ready to build but the economic situation in the country at that time hindered them. It was discussed quite completely that a person could have said the same when this church was built in 1931. It was finally resolved after much discussion that the church should concentrate on maintaining what they had and be in contact with the Mission Board. At that time an architect was retained to draw plans and specifications for a new school building but the construction had to be postponed when approval to obtain rationed building materials was not granted.¹² Calvary school continued through the 1940's with the enrollment increasing.

In 1951 the members decided that a parsonage was more urgent than a new school and so the school building was again delayed.¹³ The congregation was able to rent a school building (Thoreau School) at a nominal fee and so the members of Calvary saw no immediate need for a new school building. By 1959 the Planning Committee made a recommendation to the Voters Assembly that a school be built as soon as possible for the following reasons: 1. Classes were being conducted in two separate buildings, 2. The rented building was in need of costly repairs, 3. The lease on the rented building could be terminated 30 days after notification.¹⁴ This recommendation of the Planning Committee was adopted and an architect was again retained, a Building Committee and a New School Finance Committee were elected.¹⁵ On February 25, 1962, the new school building was dedicated. This school building is presently in existence with the addition of a gymnasium which was completed in 1967.

V. The Outlook of the Members and Foresight

"Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and for Thy truth's sake." (Psalm 115:1) We dedicate this booklet to the glory of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who as the Head of the Church, gave courage and vision to the founders of our Calvary Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thiensville Wisconsin.¹⁵

These words appear directly under a picture of Calvary Church in the 25th Anniversary booklet. The words of the psalmist became their theme. The glory remained with the Lord and the blessings to Calvary congregation remained countless.

In this anniversary year Calvary became a self-supporting congregation. What a blessing for God's people who had begun such a project as the formation of a church body under such adverse conditions. All of these plans of men fit together to accomplish not their own will but the will of God.

Yes, there were schools in the area before Calvary which taught the children reading, writing and arithmetic but this was not enough. These schools were also teaching the children in English. Many of the children understood very little German. Times were changing. After World War I there were many bitter feelings in the United States toward other countries such as Germany. Many people in the United States were against speaking German for this and other reasons. Other people were convicted to training children well in the ways of the Lord. It was time for the church to make a change. It was time for Pastor Herwig of Milwaukee to come more than once a month to preach in English at Trinity South Mequon before a filled church. It was time for the church to make a change. That was not happening in the existing situation in 1931. Yes, there were churches. Yes, there was preached the Word of God. But there was no school and there was no real effort being made to carry out English mission work in the community. The action and effort of Pastor Mahnke and the Mission Board were evidence of that. There was a need

for a Christian Day School in the area of Thiensville. It was a very vital and a serious need. By man's standards it would seem that the time was not right for a venture such as this. Those who were instrumental in forming this church body were not satisfied with that answer. They wanted English. Not because they were selfish people but because they felt that that blessing which is only felt by very few people in their life fell on them. They were to be the ones to begin this church/school organization. Yes, they would have much help and support. Yes, there was interest through the Seminary. Yes, within a few months time, a congregation would be organized and dedicate its first building. Because of the depression era this building would be erected quickly. Because of the congregational theme of Psalm 115:1 this church/school formation would be dedicated to the glory of God.

VI. Anniversary Retrospect

At the present time Calvary congregation is anticipating its seventh pastor and also celebrating its 60th anniversary in 1991. Since 1975 Calvary has been blessed to conduct its worship services in a new church building. At the time of the planning for the new church much discussion was given to keeping the original church building. As has been true in the past for Calvary, again the decision was made to move forward for the glory of God in this new building. Calvary has risen far above the mission status under which it was formed.

Calvary's growth for several years was slow, there being little population growth in the area. This and other

distractions made it difficult on those founding members. Today by the grace of God there are 650 communicants with over 800 souls. The current school enrollment is at 85 students. Historically and geographically Calvary has remained as the "Seminary Church." Both bodies continue to be a blessing to each other.

The greatest blessing Calvary has continued to enjoy is the free use of the Means of Grace. For fifty-eight years, without interruption, Calvary has been privileged to hear the Word of God and to receive the Sacraments through faithful pastors and teachers. Without these means of God's undeserved love there would be no church building standing in Thiensville.

Endnotes

- 1 25th Anniversary Booklet p.2.
- 2 25th Anniversary Booklet p.2.
- 3 Seminary archives File
- 4 Seminary archives File on Trinity West Mequon
- 5 Seminary Archives File on Trinity Freistadt
- 6 Discussions with Charter Members
- 7 Early Church History written by Pasotr S.E. Westendorf
- 8 25th Anniversary Booklet p.2.
- 9 25th Anniversary Booklet p.2.
- 10 Dedication Booklet for Calvary School p.3.
- 11 Early Church History written by Pastor S.E. Westendorf
- 12 Dedication Booklet for Calvary School p.3.
- 13 Dedication Booklet for Calvary School p.3.
- 14 Dedication Booklet for Calvary School p.3.
- 15 25th Anniversary Booklet p.2.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Many sources were used in preparing this paper. Those sources include several items from the Seminary Archives for Calvary, St. John East Mequon, Trinity South Mequon, Trinity West Mequon and Trinity Freistadt. Also Anniversary Booklets were used in gathering information and general reading. Two brief histories written by S.E. Westendorf also included valuable material. The WELS Historical Institute Journal was also of assistance. There remain to be two charter members at Calvary MRS. Stella Sperber and Mildred Hinze. These ladies were also of great help. The records of the minutes of all meetings held by this organization were also of assistance.