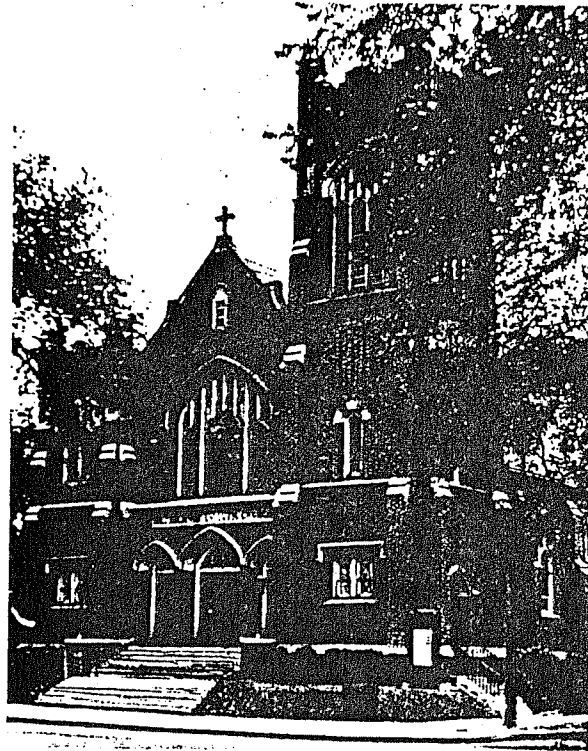


THE EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT  
OF  
GETHSEMANE EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH  
(Milwaukee, Wisconsin)



BY:

KEVIN SCHULTZ

Senior Church History  
Prof. E. Fredrich  
May 1, 1988

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

## OUTLINE

### THE EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF GETHSEMANE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

#### Introduction

- I. The Beginnings
- II. The Founding
- III. The Early Development
  - A. The First Parsonage
  - B. A New School
  - C. A New Church Building
- IV. The Later Development
  - A. A 4-Room School Building
  - B. The Difficult Years
  - C. Back on the Right Track

#### Conclusion

Kevin Schultz  
Senior Church History  
May 1, 1988

THE EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF  
GETHSEMANE EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH  
(MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN)

Introduction

*"In the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,  
Amen. On the ninth Sunday after Trinity, the 30th of July, 1893,  
after Gottesdienst, led by Pastor A. Opitz, a number of  
Evangelical Lutheran brothers of Layton Park and surrounding  
neighborhood gathered together to form a Christian congregation  
to be named Evangelical Lutheran Gethsemane Gemeinde. After  
Pastor Opitz made known to us the principles of the beliefs of  
the Lutheran Church as they are stated in the Gemeinde Ordnung of  
the Wisconsin Synod, we voted unanimously to accept them and  
believe the same and to build our church thereon. We voted as  
the council of this congregation to be Michael Patzke as  
President, Heinrich Wilhelm as secretary, and August Feder as  
treasurer and requested Pastor Opitz to be our Seelsorger (pastor  
--- literally, caretaker of souls). The meeting was closed with  
prayer.*

*Signed, Michael Patzke and Heinrich Wilhelm.*

*These are the minutes of the first congregation meeting in 1893  
of Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There  
was a sense of gratefulness and joy at that first meeting,*

because the Lord had answered the prayers of his people and had begun the mission work of Gethsemane Lutheran Church to spread the true Gospel to all nations. That mission work began in 1893 and it is still being carried out today.

But how did Gethsemane Lutheran Church actually get started in Milwaukee? What happened before that first congregation meeting in 1893 that led these men to begin a church? And what happened after that meeting that led Gethsemane to the celebration of 95 years of God's grace? That's what this paper intends to answer. Let's look at the early history and development of Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church and share in the gratefulness and joy that those men experienced at that first meeting in 1893...

### I. THE BEGINNINGS

Lutheran services were being held in the community where Gethsemane Church is presently located today (on the south side of Milwaukee) during the mid/late 1800's, led by the pastor of St. Paul's Church of the town of Franklin. This community was called the village of Layton Park.

Layton Park was a community, not perhaps as rich in industrial productivity nor in natural beauty as her sister communities but nevertheless one of the fastest growing communities in the area. Located in the area of Lincoln and Forest Home Avenues, it was not a part of the city of Milwaukee at that time. But in 1854 it

became the first toll gate on the road called the Janesville Plank Road, which connected Milwaukee with Janesville. This is what led to the rapid growth of Layton Park during the late 1800's, and also to the beginning of regular religious worship services at Gethsemane Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1893.

## II. THE FOUNDING

Pastor A. Opitz came from Slinger, Wis., canvassed the territory of Layton Park and found a number of Lutheran families there. He, along with 6 other residents of this community, organized Gethsemane Lutheran Church in 1893. It was accepted very willingly into the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1894, and Pastor A. Opitz became the first pastor of the church.

## III. THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Pastor Paul Burkholz of Renville, Minnesota, succeeded Pastor Opitz in the Fall of 1894, and he was paid a salary of \$200.00 per year. About that same time, it was decided to buy a church property and to erect a chapel with a loan of \$3,500.00 from the Wisconsin Synod. The lot<sup>1</sup> and chapel were purchased from the Layton Park Land Company for \$4,000.00. Once again, Gethsemane felt the guiding hand of the Lord as they saw their first chapel go up. They were now able to worship in their own church building and say, "Surely, this is the house of the Lord."

---

<sup>1</sup> The area of land that Gethsemane purchased was originally a part of an addition to Forest Home Cemetery, which was (and still is) operated by St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

*Gethsemane continued to grow in faith, and also in number. In the Spring of 1895 a Gesangverein (choir) was established, and their music to the Lord was a beautiful addition to the church service. St. Andrews Evangelical Lutheran congregation, which worshiped nearby but had no church building of their own, shared Gethsemane's chapel and Pastor Burkholz served both congregations for a short time. Even though Gethsemane had a small schoolroom built behind the chapel, it proved to be inadequate for both congregations to use at the same time. Thus, classes in the school were suspended in late 1895.*

#### A. The First Parsonage

In the Fall of 1897 Pastor Burkholz accepted a call to a congregation in Medford, Wis., and Professor A. Adelberg of the English department of the Evangelical Lutheran Seminary succeeded him. When the building of a parsonage was discussed in 1899, Pastor Adelberg reported that the project couldn't begin unless a mortgage be taken out on the church building which met with opposition by the members. In October of 1900 an all-member visitation was decided to collect monies for the parsonage. \$200.00 had to be obtained before work would begin. Finally, the parsonage at Gethsemane with a schoolroom in the basement was erected in early 1901 at a cost of \$1,875.00. Each member was assessed 25 cents a month to pay for it. Membership increased so much that on April 10, 1904, all debts that they owed to the Wisconsin Synod were paid and Gethsemane became self-supporting.

## B. A New School

Pastor Adelberg resigned in October of 1905 due to failing health, and Rev. Julius Kaiser became the next pastor at Gethsemane. It was soon after this that the day school began classes again. Teacher Bublitz served as the one (and only) teacher until 1909 and that school year was completed by Teacher Kinderman. The church knew that they would eventually run into the same problems (lack of enough space in the school) that they had encountered back in 1895 if they didn't do something soon. They didn't want to have to suspend classes again because of inadequate space. So, they purchased the adjacent land in the hope of building a new school there.

That hope became a reality in 1907 when the church, originally built facing 24th Avenue (now South 29th Street), was turned around to face West Harrison Avenue and a school building abutting the church was erected. (This part of the church is still standing today, and it is used as a Bible class/fellowship hall). Tuition for member children at this time was 60 cents a month and 70 cents for non-member children. The third child attended free. (It was reported that there were 38 member children and 6 non-member children). Teacher P. Hippauf came to the school in 1910 to replace Teacher Bublitz. But when Teacher Hippauf left in 1913, Teacher Kirschke replaced him. After Teacher Kirschke came Teacher Paul Jungkuntz in 1918. But, sad

to say, the school was again closed in 1921.<sup>2</sup>

Under Pastor Kaiser's pastorate Gethsemane congregation celebrated its 25th and 30th anniversary. It was also during this time that two new things were added to the church and its worship services: 1. Envelopes were used for the first time to collect the offerings,<sup>3</sup> and 2. The first pipe organ was installed and dedicated.

Upon Pastor Kaiser's resignation in 1923, Pastor Richard Buerger of Waukegan, Illinois, was called. Many changes and additions began to develop under Pastor Buerger, all of which were good for the church's growth and outreach. For example, he started Sunday School and Bible Classes, all in English. Regular services in English began in December of that year. Even a parish newspaper, the *Gethsemane Lutheran*, began publication that same year. All these changes by Pastor Buerger were things that the church needed to grow.

### C. A New Church Building

And grow they did! The partition in the wing of the church was removed to accommodate a rapidly growing Sunday School. The day school hall was extended to accommodate the growth in Sunday

---

<sup>2</sup> No other information could be found concerning the closing of the school in 1921.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to this, members were assessed dues of approximately \$8.00 per year to be paid directly to the treasurer.



worship attendance. But that still wasn't enough. As membership in the church and the Sunday School continued to grow, it became evident that a new church edifice was a necessity. And so, by 1927 a new church was built and dedicated to the glory of the Triune God.\* The cost of the new church building was \$72,000.

#### IV. THE LATER DEVELOPMENT

After Pastor Buerger's death in November of 1950, Pastor A.H. Leerssen became the next pastor at Gethsemane. Only four years later, Pastor Leerssen accepted a call to Prescott, Arizona, and Pastor Kurt Eggert took his place.

##### A. A 4-Room School Building

In an agreement with St. Jacobi Ev. Lutheran congregation, Gethsemane underwrote the cost of tuition of our member children at St. Jacobi Day School for as many as it could accept. It was at this time that Gethsemane considered getting its own new school. They wanted a school that would be large enough for future growth, but the cost seemed unreasonable.

Suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, the school building which was serving then as an office building for the Heil Company was offered for sale. Since the building had originally been a Milwaukee city school, it lent itself readily to reconversion as an educational building. It became necessary within the space of

---

\* This is the church that Gethsemane still has today.

one month to decide whether or not to buy the property and to establish a day school. Two meetings of the congregation were held to discuss this possibility, and in 1964 Gethsemane Lutheran Church decided to purchase this building from the Heil Company at a total cost of \$130,000 after many God-pleasing gifts were received to further Christian education at Gethsemane. The building they purchased was at 32nd and Dakota Streets, which was approximately one mile from the church.<sup>5</sup> Mr. Franklin Zabell became the first principal at the new school, and Mrs. Susan Gawrisch and Miss Janet Podjan accepted calls to teach the lower grades at a time when there was a critical teacher shortage. Truly, the Lord's gracious and guiding hand was present. This was the beginning of many years of "uninterrupted" Christian education at Gethsemane, something that had been unfamiliar at Gethsemane in previous years.

#### B. The Difficult Years

The years between 1966 and 1979 were very difficult years for Gethsemane congregation. They were very unstable and bitter years for many people in the church. "Gethsemane seemed to develop a self-righteous attitude..... The people gave the impression that they were pretty good people in God's eyes and didn't need to go to church as often."<sup>6</sup> It was this kind of

---

<sup>5</sup> This is the building that Gethsemane Lutheran School is still using today.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from one of the church leaders at that time who wishes to remain anonymous.

attitude that led to four pastors in only a 13 year span and also other problems that would give the church a black mark among some of its sister congregations in the WELS.

This difficult period began when Pastor Frederick Tabbert succeeded Pastor Eggert in 1966 who accepted a call to teach at Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers College. The membership began to decrease. Pastor Tabbert remained at Gethsemane for only two years when he accepted a call to Osceola, Wisconsin. Not until a year later did Gethsemane find a pastor to replace him. That pastor was Rev. Robert Carter, who was installed in May, 1969. He remained at Gethsemane only two years and Pastor F.H.O. Jungkuntz became the next pastor in 1971. The membership continued to decrease, and "the blame for this fell on Pastor Jungkuntz who really didn't deserve it."<sup>7</sup> Under the pressure of a few indignant members of the church, Pastor Jungkuntz felt there was no other choice but to resign from the pastorate at Gethsemane. And he did so in May, 1979.

#### C. Back on the Right Track

Not until a few years into the pastorate of Rev. Alan Siggelkow at Gethsemane<sup>a</sup> did the bitterness, hard feelings, and instability in the church cease. Pastor Siggelkow became the pastor in

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>a</sup> Pastor Siggelkow is currently serving as pastor at Gethsemane Lutheran Church.

October of 1979, and the most difficult period in Gethsemane's history appeared to be over. The membership began to increase again, and fellowship and unity among the members began to grow.

Today, Gethsemane Lutheran congregation is on the grow again, both in numbers and spiritually. The current number of baptized members has increased to 530, and the average attendance at Sunday worship services is 218. Gethsemane is averaging a gain of about 12-15 members each year. Also, the Christian Day School at Gethsemane has grown to 84 students, (a big increase over the past number of years). Even the attendance at Bible classes has increased from previous years. Gethsemane has become a growing congregation again.

#### Conclusion

During the past 95 years, the bountiful hand of the Lord has been plainly evident in the life of Gethsemane Lutheran congregation. First among many blessings has been the continuance of the Gospel ministry through seven pastors. Various renovations and improvements of both the church and school through the years also witness to the Lord's gracious working at Gethsemane. In all the events leading up to 1988, the gracious and guiding hand of the Lord has been clearly seen.

No one knows what the future will bring for Gethsemane Lutheran Church or for the members in particular. Only God knows that.

But there is one thing that we do know about the future of that Church. It is the welfare of the souls within the Church, as Christ says in John 8:31,32: *"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the Truth, and the Truth will set you free."* Truly, the Lord will be with Gethsemane Lutheran Church in the future as he was with them for the past 95 years.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Much of the information for this paper was gathered from the following sources:

Church records of Gethsemane Ev. Lutheran Church.

Interview with a member of Gethsemane Lutheran Church, (who wishes to remain anonymous).

Interview with Mrs. Ruth Guenther, a longtime member of Gethsemane Lutheran Church.

Records kept by Mrs. Ruth Guenther, a longtime member of Gethsemane Lutheran Church.

A booklet on the history of Layton Park, (no title, but dated 1927).