

Mt. Olive
Detroit, Michigan
1926-present

Daniel Moll
Senior Church History

When one first decides to take on a project there are high hopes for a facinating result, and yet things do not always run the course we might expect. So it is with this project. Our subject is Mt. Olive Lutheran church Detroit, Michigan, a congregation about which there is very little documented outside the records extant at the church itself. However, intrepid reader, you can look forward to some interesting things yet to come. Do not let your heart be troubled and read on.

How did this congregation that now stands at the corner of Radnor and Mack get started? That much is rather fuzzy. The founders of the congregation are not mentioned in any of the records that were studied. The pastors in the area had a plan to do some additional work in Detroit. What is known is that there was a group meeting in a storefront on Mack avenue at the corner of Neff. A small group of Lutherans gathered in the Blue Cross Drug store. There were seven adults and fifteen children that gathered for the first service of what was to become Mt. Olive Lutheran church. Not a bad start for a mission congregation especially since there were fifteen children for Sunday School that first morning. Today there would be many a missionary who would love to have that many children in Sunday School. Times were different then and Sunday School attendance is one area where that is very apparent.

The pastor of this fledgling group was one Henry Arndt. Pastor Arndt was just recently graduated from the Seminary. He was assigned in 1926 to that Mission in Detroit. There are several letters that remain that were written to Pastor Arndt before he arrived in Detroit to take up his call. These letters are from some of the pastors in the area, most notably Pastor H. Hoenecke, and Pastor H. Heyn. Pastor Hoenecke was pastor

at Our Savior on Grand River. Pastor Heyn was serving at Jehovah and Zion Lutheran churches in Detroit.

Pastor Heyn had apparently been a part of what was called the Jehovah Synod. This was a synod in which all of the churches had Jehovah incorporated into their name. These letters seem to indicate that Pastor Heyn was responsible for much of the early mission work that was going on in the Detroit area at this time. In fact he wrote a letter to pastor Arndt not long after he was assigned to the mission in Detroit. The letter (which is included in the addenda) gave the graduate the basic idea of what he would find when he arrived. Pastor Heyn describes Detroit as a place where “there is much work and the opportunities are so great that we would have more help.” From pastor Heyn we learn that the area that was to be the home for the new mission had been worked before. It is not clear what that means exactly. What we know for sure is that the mission “had to be abandoned because we could not get more men sooner from the Mission Board.”

There is also a letter from H. Hoenecke to young pastor Arndt that gives some details about the situation. Pastor Hoenecke tells us that calling for the mission had been suspended after a Rev. Mielke had been “unsuccessfully called”. Now whether that means that he did not accept or whether he accepted and then resigned cannot be determined from this document. Pastor Hoenecke describes the area as thickly populated and growing, making this a seemingly good place to start a mission. The Missouri Synod was also looking into starting a mission there, but they were waiting for Wisconsin to make a decision. Would the Wisconsin Synod start a mission there or not? Apparently the two synods had made an agreement in the Detroit area to not step on each others toes.

They had agreed that this section of town was Wisconsin Synod turf. This sort of cooperation was one of the reasons that the Synodical conference was formed.

As one reads these letters it is interesting to note how little the procedure for starting a mission has changed over the years. There are many references to canvassing the neighborhoods to see if there was good reason to start a church in the area. Pastor Edwin Frey (retired) who would later serve Ascension, Detroit first and then Mt. Olive from 1950 to 1991 was one of the canvassers of the area. It is also interesting that funding was a major factor in mission work back then as well. The initial push for a mission had to be dropped according to pastor Hoenecke because of lack of funds.

In spite of earlier setbacks Pastor Henry Arndt was assigned to the Detroit area in the summer of 1926. Pastor Arndt held services in August of 1926. In those early years Sunday School was a very important part of the church's ministry. Today Sunday School is important, however, Sunday School rarely receives top billing in our church advertisements. There are several advertisements from the early years of Mt. Olive each of which prominently mentions Sunday School. This was the primary outreach tool of the time apparently. They realized much like we do today that parents are more interested in getting religion for their children than for themselves. It apparently worked for in 1929 the average Sunday School attendance was 125.

Mt. Olive did not have to worship for long in their storefront. They bought land already in 1926 and in April of 1927 they had built a permanent house of worship. Not long after that, the parsonage was built right next to the church. Altogether the cost of the land and the buildings, including parsonage, was a little more than 12,000 dollars. Much of this was supplied by the membership, with some supplied by the Synod. It was nine

weeks from the beginning of construction until the first worship service in the new building. Included in the addenda is a copy of the worship folder for the dedication of their house of worship. It was dedicated on April 24th, 1927. They had afternoon and evening services. The preacher at the afternoon service was Rev. Heyn. The preacher at the evening service was Rev. O. Eckert. Pastor Eckert was the chairman of the Mission Board.

With a permanent house of worship things settled down for Mt. Olive and they began to grow. Yet in spite of the area being densely populated the church grew slowly. Pastor Frey attributes this slow growth to the presence of Hope congregation only a little more than a mile away as the crow flies, and also that the majority of the people in the area were Belgian, and not German. Yet there was still growth by 1930 there were 34 communicant members. By 1932 this had increased to 73.

This is not to say that Mt. Olive did not have any problems in those early years under Pastor Arndt. It was during the early years that the question of the Lodge came up. The only record that we have concerning the Lodge question is a reference to the "Lodge fight" in a letter from Pastor Eckert to pastor Arndt in April of 1928. Pastor Frey mentioned that the Lodge was very big in the Detroit area and was even into his ministry. Apparently the Lodge was something that was effecting all the congregations in the area. Pastor Eckert says of the fight "you got off easy. However disappointing it may have been to you, you will find it to be a blessing in disguise." Pastor Arndt and most of the other pastors of Mt. Olive did not keep very good records concerning losses and gains so it is very difficult to determine how many were lost in this controversy but in a church of less than one hundred any loss was significant.

The workings of the early congregation are in stark contrast to our own churches today. Especially in the areas of finances. The first budget for Mt. Olive was \$1934.46. Of that total the pastor's salary was the major part in 1928 the congregation gave Pastor Arndt a raise to \$1400 a year. Both of these numbers are a far cry from the budgets we are familiar with. Much of this can be attributed to the membership and the community of Mt. Olive. At the end of the service of dedication folder is a list of people who are being thanked for their assistance in building the church. Some of those thanked are members others were from outside the congregation who donated to help build the church. One of the methods they used to hold down costs was advertising in the church handbook. Even the church newsletter has advertisements. Practices like this helped to keep costs down. Today we wouldn't think of doing things like that but back then it was common at least in the Detroit area.¹

Pastor Arndt continued his work at Mt. Olive for several years until as one record of Mt. Olive put it "tragedy struck." At the age of 28 Pastor Arndt died of pneumonia brought on by influenza. He had been married for five years to Freida and they had two children, Lucille age 4 and Robert age 3. The family had struggled with influenza for some time in 1932. Freida having it first and Pastor Arndt contracting it later. On March 10th 1932 Freida died of pneumonia and seven days later on March 17th Pastor Arndt also died. They were carried to Minnesota and there they were laid to rest in St. Paul Lutheran cemetery "until the Lord will call all of us to heaven."²

What a terrible event to happen to a fledgling congregation. They had been in existence for only five years and already they had lost a pastor. The congregation did not

¹ There are handbooks from other congregations that have similar advertisements

² From the obituary of Rev. Arndt

fall apart however, and they moved on with their work holding their first call meeting on April 4th, slightly more than two weeks later.

After one pastor declined the call, Pastor F. Stern accepted the call. He was installed in July of 1932. That is amazing turnaround especially in view of our current situation today. Perhaps calls were not as common and so it did not take as long for a pastor to make a decision. Regardless of the reasons five months after Pastor Arndt's death Mt. Olive had a new pastor.

Pastor Stern could be described by his name. He was a solid man but not especially well liked by the congregation. Pastor Stern served during the depression years. It was a time when the faith of many was tested by financial trouble. Yet Mt. Olive survived, and continued which is something of a theme of this congregation. During his time the constitution of Mt. Olive was modified. Unfortunately there is not an extant copy of the old constitution so it is not clear what was changed, but we do have some of the drafts of the proposed changes.³

During pastor Stern's time there also was a push for attending the Lord's Supper. It is not clear why this issue arose but apparently Pastor Stern thought that the people of Mt. Olive needed some encouragement to come and receive the Lord's Supper. Pastor Arndt had been giving communion four times a year. When Pastor Stern came he began to offer it more often, one cannot entirely decipher his means of notation but it is possible that he began to offer it seven times a year, expecting attendance at four of the offerings. Part of the problem is that there was no rationale preserved behind the notations kept so they are rather difficult to decipher.⁴

³ specifically article 12 which is included in the addenda

⁴ see the copy of the communion register

Pastor Stern is most remembered for the building of the church basement. This was done at the cost of \$2840 in 1937. Unfortunately there was some issue with its construction. In the minutes of the church council throughout 1937 there are cryptic references to a lawsuit against either Pastor Stern or Mt. Olive. It seems that the records implicate Pastor Stern more directly. A Mr. La Rue was suing for some unnamed reason. Also there were charges brought by the Mission Board against Pastor Stern in this regard which are also unclear. In the proceedings of the Michigan Synod Convention of 1938 it mentions that the charges brought against Pastor Stern by the Mission board were resolved amicably. This is a mystery that will remain one until perhaps some more information becomes available. Perhaps it is best to not drag anyone's name through the mud about something that was apparently not a big issue in the grand scheme of things.⁵

Pastor Stern served Mt. Olive from 1932 until 1939 when he took a call to Arizona. He was replaced by Pastor Kenneth Vertz in September of 1939. Pastor Vertz was the most memorable pastor that Mt. Olive had even though he did not serve as long as some. During Pastor Vertz's tenure at Mt. Olive membership increased⁶ and the mortgage was burned⁷. Membership had grown so much that by 1943 the congregation began to study the possibility of enlarging the existing sanctuary or building a new one. They responded to such thinking with the creation of a building fund. This building fund would find its use later with the new church building.⁸ Mt. Olive continued to spread her wings during this time by cutting herself free from Synod Subsidy. On January 1st 1944 Mt. Olive became a self-supporting congregation.

⁵ attached copy of church records from 1937

⁶ attendance averaged 114 per Sunday

⁷ April of 1945

⁸ Built in 1958

Just two years later in 1946 Pastor Vertz accepted a call to Owosso, MI. The new pastor was Norman Engel. During pastor Engel's term of four years Mt. Olive saw a decline of membership to the levels that it saw before Pastor Vertz. However that does not mean that nothing was accomplished during his tenure. A new Wurlitzer organ was purchased for the church in 1949. Less than a year later Pastor Engel accepted a call to Gloria Dei Mission in Milwaukee.

He was succeeded by Edwin Frey who served Mt. Olive from 1950 to 1991. During his term of office Mt. Olive continued as it had. Over the course of forty years Pastor Frey saw many things change in the Detroit area. He saw a city where the WELS presence steadily shrank until it reached the point it is at today. The churches where Pastors Hoenecke and Heyn served are no longer with us. Hope congregation that was served by Pastor Vallesky is closed. The neighborhood that the church is located in is no longer Belgian. Now across the Mack Ave. is Grosse Pointe, one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the nation. While on the same side of Mack as Mt. Olive is the city of Detroit, and when compared to its neighbor across the street, is extremely poor. Much has changed since 1950. The church has even changed. In 1958 the building fund was put to use and Mt. Olive dedicated its new church building. The building of the current church was anything but smooth sailing. In an interview with Pastor Frey he talks about the difficulties of that building. The architect was Elgin Pruder a member of Mt. Olive. His original design was Colonial in style and a far cry from what was eventually built. The problem was that his idea of the costs and the contractor's idea of the cost were completely different.⁹ Also Mr. Pruder designed a structure that was fabulous but much too ornate for the amount of money that Mt. Olive had. So it was back to the drawing

board literally. The modified plans were more reasonable. The appropriate additional land was acquired at a very good price across the street from the current location of the church and construction was started. Construction went fairly smoothly and with only minimal delays the new building was completed in March of 1958.

Pastor Frey had a fairly uneventful ministry, at least as he describes it. Perhaps the worst event was the choosing of the color of new carpet for the sanctuary. During his tenure Mt. Olive became one of the supporting congregations of Martin Luther School. It is a school that was started by Detroit area congregations as a joint venture in 1977. Martin Luther School is still in existence today and is struggling to remain one of the few WELS schools in the Detroit Metro area.

Pastor Frey retired in 1991 and his post was taken by Pastor Thomas Biedenbender. Pastor Biedenbender served six faithful years. At that time he took a call to Juneau, WI. After a year long vacancy Pastor Matthew Grunewald was installed in 1998 as a new graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

There is a revitalization of the spirit of outreach in Detroit as of late and Mt. Olive is a big part of that work. Five congregations have come together to found N.O.T.E. Detroit. (Neighborhood Outreach Through Education) This is an effort by the five remaining congregations to share the gospel with their neighbors. It is programs like this one that God willing will allow Mt. Olive to continue, not only surviving but even to begin flourishing in the future.

In 2002 Mt. Olive celebrated their 75th anniversary it was an opportunity to praise God for all that he had done through that congregation in the last 75 years. It was also a time to look ahead to what God has in store for this congregation that has changed very

⁹ As can be seen in the concept drawing on the cover of the booklet "An Expression of Gratitude"

little over the last 75 years even as the world around it has changed dramatically. I thank God that he has preserved his church at that place. He has always cared for his people gathered there and has carried them along. Mt. Olive continues to hang on and I pray that it will continue to do so. I also pray that this congregation will continue to hold to that which has carried them this far, God's immeasurable grace.