

ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH (*Chesaning, MI.*)
A GREAT EXAMPLE OF GOD'S GRACE

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I have to admit that church history has never been my favorite subject. I don't know if it is because I don't like trying to remember all the different dates or names but I have never been excited about church history.

When we received our assignment to write a paper dealing with Lutheranism in America I prepared myself for a long, tedious task. But when it came time to actually begin working on the paper I surprised myself by enjoying what I was doing.

Perhaps the reason for that was that I went back to the roots of the congregation that I grew up in. This paper will deal with my home congregation. A paper like this one might seem to have a rather narrow focus and might seem a bit insignificant when compared to the whole picture of Lutheranism in America. I feel, however, that for the thousands of people that Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church has served over the past 115 years this topic would be very significant.

Unfortunately, records pertaining to the organization of Zion Ev. Lutheran Church and the years prior to its organization have ben lost. Some information has been gathered from early settlers in the Chesaning area which gives some insight to the infant years of the congregation.

Most roads were still trails through the forests, when as early as 1867 Rev. C.L. Eberhardt, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran

Church of Saginaw traveled by foot or by horseback to conduct services for a group of Lutherans living around Chesaning. As the Saginaw News said, "Lutheranism came to Chesaning more than 100 years ago with the help of a minister who often walked from Saginaw to Chesaning."¹ Services were usually held in the schoolhouse on the north side of town. Many of the worshippers walked to the schoolhouse for the services.

In 1873 this group of Lutherans resolved to hold all future services in the Chesaning Town Hall. This resolution was adopted at the time of organization although the exact date remains a mystery.

Ten families founded the First German Evangelical Lutheran Zion Church of Chesaning. The "Articles of Association" were adopted in the annual meeting of July 4, 1874. These articles are the earliest record of the congregation. This meeting was held in the home of William Goetzen. The document lists the following officials: Chairman, Pastor John Haas; Elder, F. Stretchan; Deacon, William Goetzen; Trustees, William Goetzen, Jacob Foess and Michael Manshart; Election Committee, William Goetzen and Fred Bayerlein.

These articles were filed on September 18, 1874 and allowed the congregation to obtain property. On November 13, 1874 the congregation purchased a lot for \$50.00 on which the old church stood. This property is now occupied by the present parsonage

¹ The Saginaw News, "Chesaning Lutherans celebrate 100th", May 5, 1973.

and is part of the original plot of the village of Chesaning.

The first church building was built in 1877. Features which we might find unusual today include: an altar with the pulpit located behind and above the altar, a porch with steps which seemed to lead into thin air to enable the ladies easily to enter or leave the horse drawn wagons and buggies, and hitching posts located along the side of the building.

During services, conducted in German, the men would sit on one side of the building and the women and children on the other side. There was no central heating system or running water, two small buildings located behind the church provided all the comforts of home. This building, which served Zion well for many years, was sold in 1949 and moved to the corner of Main and Center, where it still stands today.

For the first 18 years of its existence as an organized congregation Zion formed a parish with Salem Lutheran Church of Owosso. It was therefore served by pastors living in Owosso; J. Haas, G. Deckinger, John Meyer and H. Abelman.²

On February 19, 1889, at the annual meeting, the congregation authorized the purchase of the lot south of the church. It was purchased for \$90.00. In the annual meeting of February 25, 1890 the congregation resolved to become a member of the Michigan Synod as soon as that would be possible.³

² Schmelzer, G., Geschichte der Michigan Synode und deren Gemeinden. (F. & C. Reitter Co., Saginaw, 1910). p. 129.

³ Minutes from Congregational meetings, p. 34

In September of 1890 Pastor Abelmann informed Zion that due to the stress of work in the growing congregation in Owosso he would no longer be able to serve as pastor of the Chesaning congregation. A parish was then formed with Christ Ev. Lutheran Church of Brady Township. The newly formed parish asked Pastors Huber and Mayer to arrange for students from the Seminary in Saginaw to preach there every fourteen days. At this time the school in Saginaw was still a theological seminary.

One student who therefore served the parish and served it alone from November of 1890 was F. M. Krauss. When the matter of calling its own pastor was resolved at the annual meeting of January 6, 1891, it was only natural that the call should be extended to the student pastor who had by now completed his theological training.⁴

During the pastorate of Rev. Krauss the congregation was informed of the impending merger of the Michigan Synod with the Minnesota and Wisconsin Synods to form the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States. On May 2, 1892, the parsonage at 231 Commercial Street was purchased for the sum of \$429.87. On April 30, 1893 Pastor Krauss was granted a peaceful release so that he might follow a call to the congregation at Sturgis, Michigan.

A call to fill the vacancy was not extended until April 29, 1894. Pastor H. Gangnuss of Brighton accepted the call extended to him by the Christ-Zion Parish. During his pastorate a barn

⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

was built on the parsonage property in 1896. After laboring in Chesaning and Brady for six years, advanced age compelled Pastor Gangnuss to resign from the ministry early in 1900.

In June of 1900 a call was extended to candidate of theology Henry Richter. On July 4, 1901 lightning struck the east side of the church, badly wrecking the spire. The resulting fire caused considerable damage to the church. Not only repair, but also enlargement and improvement of the building were taken under advisement, and in October the congregation decided to enlarge the church.

Dedication services for the enlarged church were held on June 15, 1902. Rev. J. Westendorf of Saginaw was the guest speaker. A German service was held in the morning and in the afternoon an English service was held.

In October 1905 plans were formulated for enlarging the parsonage. Two plans were presented and the second plan was adopted. For some unknown reason however, the first plan was used. In April 1906 Pastor Richter was granted a peaceful release to follow a call to Sturgis, the same place where Pastor Krauss had gone. Calling of a new pastor was postponed until the renovated parsonage was ready for occupancy. During this time Director Beer and students from the seminary in Saginaw were in charge of the parish.

In the summer of 1907 candidate of theology G. Schmelzer accepted the call to Chesaning. Work on the parsonage was not yet completed. Pastor Schmelzer wrote that both Brady and

Chesaning "have beautiful, debt-free property and hold God's Word dear to their hearts."⁵ In 1914 Pastor Schmelzer accepted a call to Detroit.

The next pastor of the parish, John Roekle, was installed the same year. In 1922 Zion numbered about 90 souls, 64 communicants and 24 voting members. The minutes of the July meeting in 1924 give the first reference to Sunday services in the English language, though English services were held prior to this time. It is at this meeting that the congregation decided to conduct English services every other Sunday. In 1926 Pastor Roekle followed a call into the pastoral office at Allegan, Michigan.

In the summer of 1926 Hilbert Engel, a graduate of our Theological Seminary, then located in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, was installed as pastor of the parish. In a special meeting held in December of that year it was decided to install electricity in the church. The Ladies Aid financed this project.⁶

Before 1928 Zion held many of its services on Sunday afternoon. That was changed in a special meeting in October of 1928. "At a special meeting on October 28, 1928 the congregation, upon recommendation of the church board, accepted the plan to change the schedule of Sunday services to wit: Services every Sunday morning, beginning at 9:30, the services to

5 Schmelzer G., Op. Cit., p. 129.

6 Church Minutes, Op. Cit., p. 97.

alternate as formerly in regard to English and German."⁷

In January of 1931 the church board resigned in order that the congregation might reorganize and enlarge its board to eleven members. Church council minutes state that the only two remaining board members at this time were Ed Ferden and Levi Koch. Plans to add a bedroom and bathroom to the parsonage were adopted in July of 1932. In order to do this with the congregation's approval the council resolved to have Rev. Engel make an every member canvass.

By 1937 the growing congregation recognized the need for a larger house of worship and a building fund was started. Wooden barrel banks were given to each family to be used for the fund. During the first year \$60.13 was collected. The resolution to obtain plans for a new church were interrupted when Pastor Engel accepted a call to Saline, Michigan in July of 1939.⁸

Pastor Engel must have a very popular man in Chesaning. In a special meeting on August 1, 1939 he read the call he received from Trinity Lutheran Church in Saline. Pastor Engel then explained to the members present his conviction that it would be advantageous to both congregations if a change in pastors were made at this time.

When it came time to vote for Pastor Engel's peaceful release it was agreed that a "yes" vote would grant the pastor a peaceful release and that a "no" vote is opposed to his being

⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

released. The results of the first ballot were: 41 votes cast, 33 voted no, 8 voted yes. Finally, after six ballots there were only four men left who voted no. Pastor Engel asked these men not to be offended by his decision to accept this call and that unless they could convince him that he must stay, he would go.⁹ The farewell service was held on the fourth Sunday in August.

Rev. Roland Hoenecke of Tacoma, Washington was installed as pastor of the parish on November 12, 1939. The need for a larger church continued to be a prime concern for members of Zion. The restrictions of World War II made progress difficult, however.

In the spring of 1943 the Evangelical Church, whose property was adjacent to Zion's, decided to relocate. Zion was able to purchase their building and property for \$2,650.00. This property is where the present church is located. Plans were made to remodel the newly purchased building as a new and larger house of worship. As before, war and post-war restrictions continued to hinder progress in that area. The building became a temporary parish hall.

On October 31, 1943, Zion was privileged to celebrate its 70th anniversary with former pastors F.M. Krauss of Lansing and John Roekle of Tawas City as guest speakers. In 1943 Zion numbered 80 families, 61 voting members, 150 communicants and 238 souls.

In 1944, at a cost of \$400.00 Zion purchased two lots located across the street from its property. Motivation for the

⁹ Ibid., p. 189.

purchase was future expansion, but it also eliminated the perpetual problem of carnivals using the property, creating a parking lot out of church property. A church bell was purchased in 1944 for \$136.00. This bell still calls members of Zion to worship today.

On March 22, 1946 the congregation had occasion to mark a double celebration: the purchase of an Estey reed organ and the 60th anniversary of the Ladies Aid. On October 6 of that same year pastor Hoenecke accepted a position as Dean of Men at Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm. He was granted a peaceful release on the second ballot.¹⁰

After several men declined the call to Chesaning, including Rev. Carlton Toppe, Rev. H.A. Schultz was installed into office on January 19, 1947. In the annual meeting of that year the congregation decided to drop all German language services. The minutes don't record if there was any discussion over the matter. They simply say, "German services will be dropped."¹¹

The often interrupted building program was still the major project facing the congregation. When it became evident that remodeling the parish hall would not provide adequate seating for Sunday services, plans were formulated for a new building.

After failing to release prints and specifications to contractors the architect was paid off at a cost of \$2,341.85 and

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 258.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 264.

new plans were adopted. In anticipation of building a new church the parish hall was sold to Mr. Paul Konkus who used the lumber to build his new home. The two lots located across the street were also sold.

The contract for a new church building was let to Mr. Fred Muehlenbech of Saginaw and groundbreaking ceremonies were held on July 11, 1948. Pastor Schultz laid the cornerstone on August 22, 1948. The guest speaker for the occasion was a former pastor of the congregation, Rev. G. Schmelzer.

On May 22, 1949 Zion again marked a double celebration; the dedication of its new house of worship and the diamond jubilee of its organization. The 75th anniversary had been postponed for one year so that it could be held in conjunction with the dedication services.

It was a festive time for members of Zion. Rev. H. Engel was the guest speaker in the morning service and Rev. K. Vertz of Owosso spoke in the afternoon service. A dinner at noon and an open house after the afternoon service were part of the dedication program.

On the following Tuesday a family night was held in the church parlors. Rev. Voges of Bay City served as master of ceremonies and various organizations of the congregation provided entertainment. On Sunday, May 29, an organ concert with Mr. Stanley Sparks at the console of the new Hammond organ concluded the dedication-jubilee program.

For several years the congregation had been considering

either remodeling the parsonage or building a new parsonage. It was decided to sell the old parsonage and construct a new parsonage next to the church. The present parsonage, built on the site of the original church, was dedicated on August 18, 1957. The congregation borrowed \$26,900.00 to finance its construction.

The continued growth of the congregation made it evident that the large building dedicated in 1949 was becoming smaller and smaller. The need for more seating for services resulted in the decision to conduct two services each Sunday starting in January of 1964.

The congregation in Brady township was invited to unite with our congregation in an effort to provide a more efficient operation for the parish and to lessen the work load of the pastor. The invitation was declined. As a result the pastor conducted three services every Sunday morning; two for Zion and one for Christ.

Holding two services each Sunday enabled the congregation to provide adequate seating for worship. However continued growth, especially evident in the Sunday School soon brought Zion to its third building program in the past twenty years.

After considering several plans for educational rooms the third plan under consideration was adopted. Groundbreaking services for the new educational unit were held on March 24, 1968. Dedication services for the twenty room building, connected to the church, were held on September 22, 1968.

In 1969 Christ Lutheran of Brady resolved to call its own pastor and the dual parish which had existed since 1890 was dissolved at the end of that year. A call extended to Pastor Schultz to continue as pastor of Zion was accepted.

In May of 1973 Zion was privileged to celebrate 100 years of God's grace. A month long celebration was planned. Guest speakers included Rev. K.F. Krauss, the son of Zion's first pastor, Rev. H. Engel, and Rev. Roland Hoenecke, both former pastors of the congregation. A special dinner was also held every Sunday.¹²

At Zion's centennial God's grace could be seen abundantly through the growth of the congregation. Zion went from 10 families in 1873 to 234 families in 1973. There were 648 baptized members, 394 communicant members and 93 voting members. In its first 100 years Zion saw 954 baptisms, 731 confirmations, 324 marriages, 278 burials and 32,217 members communed.

In 1978, after faithfully serving Zion Lutheran Church for 31 years, Pastor Schultz felt it was time to retire. His resignation from office was officially accepted by the church council on February 13, 1978.

In September of 1978, after six call meetings, Pastor David Schwartz became the next shepherd of Zion. He still serves the congregation today. Pastor Schwartz saw the need for a Christian Day school at Zion and plans were made to undertake the task. In 1983 the school was built and enrollment during the first year

¹² Church Bulletins, May, 1973.

was 53 students. The school grew so fast that an addition had to be built in 1985. The school currently serves 76 students and is staffed by four teachers.

Zion has shown remarkable growth during the past 115 years. It has gone from 10 families in 1873 to a congregation of 583 communicant members and 780 baptized souls. This congregation in the little village of Chesaning has touched the lives of thousands of people over the years. That really shows the greatness of God's grace and the power of his word.

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