

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH, JENERA, OHIO  
A KINGDOM MINDED CHURCH

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CHURCH HISTORY  
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The founding fathers of Trinity Lutheran Church first arrived in Hancock county in 1834. Though they had left Odenwald in 1831, a shipwreck just off the coast of America cost them most of their possessions and forced them to find gainful employment before moving on to their new homes in Ohio. Only nine years after the first settlers arrived, 36 families had settled in the area.

During the first years in Hancock county, the settlers held worship services in their homes. Since they lacked a pastor they read a sermon from a Lutheran commentary and sang some hymns. Finally in 1839 a German Lutheran pastor arrived and conducted services for a year. A unionistic attitude prevailed, however, and he was succeeded by a Reformed minister who remained only a short time. The next three years saw the congregation served by Lutheran circuit riders. Finally in 1843 the congregation was organized, and a J. G. Burger was called as its pastor. The official name of the congregation was German Evangelical Lutheran Zion Church. Only a month after its founding the congregation opened a school.

Four years later Pastor Burger left Zion. As was typical for Lutheran Churches in those days, Zion was left without a pastor for four years, during which time itinerant preachers occasionally served the congregation. The pastors called by the congregation over the next 36 years seem to have been little better. The pastor who stayed the longest was at Zion for only a year. In all, nine pastors served Zion during those years.

Perhaps part of the reason they stayed for so little time

was the strife that was a part of those times. The Civil War certainly made getting supplies and new pastors difficult at best. Also there was strife within the congregation. Although the majority of the members were Lutheran, a unionistic attitude prevailed and several members of the Reformed Church were accepted as members, with the understanding that only Lutherans could serve as pastors. The name of the church was changed to German United Lutheran and Reformed Church of Van Buren Township.

In 1853 the church split because of the strife between the lutheran and reformed elements of the congregation. The new church was named German Evangelical Lutheran and German Reformed Congregation of St. Paul in Van Buren Township. This faction went on to become St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church now of ELCA. The remainder of the congregation continued to worship in their newly built church (completed in 1852), but the error of unionism was still rampant.

The congregation was again reorganized in 1875 under Pastor Behrens. The name was changed to German United Lutheran and Reformed Church. Pastor Behrens tried desperately to end the strife and satisfy everyone. He did not succeed and was forced to leave.

Again, in 1883, under the direction of Pastor Jansen, the congregation reorganized under the name it holds today, German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church. This was a good sign that the unionism that had plagued the church for some 30 years was coming to an end. In 1885 under Pastor Andrew Beyer, the

Lutheran principles that had always been a part of the constitution were enforced. Reformed members of the congregation left. Delinquent members were brought back, and the school which had fizzled out was restarted. The church building, which is still in use today, was built for \$11,000, and was dedicated late in 1889.

During these early years the congregation suffered much due to the unionistic attitudes that prevailed among some members. God, however, used these trying times to strengthen the faithful few in their conviction that the Kingdom of God is served best, not by glossing over doctrinal differences, but by proclaiming the Word in all its truth. That attitude, along with a very definite desire to enlarge the kingdom and God's help, brought Trinity to become the Kingdom minded mother church that it is today. That kingdom minded attitude came to the forefront under the faithful service of Pastor John Gauss.

Pastor Gauss was a unique man. Born in 1874 near the Black Forest, he left his family to come to the United States alone, at the age of 15. During the next six years he worked his way through school here in the United States. He was ordained in 1895 and was installed at Trinity on August 22, 1897. During his 52 year ministry at Trinity, the self-reliance he showed as a 15 year old held true. He demanded and accepted nothing less than perfection in himself and in others, and yet he had the heart and demeanor of a *seelsorger*. Even today older members of Trinity are hesitant to answer questions in Bible Study, for fear that

they will be wrong and will be rebuked. And yet when one talks to them of Pastor Gauss their love for him is obvious. For all his apparent harshness, his congregation loved him dearly.

When Pastor Gauss began his work at Trinity there were a total of 47 voting members.<sup>1</sup> During his ministry the congregation grew by leaps and bounds. Near the end of his ministry the congregation had tripled in size to 153 voting members, 401 communicants and 551 baptized souls.<sup>2</sup>

Under Pastor Gauss, Trinity decided to join the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Michigan, and in 1919, the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States.

These facts show some of the Kingdom mindedness of Trinity under Pastor Gauss, what shows it even better are the missions started during his ministry.

In 1897 Pastor Gauss began services for a mission in Orange Township. The church was named St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Orange Township. As with its other mission endeavors, St. John's was started because of the distance to Jenera. Rather than have all of the members of Trinity from Orange Township travel ten or more miles to Church every Sunday, Pastor Gauss travelled to Orange Township every other week to conduct services there. For twenty years he served both congregations in this way. With the advent of the automobile at affordable costs, and with better roads, the members of St. John's decided to dissolve their congregation. Nearly all of the members chose to make Trinity their new church home.

In the late 1930's there was a desire in the congregation to start a mission twelve miles away, in Findlay. Findlay was and is the largest city in the immediate area, and thus offered greater job opportunities for those not involved in farming. The main offices of Marathon Oil were located there as was the Cooper Tire factory. Along with its industrial base Findlay had the closest major hospital. All of these factors combined to make Findlay a good place for a mission congregation, especially when it is considered that there were 45 members of Trinity willing to put forth the effort to start the new church.

The interested members of Trinity petitioned the District Mission Board and were rewarded by a decision from that board which stated that Findlay was indeed a promising mission field, and that a missionary would be placed there. In September of 1939 Candidate of Theology R. A. Gensmer received and accepted a call to serve the mission in Findlay. Pastor Gensmer was ordained and installed at a service at Trinity on October 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>3</sup> On October 29<sup>th</sup> the first worship service was held in a vacant store building with an attendance of 43.

On January 7, 1940 the congregation was officially organized as Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>4</sup> Plans to build a church building were begun in 1941 and a lot was purchased, but due to governmental restrictions on building due to World War II, the chapel was not begun. The congregation attempted to begin building on their property again in 1943, but wartime restrictions again prevented this. In 1947 the lot was sold, and

with the permission of the District Mission Board two lots were purchased on North Main Street. Building plans again fell through because the proposed plans did not meet with the Synod's specifications. Finally, on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1950, building was begun for the chapel. Just two years later Immanuel declared itself to be self-supporting. During these hard years for Immanuel, the Lord blessed them greatly, bringing their membership up from approximately 45 to 232 souls, 143 communicants and 36 voting members at the end of 1955.

In 1959 Immanuel suffered a division. The Council for Weekday Religious Education proposed setting up religious education in the Findlay Public School System. Pastor Maaske of Immanuel vigorously opposed such instruction on the grounds that it was not the government's responsibility to teach religion, and that it would violate fellowship principles, not to mention the question of what religion would be taught. Fourteen families, however disagreed with the way Pastor Maaske handled the situation. They left Immanuel and formed another congregation under the auspices of the LCMS. Membership dropped to 182 souls, 98 communicants and 36 voting members.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1959 Immanuel's membership has remained fairly steady. In its annual report for 1988, Immanuel lists 170 baptized members and 120 communicants.<sup>6</sup> In 1989 a number of members from the LCMS congregation founded by those fourteen families sought membership with Immanuel, bringing its average Sunday attendance up to 204. The year 1989 also saw the congregation purchase

property on the Northern side of Findlay for a new church building. It was purchased in April for \$32,000, and was paid off in November. The new church building will be designed to accommodate between 300 and 500 people. The decision to purchase the property was made with the Kingdom mindedness that began their own church, for Immanuel hopes to start a mission congregation in the southern part of Findlay within ten years.

This, however, was not the full extent of Pastor Gauss' and Trinity's kingdom mindedness. Trinity also encouraged Pastor Gauss in his duties as a synodical officer. In 1915 he was elected as president of the Michigan Synod, and then in 1919 when it became a district, he was elected as chairman of the General Mission Board. This also made him the chairman of the Apache Indian Mission in Arizona. Trinity willing gave him the time to make two visits to this mission field. Along with his efforts with the Apache Indian Mission, Pastor Gauss was instrumental in opening the mission field in Poland among the Lutherans there. In addition, he was elected to the presidency of the Michigan district numerous times. Three years before his death in 1949, Trinity decided to call Walter Voss to help the aging Pastor Gauss in his ministry.

It was under the direction of Pastor Walter Voss that Trinity decided in 1952 to start a mission congregation in Kenton, 25 miles southeast of Jenera. The opening service was held at a house in Kenton and had 105 in attendance, of which 40 were from the Kenton area.<sup>7</sup> On March 16<sup>th</sup> the first Sunday



School was held, led by Ezra Heldman, a long time member of Trinity.

In May of 1952 Pastor Voss decided, with approval from the Church Council, to seek approval from the mission Board to call a full-time pastor to the Kenton Mission. Pastor Baumann a former ALC pastor, after a colloquy, was accepted as a member of the Wisconsin Synod, and subsequently as a member of Trinity. His help was invaluable at the Kenton Mission as this allowed Pastor Voss to fulfill all of his duties to Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

On October 12<sup>th</sup> of that same year the congregation organized, adopted a constitution and the name Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church. In 1953 Pastor Leonard Newmann was installed as Grace's first pastor. That same year a vacant church building east of Kenton was purchased, but it turned out that the building was not well suited to the needs of Grace, and so in 1954 lots were purchased for a new chapel and parsonage. Work was begun on the parsonage first, and after completion it served as both the parsonage and the church building for three years. After this, services were conducted in various places while the congregation awaited the construction of a permanent church building. The chapel, still in use today, was finally completed in 1964.<sup>9</sup>

In 1971 there was a vacancy at Grace, and the members of the congregation decided to go to the assignment committee in order to fill the call. The assignment committee assigned Candidate James Clark to Grace, but before his graduation the Lord called him home. Saddened at the death of their pastor to be, the

members of Grace were forced to look elsewhere for a pastor. The decision was made to call Walter Voss who, since the founding of Grace, had accepted a call away from Trinity. Pastor Voss accepted the call and served Grace faithfully for seven years.

Trinity's kingdom mindedness also shows in her attitude for missions that have not fared as well as Immanuel and Grace. For a number of years in the late seventies and early eighties Faith Lutheran Church was the Synod's mission congregation in Lima. Unfortunately the slow growth at Faith and the tightening budget of the Synod forced the mission to fold. Since March of 1984, when Faith Lutheran of Lima held their last service, Trinity has been holding \$5,000 which Faith gave to Trinity to hold until such time as another WELS mission is started in Lima. The members of Trinity hope to be able to return that money to the mission field in Lima soon. Unfortunately there are no plans at this time to re-open the Lima mission.

The years since the closing of Faith in Lima have seen a strong emphasis on missions, despite the fact that there has been no new mission effort in Trinity's area. This emphasis has rather taken the form of strong Synod Subscriptions for home missions. In 1989, when many churches, especially those in farming communities which like Jenera were hit hard by the drought, were lowering or not increasing their subscriptions, Trinity increased her subscription by \$5,000 to \$60,000. This figure, if taken by itself, accounts for nearly half of the total increase in subscriptions for the entire Michigan district.

Despite the drought, which hit Trinity hard, they not only surpassed their subscription for 1988, but they increased it for 1989, because the members realize that the Kingdom comes first.

Trinity has not only started several mission congregations, she continues to support them in her prayers and through her actions. Relations between the churches are close. They work together like a family, just the way churches should. When Grace needed a new roof for their chapel, Trinity and Immanuel got together and helped pay for it. In the future, when Trinity needs another teacher, Immanuel plans to extend the call and handle the salary. As with the early church, when one of these congregations is in need the others see it as an opportunity to serve.

Down through the years Trinity has had a vision of expansion. Expansion of God's kingdom, not just at Trinity, but anywhere Trinity can reach. In the early years this zeal was misdirected by a few who thought that the best way to expand the kingdom was through union with the reformed. Thankfully, the Lord patiently led Trinity away from their error and blessed them greatly over the years. Missions, both those that have lasted only a short time like St. John's, and those that have endured to become self-supporting like Immanuel and Grace, are good examples of Trinity's Kingdom mindedness. Trinity could be a much larger congregation than it is; it could have a more prestigious church building; it could be in much better financial shape, if missions were not a part of its work. The members realize these things,

and yet they realize is that what is important is not Trinity congregation, but God's kingdom, which has grown because of the efforts at Trinity blessed by the working of the Holy Spirit.

## END NOTES

1. Fifty Years Of Faithful Service, A history of Pastor John Gauss' ministry at Trinity Lutheran Church, Jenera. 1947.
2. Fifty Years Of Faithful Service.
3. Newspaper article from "The Republican-Courier Press", October 28, 1939
4. God With Us, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration, Immanuel Lutheran Church, Findlay, Ohio. 1989.
5. God With Us.
6. Faith Alive: Venture Forth In Faith And Harvest God's Blessings. Immanuel Annual Report 1988.
7. Church Council Minutes, Trinity Lutheran Church, recorded February 13, 1952, adopted March 2, 1952.
8. Church Council Minutes, Trinity Lutheran Church, recorded May 26, 1952, adopted July 2, 1952.
9. Interview with Pastor Gregory Stählecker, current pastor of Grace Kenton. March 30, 1990.