

BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH, HUSTISFORD

THE FIRST 50 YEARS 1858-1908

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Senior Church History

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

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Mequon, Wisconsin

The fact that there is a Lutheran church in Hustisford, Wisconsin should not surprise anyone. If you take a Sunday drive to any part of Wisconsin you can find a Lutheran congregation in almost any area. This is especially true in the area between Watertown, Fond Du Lac, and Milwaukee. There are Lutheran churches everywhere you look. Church life was a vital part of life in the 1800's so many of the communities grew up around the churches. Church provided opportunities for people to get together, share experiences, practice Christian love with one another, and hear God's Word - preferably in German. The Word brought people together and gave them strength to overcome many of the problems they faced in daily life. That Word was a treasure the people cherished and Lutherans in the Hustisford area have been fed with the precious word of truth for almost 135 years. From it's small beginnings Bethany Lutheran Church grew to be a congregation of more than 1000 souls by the time they celebrated their 50th anniversary in 1908. These were 50 years filled with blessings from God and 50 years that were enjoyed only by the grace of God.

"From its earliest beginnings the Hustisford area seems to have had a good representation of German families, some of whom had left Germany in protest to Frederick William's forcing the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches to combine. Seeking a place of religious freedom some of them most likely made Hustisford their home." Since many left Germany because of their deep love for the Word of truth, they continued to give worship a primary position in their lives.

The first Lutherans coming to the Hustisford area found no Lutheran pastors here. "The first missionary activity among the German people in the town of Hustisford was carried on by the Methodists near the end of the 1840's. They, however, won over only a few families, because many of their prospects had fixed convictions of their own regarding the true doctrines and the purity of Scriptures."

Hustisford has seen a variety of churches: Baptist, Methodist Episcopal, Congregational, Bethany Lutheran, German Protestant, Episcopal Society, Union Church, Grace Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Zion Lutheran. Only two have survived the test of time. Bethany which was founded in 1858 and the Presbyterian Church founded in 1923.

Bethany is actually an offshoot from a Lutheran Church which was started in Town Hubbard. In 1857 the church in Hubbard split and a part of the Hubbard congregation formed Bethany Lutheran Ev. Lutheran Congregation. It seems that in the early years the members of Bethany were very cautious about becoming part of any specific synod. The split from the Town of Hubbard Church may have been caused by a pastor ^(name?) who wanted his congregation to become part of the Missouri Synod. Not all were in favor so a split occurred

The early years were not easy for the group that started worshipping just west of Hustisford. This group built a small church out of the most common material of the day. They built themselves a church out of logs which had been supplied from the trees that a tornado brought down a year earlier. I have

no record of how many members made up this original body, but within a year there were 30 families who were worshipping together in Hustisford. The group that organized into Bethany soon found themselves without a pastor. Their first pastor G. Schwanz served them only a few months before leaving in September of 1858 to serve a Moravian Church. Within a month God had answered their prayers for a pastor when Fredrich Hass agreed to shepherd the small flock in Hustisford. He had formerly been a school teacher in Watertown, but served in Hustisford as both pastor and teacher.

Reading portions of Pastor Haas' journal leave you with the impression that Fredrich was a man who left all things in God's hands. As was customary for most Lutheran pastors in the 1800's Pastor Hass had come over from Germany. In the writings he left behind he described some of the experiences he and his family encountered on their voyage to America. When he was informed that 40 persons had died the last time the ship had made the journey to America he spoke a prayer to Jesus asking for God's help and protection. Time and time again during the journey he went to his Lord in prayer and also looked to God's Word for needed assurance. Pastor Hass was a man who knew the value of relying on God. He wore his faith on his sleeve which may have not been an easy task when you consider his surroundings. He made this addition about the ship's crew. "The ships crew is very rough and without religion. We have hopes with God's help soon to land on the other side. Help us Lord and have mercy on us." When the ship finally reached America Mr.

Hass gave all glory to God, saying "God be praised. If thou givest us so many blessings on earth, what a wonderful place heaven must be."

Soon after Pastor Hass arrived the church experienced another setback. In 1859 a group broke away from Bethany and formed St. Michael's Lutheran Church. St. Michael's continues to exist today situated about 3 miles NE of Hustisford. So in its early years Bethany had many difficulties to overcome, but with God's help they continued onward, not thwarted by the problems they had been through.

Pastor Hass found himself extremely busy serving in his new field of work. God had blessed the work of Pastor Hass by bringing additional souls into his care. When he applied for membership into the Wisconsin Synod Pastor Hass wrote the following words about his work: "When I arrived the congregation consisted of about 30 families. At present there are two congregations, because some of the more distant members felt that it would be more convenient if they built a second church in their vicinity. Thus since Nov. 20, 1859, we have two churches. The second congregation has the same number of families. Then a third group organized five miles from here, there being ten families They have services every three to four weeks, until now in a farmer's house. Church attendance in general is good. The daily life of the congregation is outwardly honorable and respectable. Here and there you will find strong active Christians."

Strong Christians they were but also very cautious. Though

Pastor Hass applied for membership into the Wisconsin Synod in 1860 the congregation did not make the same move. Still remembering the past experiences they had been through they needed time before they would make such a commitment. Pastor Hass adds this remark in his application to Synod. "Although my congregation will never forget what great harm was done to them that a preacher and his Synod could cause them to break up to such a point as to even selling their church, I hope that my congregation will outlive this and will be taken in by a Synod, whose head is the Lord Jesus."

Pastor Hass only served in Hustisford for four years before the Lord called him to proclaim the precious gospel in the area around La Crosse. So in 1862 Bethany was again in need of a pastor and they found him in the person of Phil. Wetzel. He had also been a teacher previously and could even be the teacher that was responsible for Pastor Hass coming to America from Germany. In his journal Pastor Hass mentions a Teacher Wetzel from Watertown whose letters he had read. These letters played an important part in him deciding to leave Germany. If this is the same Wetzel then it is not without possibility that Pastor Hass may have recommended Pastor Wetzel as his replacement.

During his years of ministry Bethany continued to experience growth so by 1866 the congregation needed a larger place of worship so they looked to the village and found a white framed church building that had belonged to the German Protestant Ev. Society, but now was not in use. So they decided to move from the country and purchase the white frame church as their 2nd

House of God. This move would eventually contribute immensely to the growth of Bethany.

Pastor Wetzel served for 5 years but in 1867 he was no longer able to carry out the responsibilities of his ministry so he resigned as pastor of Bethany. "Then Bethany appealed to the Wisconsin Synod to supply her with a pastor. Synod gladly complied with the request, recommending Pastor Phillip C. Koehler, who at the time due to ill health had resigned his pastorate at Manitowoc, but was now again ready to assume duties in a more healthful area. He took charge of the church and school in July 1867." On June 1, 1868 the congregation was incorporated under the name, Die Deutsche Ev. Lutherische St. Bethanien Gemeinde, agreeing to the constitution that Pastor Koehler had drawn up.

In one of his letters he states, "The congregation at the time was a small group of families, a few over thirty in number. What I saw and heard of Hustisford at the time was of such nature that one would have reason to despair, and I myself had very little hope that a congregation worthy of note could be gathered and exist at this place. Yet I had accepted the call in God's name, and I had also decided in God's name to hold out here as long as possible, and to carry out the duties of my office after all. Thus I was permitted soon to experience that God was with us, and that my labor in church and school was not in vain."

"In Dec. 1870 Pastor Koehler was permitted to serve the newly-founded congregation at Woodland and at the close of 1873

he began to gather and serve a congregation at Juneau. When he was requested to serve two additional congregations, Bethany called Johann Koehler, a son, as his assistant. This arrangement continued until 1881, when the son accepted a call to Two Rivers, Wisconsin.

In 1884 Pastor Koehler was forced by ill health to request his release from serving Bethany any longer. It was granted in March. But upon reconsideration at the next meeting she preferred to grant his ^m a four-month leave of recuperation. During this time his son, Chris, of Hubbard, served as pastor."

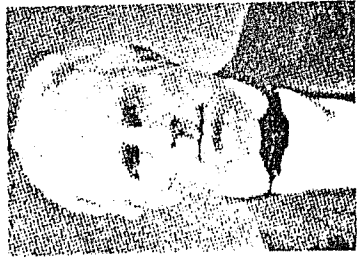
During the Koehler years the congregation experienced tremendous growth. It was during his ministry that Bethany had so many students attending school that they had to call a full time teacher to carry out the responsibilities of instructing the children. The congregation had increased so much in size that by 1891 the 2nd place of worship was no longer able to house the congregation. The members had to decide between remodeling or building from scratch. It was decided they would build a brand new house of worship, but would delay the project for at least two years.

In 1893 they began and completed the project. The massive structure was erected at a cost of \$11,637. Almost 100 years later the interior was renovated at a cost of almost \$150,000. "The dedication of the new church was a joyful celebration, a day to give thanks to the Triune God for the tremendous blessings he had showered upon them. The speakers for the occasion were Pastors Chris Koehler, G. Bergemann and Prof.

Joh. Koehler." The first English sermon ever preached in Bethany Lutheran Church was delivered that evening by the future professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, J.P. Koehler. German, however, continued to be the primary language into the 40's and German services were still regularly conducted into the 1980's.

Pastor Koehler's ministry in the new building was rather short for he died in August of 1895 after contracting blood poisoning. "His successor was Pastor William Huth of Green Bay, who served from 1895-1911. During his time here Bethany built a new parsonage and celebrated her 50th anniversary. In 1911 he accepted a call to Northwestern College."

When Bethany observed their 50th Anniversary of the congregation there were 1060 souls that God had made part of their body. What great evidence they had seen of the grace of God that he would bring about such a miracle of growth in a community that many of his servants doubted would ever give rise to such a family of believers. The Word of God is what God says it is "the Word of life." The Word that creates life in hearts that are dead and makes sinners alive to serve the God of their salvation. I marvel at how a community of less than 800 residents can be home to a congregation of nearly 1000 souls still today. The only reason is by God's grace. Bethany Lutheran Church has seen many advances since 1908, but the important things have remained the same. The members still cling to Jesus as their most precious treasure and they continue to let his Word guide their lives.



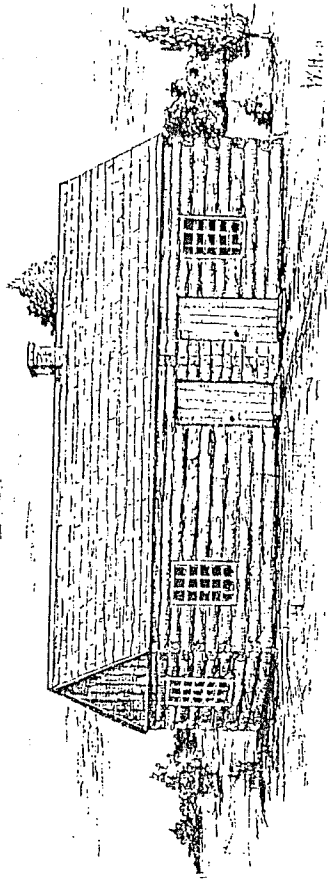
FREDRICK W. HASS
1858 - 1862



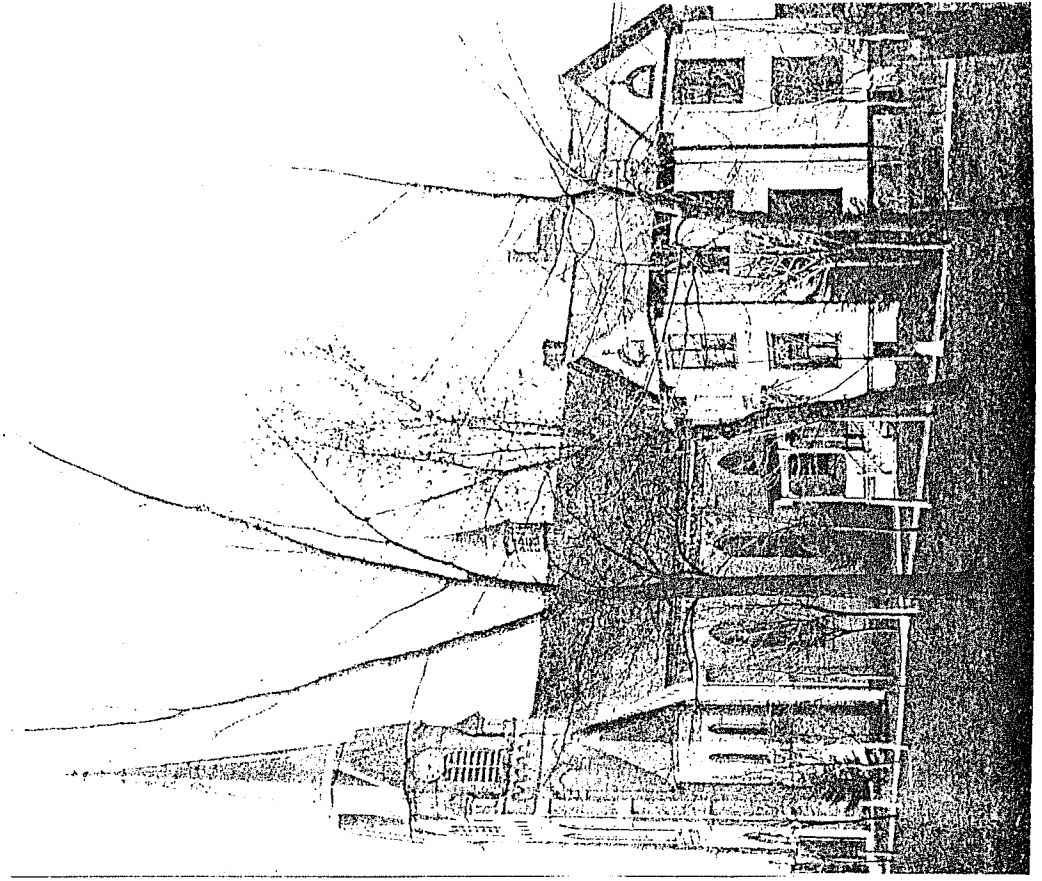
WILLIAM HUTH
1895 - 1911



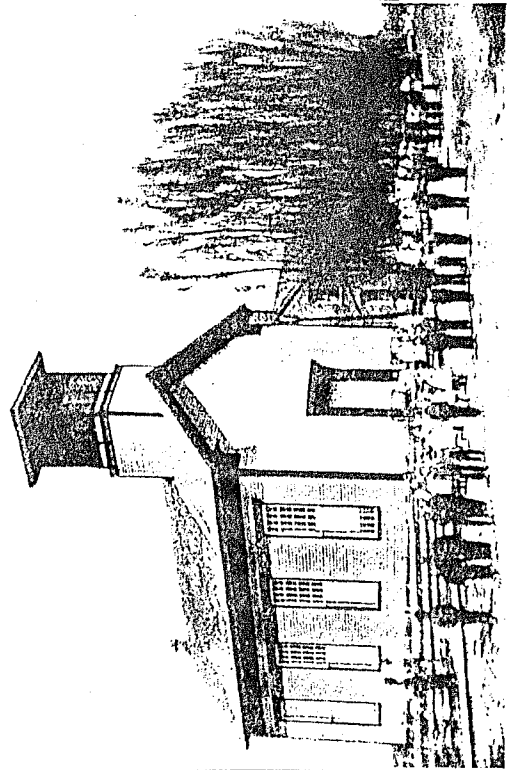
PHILLIP KOEHLER
1857 - 1895



Bethany's Church 1858-1866



Bethany's Church 1893 Present



The portions which were quoted in this paper were from two sources. One source were excerpts from a journal that Pastor Hass had kept. Some of his relatives translated different portions and gave a copy of the translation to Bethany Lutheran Church in 1991. Every time I quoted Pastor Hass I referred to it as a quote.

The other quotes were taken from Bethany's 100th Anniversary Booklet from 1958. The pages referred to in the paper were pages 8-10.