

A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY
OF
BETHLEHEM EV. LUTHERAN CONGREGATION
HORTONVILLE, WISCONSIN

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Church History 373
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The village of Hortonville was incorporated as such in 1894. It is located in Outagamie County between Appleton and New London on U.S. Highway 45. Hortonville, a village of just over two thousand people today, was a prosperous town, however, as early as 1857 when Pastor Gottlieb Fachtmann arrived there. Fachtmann, who is called the "first traveling Missionary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," was the first Lutheran pastor known to have worked in Hortonville. In October of 1857 he left Milwaukee traveling eventually to the area northwest of Lake Winnebago. Leaving the Neenah-Menasha area on the northwest shore of the lake he:

"continued up the Rat and Wolf Rivers. His journey took him as far as New London and what is now known as Hortonville. Everywhere he found a lack of churches, children unbaptized, and people hungry for the Word and Sacraments. These findings he noted in several reports to the President of the Synod."¹

"Hortonville at that time was a prosperous village about ten years old. In the winter of 1847-1848 the Knapp brothers had made hand shaved shingles in a cabin on the site of Hortonville. Alonzo E. Horton followed them in the early spring of 1848. His selection of Hortonville was determined by the fact that the Black Otter Creek afforded sufficient power to operate a saw mill and that the region round about was covered by a heavy growth of fine timber. Later in 1848 he began putting in a dam, digging a millrace, and building a saw mill, which began making lumber about August, 1849. The lumber was rafted down Black Otter Creek to the Wolf River and eventually to the Mississippi. In November, 1849, the first plat of the village of Hortonville was filed. By 1857 Hortonville was the site of a flour mill, several dry goods stores, grocery stores, and two large hotels, one of them the best and largest in northern Wisconsin. A good road also connected Hortonville and New London, which was the steamboat port on the Wolf River. The fact that Hortonville lay midway between Appleton and the vast pine regions of the Wolf River made it an important trading and business center in those years. Such was the village Pastor Fachtmann visited in October, 1857."²

Although Fachtmann found a thriving community, there were no churches to be found in the village. Clergymen of the Reformed persuasion and

Roman Catholic priests had served this area, but none of them had as yet built a house of worship. Such was the atmosphere in which Fachtmann found several German Lutherans. To these people he preached and administered the sacraments.

In June of 1858 Fachtmann attended the Wisconsin Synod's convention. After the convention he set out on a second mission circuit. Again he visited Hortonville and New London. At Hortonville "some 60 German families in the area near the village extended a warm welcome to him." 3
At New London,

"Fachtmann preached and administered the sacraments to 30 Lutheran families living in the settlement whom he had served the previous year. They came mostly from Prussia, Pomerania and Mecklenburg, Germany. 4

Fachtmann continued to serve the Hortonville area for about a year, working out of St. Peter's Congregation in Fondulac. However in July of 1859, after accepting another call, he left to work in the LaCrosse area. At this time Pastor Carl Friedrich Waldt from Menasha began serving the area.

"In 1859 St. Paul's Congregation, now at Dale, but then situated between Medina and Dale, was organized, but whether by Fachtmann or by Waldt is uncertain. The Lutherans from Hortonville usually attended services there. 5

Through the congregation at Dale, Waldt served the people of Hortonville until 1865 when he accepted a call out of the area. The Dale congregation was served for the next two years by Pastor Theodore Jaekel who was the Pastor of Immanuel's Church in Town Winchester. At this point it should be noted that some sources attribute the founding of the Dale congregation in 1859 to Pastor Jaekel. The History of Outagamie County states that "St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation was organized

in 1859, by Rev. Th. Jaeckel, who preached to eleven families." ⁶ Furthermore, Gordon A. Bubolz wrote:

"A group of Germans, largely from Ohio, and a few families from Pennsylvania had come to Dale beginning in 1853. Apparently there came with them a pastor, a Rev. Lienkaemper who organized a Reformed Church congregation by 1858 while a year later the Rev. Th. Jaeckel organized the St. Paul Congregation. Services were held in a school house or in the homes of members of the congregations. In 1863-1864 the two congregations united in the building of a church about one half mile west of Dale. They continued to share this house of worship until 1878 when the Reformed congregation purchased the share of the Lutherans." ⁷

While the source quoted earlier seems to attribute the founding of the Dale congregation to Fachtmann or Waldt, these last two clearly state that it was Jaeckel. However, the interesting fact is that the Lutherans at Dale cooperated with the Reformed at least in externals. Since this was the congregation where most of the Lutherans from Hortonville attended it may be concluded that they too were not entirely free from the influence of "unionism" which came to America from the Old Country.

Pastor Waldt returned to the area in 1867, accepting a call to Neenah. He once again took over the spiritual care of the people of Hortonville. "It is during this period that the actual organization of the congregation at Hortonville took place - first as a preaching station and then as a congregation." ⁸

~~"The few Lutherans in Hortonville and vicinity called Rev. C. F. Waldt to build them a church. The congregation was organized and the first church dedicated August 14, 1870. Seven families constituted the original congregation, comprised in the following members: Fred Schulz, Emil Schwebs, Fred Voss, William Voss, August Levin, Gustav Schwebs, and Conrad Mainzer."~~ ⁹

Because of poor health the Synod gave Waldt an assistant in the person of Rev. Otto Spehr, in 1870. He resided in Hortonville and also served

the congregations at Dale and Greenville. Prior to his arrival the Hortonville flock had purchased an unfinished church building from the Methodists. They completed the work on the building after he arrived. This building was dedicated as a house of worship in August of 1870. In September of that same year the founders of the congregation met and officially established themselves as Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. Less than a year later, in June of 1871, Bethlehem applied for and was accepted into the membership of the Wisconsin Synod at the Synod's convention in Manitowoc.

Pastor Spehr served the Hortonville congregation for about a year and a half. In the fall of 1871 he left to serve a congregation in Sheboygan and Pastor H.J. Haack accepted a call from Bethlehem shortly thereafter in October to replace Spehr as the congregation's spiritual shepherd. Haack served Bethlehem until the middle of 1873 at which time he resigned from the ministry for reasons which are unknown. However, shortly before he resigned, Bethlehem's house of worship burned to the ground, on May 15, 1873. A fire had started in the local shoe-shop located a ways down the road from the church.

"A strong wind was blowing from the south, (and) spread to a shed between the shop and the church, from where embers were carried to the steeple of the church....The whole village turned out in an attempt to put out the fire. The women of the town formed a bucket brigade and the men fought the fire. Mr. Emil Schwebs, one of the founders of the congregation, almost became a casualty while fighting the fire on the steeple, when someone removed the ladder to the rear of the church. All attempts to save the church were in vain. 10

Needless to say, the Lutherans of Hortonville were in dire straits that summer of 1873. They had no insurance to replace their church which had burned to the ground, they still owed \$900.00 on the original property and building, and they had no pastor. Such were the details of a re-

port which Mr. Charles Buck presented to the Synod Convention at Lacrosse in behalf of the congregation in June that same year. The brothers and sisters of Bethlehem, throughout the Synod, opened their hearts and pocket-books to help the congregation. \$800.00 was collected and sent to Hortonville. The congregation decided not to rebuild on the same site. Instead, they purchased a lot from Mrs. Julius Zuehlke for \$75.00 on the corner of Embarrass and Pine streets. No building project was undertaken however, until another pastor was secured. After a vacancy of over a year Pastor Traugott Gensike was installed as their pastor on June 28, 1874. Gensike served a dual pastorate, also serving the congregation at New London.

About three months after his arrival a new church building was completed and dedicated to the worship of God, on September 6, 1874.

"The new church, it is true was not a pretentious building, but after all its best ornament was the true Word of God and the precious sacraments. It was a frame building, 30 ft. x 56 ft. heated with two box stoves. It had a balcony, but had no sanctuary. The front of the church was square inside. The altar was on an elevated platform and the pulpit was built directly above the altar. Special gifts of money, presented to the congregation, enabled the congregation to purchase a reed organ to accompany the congregational singing. When the church was completely finished, the congregation had a debt of \$1500. Each of the members, however, signed a personal note and thus reduced the debt to \$200....The congregation had only thirteen voting members." 11

During his pastorate, Gensike made his residence in New London after residing for a year at Hortonville. This was at the vehement request of the New Londoners. However, Gensike continued to shepherd the flock at Hortonville until he left the area for another congregation in September of 1880. The Lord blessed Gensike's pure preaching of the Gospel and when he left the congregational voting members had risen from thirteen to forty-eight.

In no time at all Bethlehem had a new pastor. On September 17, 1880 Albert F. Kluge was installed. Not only did Kluge serve the congregation at Hortonville, but he also continued to pastor the congregation at new London as well as the congregations at Dale, Caledonia, Maple Creek, and Liberty. During his term of service Bethlehem decided to build a Christian Day School. The first school building was erected across the street from the church. The land for this one room school was purchased on May 2, 1881 for \$150.00. \$125.00 came from selling the lot where the congregation's original church building had stood. The congregation officially voted for the building of the school on January 5, 1882. The duties of teaching the children fell on Pastor Kluge. "Following Pastor Kluge, Pastors John Hacker and G.E. Boettcher spent many years in the classroom, until the congregation could see its way clear to call special teachers." 12

The members of Bethlehem responded to the Lord's blessing of continued growth by calling their own resident pastor in 1884.

"They sent a call to Pastor John Hacker who was then serving Zion's Congregation at Leeds, Wis. Pastor Hacker accepted the call to Hortonville and was installed as pastor of the congregation on November 4, 1884." 13

Since this was the congregation's first resident pastor, they had to supply adequate housing. Initially Hacker and his family lived out of three rooms in a local house which the congregation rented for them. However,

"At the annual meeting of the congregation on January 2, 1885, the voters decided to build a parsonage for its first resident pastor. It was also used to teach instruction class in later years. In that period of time, the school term usually lasted six months. Some of the children only attended school until the fourth or fifth grade." 14

This parsonage was used until 1951 when a new one was built. There were, however, additions made to the original parsonage in 1904, and 1910.

Pastor Hacker remained at Hortonville until December of 1893 when he left to serve a congregation in Wilson, Minnesota. After retiring from the ministry in June of 1911, he returned to Hortonville where he lived out the rest of his life. He died on June, 4, 1917. Bethlehem's next pastor was to serve the congregation for forty-five years.

"Upon his graduation from the Seminary, Pastor Gustav E. Boettcher accepted the call to preach at Bethlehem. He was ordained and installed as Pastor on July 1, 1894. One of his first duties was teaching the Christian Day School, a task to which he devoted himself wholeheartedly until the congregation was able to support a teacher.

"In addition to his pastoral and teaching duties, Pastor Boettcher was the choir director, preached in Dale on Sunday afternoons and did some janitorial work." 15

One of the major tasks undertaken by the congregation during Boettcher's stay was the building of a new church on the site where the school was located. In August of 1895 the congregation celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary and took special collections for the purpose of erecting a new house of worship. A little over two years later the structure was completed at the cost of \$5665.00. This building continues to serve as the congregation's worship facility today.

"The present church edifice is a solid-brick, Gothic-style structure, 40 x 80 ft., with a sanctuary sixteen feet deep and a spacious sacristy. The tower at the southeast corner of the church is about 100 feet high. Altar, pulpit, antependia, and a new reed organ were supplied by the Ladies' Aid of the congregation. Carpets were bought by the young ladies of the congregation and the young men of the congregation furnished the light fixtures. The art-glass windows were gifts of individual members of the congregation.

"The building of the new church also brought about one other change. The school-house had to be moved to a new location, namely, to the rear of the present church." 16

At this time the congregation numbered about 420, with a voting membership of about 70 men. The former church building was sold in 1898 to St. Peter's Congregation in the Town of Liberty.

During the fall of 1897 while the church was being completed the congregation relieved Pastor Boettcher temporarily of his teaching responsibilities and hired Mr. H. Munding. After the church had been completed, however, Boettcher resumed his teaching responsibilities until 1903. "In the spring of 1903 the congregation permanently relieved Pastor Boettcher of his teaching duties and since that time has had regular teachers in its Christian Day School." ¹⁷ A Miss Meyer was engaged to teach the spring session at the school and the next academic year was conducted by Miss Martha Schliebe. Through the early 1930s the teachers were simply hired by the congregation for the school year. Sometime in the mid to late 1930s the congregation began sending its teachers "divine calls." Including Pastors Kluge, Hacker, and Boettcher, Bethlehem's school has had 86 people serve as teachers, the last one being called in 1983.

Another major change took place in 1903 which showed that the largely German-speaking congregation was beginning to change.

"In the Quarterly Meeting of the congregation on March 29, 1903, it was decided to permit the pastor to conduct English services if they would not interfere with the regular German services...Although German services remained a regular feature for a long time, they were discontinued altogether in 1946. Since 1921 all instruction classes have been taught in the English language and since 1929 all business of the congregation has been conducted in the medium of the English." ¹⁸

Some other major events which took place during Pastor Boettcher's tenure as the spiritual leader of Bethlehem, were the building of a new two-story brick school in 1908 for \$3000.00, the purchase of a pipe organ in 1915 for \$1600.00, the purchase of a teacherage in 1916 and the selling of it in 1931, the observance of the congregation's fiftieth anniversary, the formation of the Young People's Society in 1931, and a \$2000.00 redecoration of the interior of the church in 1936. Concerning Pastor Boettcher

Bethlehem's 100th anniversary book states:

"After forty-five years of blessed and faithful service to the congregation, Pastor G.E. Boettcher resigned his pastorate at the Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church and retired from the active ministry on June 30, 1939. Under God, it was Pastor Boettcher who made this congregation what it is today. God visibly blessed his conscientious labors both for the congregation and for its Christian Day School. At the end of 1939 the records show that the congregation had 576 baptized members, 457 communicant members, and 132 voting members. Pastor Boettcher spent his entire ministry in this congregation. During his forty-five years of service he preached about 5000 sermons, performed 641 baptisms, 674 confirmations, 187 marriages, and 282 burials. He communed about 26,234 guests at the Lord's altar. His long ministry was a distinct blessing to the congregation." 19

Boettcher retired in Hortonville and died there on Dec. 17, 1946.

Pastor Harold E. Wicke succeeded Boettcher on July 1, 1939. After completing his Seminary training Wicke accepted a call to Bethlehem as a teacher in their Christian Day School, apparently because there were not enough openings for the new graduates into the parish ministry as pastors. However, on March 6, 1938, he was ordained and installed as the congregation's assistant pastor, becoming their resident pastor upon Boettcher's retirement. Pastor Wicke served the congregation faithfully until October 15, 1950, when he accepted a call to St. Peter's in Weyauwega, Wisconsin. During Wicke's stay a major project which was completed was the two room addition to the Christian Day School. As a result of the WW II baby boom the school's enrollment jumped from about 50 students in 1940 to 102 in 1947. The time of dedication and the cost of this project are unclear.

One source states that "the new addition to the school was dedicated on September 11, (1949). The total cost of the addition was \$50,583.20." 20

However a later source states that "The two room addition was completed and dedicated on October 11, 1949 at an approximate cost of \$30,000.00." 21

Another major change which took place during Wicke's tenure was the

official change of name for the congregation in 1950.

"At the Annual Meeting, the congregation officially adopted a change of name for the church. The congregation was originally incorporated with the name 'The German Lutheran Bethlehem Church Society of Hortonville, Wisconsin.' This name was changed to the present name of Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Congregation." 22

Before continuing with the years of Wicke's successor one other point should be noted. Although the Ladies Aid existed since February 4, 1897, there was no organization for the men until 1940. Wicke, even though a rookie pastor, saw the need for such an organization for the men of his congregation. On February 12, 1940 the Men's Club was officially organized. The object of the Men's Club was,

"To encourage one another actively to participate in the work of the local congregation; to further Christian fellowship, and to assist in giving publicity to the cause of Lutheranism." 23

Pastor Erwin B. Froehlich followed Wicke as the next shepherd of the Bethlehem flock. Froehlich was installed as the congregation's pastor on January 7, 1951. Under Froehlich's direction the congregation continued to progress and grow. In 1951 men and women were for the first time allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper together. Also in 1951 a new parsonage was completed. In 1953 mortgages on the church, school, and a teacherage were paid off. Modern technical advancements did not pass the congregation by either. Although the church building has excellent acoustics, a sound system was installed in 1956. Pastor Froehlich left Bethlehem in 1957, after accepting a call as pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Hustisford, Wisconsin. He was succeeded by Pastor Charles A. Schlei who was installed as pastor of the congregation on November 3, 1957.

Schlei devoted twenty-two years of his ministry to Bethlehem, leaving the congregation in July of 1978 to serve our military servicemen in Europe as a civilian chaplain. As in the past, the Lord maintained, preserved, and

caused the congregation to grow during Schlei's pastorate.

In 1958 the congregation voted "to join the Federation of Congregations to maintain and operate Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton, Wis." 24 Individual members of the congregation had privately supported the high school before this time. Over the years many of the congregation's young people have taken advantage of the opportunity to continue their secondary education at Fox Valley. The congregation's dedication to Christian education was also made evident in 1961, when the Christian Education Society was formed.

Another major achievement of 1961 was the \$37,000.00 renovation of the church building. A new heating system was added to the church along with an enclosed front entrance. The inside of the edifice was redecorated and the building itself was rewired electrically.

In 1965 a group of women of the congregation organized a Lutheran Girl Pioneers' "Caravan" for the girls of the congregation. The purpose of this group was and still is:

"to provide the youth of the church with a six point program in keeping with the purpose of the church, a program which: 1) contains only Lutheran Theology, 2) gives the children the great outdoors, 3) develops leadership, 4) builds citizenship, 5) teaches safety, and 6) gives children something to do." 25

In 1967 the Sunday School was reactivated after lying dormant since 1932. One elderly member did, however, remember attending Sunday School as early as 1912, although the earliest mention of a Sunday School program is in the minutes of a 1924 quarterly voters meeting. Since its re-establishment in 1967, the Sunday School has continued to exist, serving children from the age of three years up through the eight grade.

The worship of Bethlehem was greatly enhanced on February 2, 1969, with the purchase of a new organ,

"The organ was built by the Temple Organ Company of Burlington, Iowa. It has 17 registers; 19 ranks and 1,089 pipes. It was purchased for \$10,000.00." 26

In addition to the organ, a set of chimes was given to the congregation at the same time as a gift by one of the members.

In 1970 the church basement was remodeled, but more importantly, the congregation celebrated living under God's grace for 100 years. At that time the congregation listed the following statistics: "Baptisms - 1677, Confirmations - 1398, Marriages - 485, and Burials - 619." 27

One final accomplishment of the congregation which took place during Schlei's stay as pastor was the construction of an all purpose room which was dedicated on September 25, 1977.

"This multi-purpose room is very functional for school and church activities. Besides the school sports programs, it is used by the Youth Group for various activities, adult basketball, womens exercise classes, AAL programs, Easter Breakfast, family physical activities and physical education for the grades." 28

The current Pastor at Bethlehem is Carl Pagel. He was officially installed and began serving the congregation in August of 1978. Under his shepherding the congregation has undergone further advancement.

In 1980 a "Train" of the Lutheran Boy Pioneers was reactivated. Data on the Pioneer program at Bethlehem could only be obtained through telephone conversations with the current leaders, Mr. "Red" Surprise and Mr. Larry Klitzke. According to the information which they had from previous records, a Pioneer group for the boys of the congregation was started during Schlei's tenure as pastor in 1970. It lasted about two years and then folded when the senior leader, Gene Paschen, left the congregation. Another effort was made around 1974 and this time the club lasted for about four or five years. Whether it folded for the second time just before

or after Pagel arrived on the scene is unclear. The Train has been active since 1980 and currently has three senior leaders, one junior leader and twenty-four boys who are members.

The major advancement of the congregation thus far during Pagel's stay has been in the area of Christian education and shows the congregation's deep commitment to the proper training of its youth.

"Through great efforts on the part of the finance committee and money acquired from fund raising events, the congregation was able to construct a four classroom addition to its school. All the money needed for it was by donation or interest free loans given by members of Bethlehem. Plans were drawn and construction began in the spring of 1980. It was completed for occupation by fall of that year, the dedication being on September 25, 1980. Total cost of this addition was \$110,000. When talking about this new addition, Pastor Pagel said, 'Our school represents the youths and strength of our congregation. Even though we are an old congregation, the school and its continued growth shows we aren't dead or dying.'" 29

Because of the continued growth with which the Lord has blessed Bethlehem, the congregation voted to call a vicar from the Seminary at Mequon. In August of 1983 the congregation's first vicar was installed in the person of John Beck.

According to the Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for 1983, Bethlehem currently has 1,110 baptized souls and 838 communicant members. There are 138 students enrolled in the Christian Day School, who are taught by three male teachers and three female teachers. Forty One students are enrolled in the Sunday School. They are instructed by one male teacher and four female teachers. The congregations total contributions for all purposes in 1983 came to \$250,295.00.

It is self-evident that over the years the Lord has blessed this congregation. He has blessed these people with willing and able workers. He has blessed the workers with willing, able members. However, credit must be given only where credit is due: "To God all praise and glory." (TLH 19).

NOTES

¹Armin Engel, "Ernst August Gottlieb Fachtmann, WELS' First Traveling Missionary," WELS Historical Institute Journal, Vol. I, Fall, 1983: p. 11.

²Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, 100 Years of God's Grace, (Unpublished Booklet, 1970), pp. 5-6.

³Engel, p. 14.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁵Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 6.

⁶Thomas H. Ryan, ed., History of Outagamie County (Chicago: Goodspeed Historical Association Publishers, 1911), p. 1336.

⁷Gordon A. Bubolz, Land of the Fox, Saga of Outagamie County (Appleton: Badger Printing Co., 1949), p. 177.

⁸Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 8.

⁹Ryan, p. 1314.

¹⁰Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 11.

¹¹Ibid., p. 13.

¹²Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran School, Reflections, 1882-1982 (Unpublished Booklet, 1982), p. 4.

¹³Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 15.

¹⁴Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran School, p. 4.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 4-5.

¹⁶Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 17.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 19.

²⁰Ibid., p. 21.

²¹Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran School, p. 12.

²²Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 21.

²³Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 29.

²⁴Ibid., p. 21.

²⁵Arlouine Kringel and Dr. Leola S. Garriott, Village Directory and Commemorative History (Unpublished Booklet, 1976), p. 76.

²⁶Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church, p. 22.

²⁷Ibid., p. 22.

²⁸Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran School, p. 18.

²⁹Ibid., p. 20.

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