

A Concise History of St. John's Lutheran Church,
East Mequon, Wisconsin

Senior Church History
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The same wave of immigration that brought Saxons to Perry County, Missouri, and brought about the beginning of the Missouri Synod carried along another wave of immigration led by Pastor Johan A. A. Grabau. Friedrich William III, Reformed King of Prussia, wished to strengthen and unify his kingdom by putting all his people under the influence of one church -- the Reformed Church. On the 300th anniversary of the Reformation he decreed that from that day on all Lutheran and Reformed believers would worship together in the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Prussia. Confessionally minded Lutherans objected to this decree, and chose to meet in secret in the homes of fellow Lutherans and other places of assembly to avoid Reformed teachings and practice. But by 1839 the first of many groups of confessional Lutherans, or "Old Lutherans", decided to cross the ocean to America to gain religious freedom.

The first group, composed largely of people from Pomerania and Silesia, chose Pastor Grabau as their leader and left Hamburg in June and July, 1839, and arrived in New York about a month later. In Buffalo the group divided into two sections, and the smaller group remained with Pastor Grabau in Buffalo and founded Trinity Old Lutheran Church, today a member of the American Lutheran Church.

The larger section went on to Wisconsin under the leadership of a former military man, Captain Heinrich von Rohr. When this group reached Milwaukee, it divided into two smaller groups. The smaller party remained in Milwaukee while the larger party, about twenty families, moved about twenty miles northwest of

Milwaukee and founded the community of Freistadt. Trinity Lutheran Church, the congregation this group founded in Freistadt, became the first Lutheran congregation in the then still territory of Wisconsin in 1839.

Trinity congregation maintained friendly relations with Pastor Adolph Kindermann at Kirchhayn. In the next few years a flood of Germans came into America, many of them to Wisconsin. According to government reports, the Erie Canal brought 50,000 to 60,000 German settlers to Wisconsin in the year 1843 alone. One group of Saxon immigrants, among them such names as Carl Ehley, Carl Ehlke, Carl Gutwasser, Andreas Kaul, Ernst Nolzer, Mathusalam Schneider, Christian Woelbing and Andreas Zinke, united to build a church building on a piece of land donated by Carl Gutwasser before 1861. This beginning pioneer church was 20 by 30 feet, made of logs, with wide board flooring and home-cut and trimmed planks set on wooden saw horses for benches. This church building was a preaching station for a number of itinerant preachers whose names were never recorded.

Around 1861 Pastor J. Boehling of Freistadt preached at this log church to this group of pioneer Christians every two to four weeks. Under Pastor Boehling's guidance the congregation was led to embrace correct Biblical teaching. Pastor Boehling served the church for six years. Pastor F. Schumann of Freistadt followed him and served St. John's until 1872, when the Freistadt congregation decided that Pastor Schumann should devote his full attention to his resident congregation.

The Church Council of St. John's then asked the congregation on Cedarburg Plank Road for assistance. Pastor P. Moll assented to serve St. John's along with his resident parish. He was to a different congregation shortly thereafter and accepted the call. Pastor C. Keller served the two congregations until 1879. He was followed by Pastor F. Ledebur. Pastor Ledebur served the dual parish for 28 years, and it was during his years as pastor that St. John's congregation decided the log church was too small to serve their purposes, and they erected a new stone church, 28 by 42 feet, at a cost of \$1600. A 75th anniversary booklet of St. John's mentions that the members, numbering sixteen at that time, spent many days hauling material for the new structure. The impression had been given in this booklet that growth had been good during the previous years. Could the sixteen members be a mistake? Might that rather mean sixteen voting members, or sixteen families?

Pastor P. Burkholz was called in 1907 to serve the two congregations. At this time divine services were held at St. John's every Sunday. By 1925 the congregation decided that their existing structure was too small and built addition on to the back of the stone church. They also attempted to excavate for a basement to install a modern heating plant, but after the excavation was finished and the north wall of the church had been broken, the entire structure collapsed. Work was begun to rebuild the church, and the new church was dedicated on January 17, 1926. A Sunday School was begun in 1930. English services were started in 1931.

By 1932 the congregation voted to become self-supporting and call its own pastor. It called candidate Kurt Lescow from the Seminary and he was installed on September 18 of that year. At that time the congregation voted to be affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod; apparently because they asked Pastor Lescow who needed the most help and Pastor Lescow told them Wisconsin did. This paper had begun as an attempt to understand what the Wisconsin-Missouri relations were during the first decades of St. John's congregation, and what caused St. John's to become affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod. Apparently, after the election controversies of the 1880's Missouri and Wisconsin were so closely agreed on doctrine and practice that there was a casual interchange of pastors and pulpits, and when the decision had to be made which Synod to be aligned with, the decision was made on so casual a basis as who needed the most help.

The years since St. John's has had a resident pastor brought continued growth and, in 1966, a Christian Day School. In especially the last ten years, the neighborhood around this congregation has undergone great change. The land that had been farmland for over one hundred years was rapidly being changed into suburban subdivisions and condominium complexes. After over a hundred years of service to a rural area, St. John's could foresee a new era of more rapid growth possibilities serving a fast-growing metropolitan area, as the lines of demarcation between the big city of Milwaukee and the little villages to the north were erased. The challenge is there for the present members of St. John's to reach this new influx of people with the Gospel, exhibiting the same zeal for the work

of spreading Christ's kingdom that St. John's first members had a century before when a log cabin was the house of the Lord. As the original wave of German immigrants moved men to sacrifice to preach the good news, it is a sincere prayer that this second wave of "immigrants" to the east Mequon area will bring about a second sustained effort to preach the Gospel with vigor.

Bibliography

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