

Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Menasha, Wisconsin

Senior Church History  
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## Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church

Bethel Lutheran Church of Menasha, Wisconsin was officially organized as a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregation on September 28, 1951. Yet Bethel actually had its beginnings five months earlier as the result of a quarterly meeting of Trinity Lutheran Church of Menasha. On Sunday afternoon, April 15, 1951, Trinity Lutheran Church voted to join the Missouri Synod. This decision, and the actual vote itself caught many members unawares. Most had anticipated nothing other than a regular quarterly voters' meeting. The bulletin that morning had stated "Quarterly congregation meeting this afternoon in church at 2 o'clock. Besides the new plans for church and school the issue of ~~the~~ the pastor's staying or leaving is up for your vote. We invite the expression of our lady members. The consequences of this meeting may be grave or glorious. It is for you to speak up and say so!" There was little indication that the people would be asked to switch synods.

To understand the reasons for the actions at this meeting, it is necessary to several events preceeding that fateful afternoon. The Wisconsin and Missouri Synods were still in fellowship, and they had a written agreement known as the Wausau Agreement. This agreement supposedly prohibited one synod from organizing in a locality already occupied by another synod unless there was a mutual agreement.

In January 1949, Faith Lutheran Church was organized as a Missouri Synod congregation in Appleton, a neighboring town of Menasha. Yet there was not any mutual agreement between the two synods. The WELS Appleton churches did not recognize Faith congregation. Trinity congregation of Menasha, and its pastor, Rev. Bergmann, agreed with the Appleton congregations and did not recognize Faith congregation. When a family requested a release from Trinity to Faith, it was denied. At this time one of Trinity's teachers

was member of Faith, and Pastor Bergmann questioned her status, but she was allowed to continue teaching.

The following year, Pastor Bergmann's attitude toward Faith seemed to change. After the Northern Wisconsin District Conference in Appleton, Bergmann announced at a Trinity congregational meeting that he disagreed with the action taken by the Conference in its decision not to recognize Faith. This itself was a contradiction from Bergmann's previous agreement in 1949. He also said the Conference implied that Miss Rentner, the teacher who was a member of Faith, should not continue as a teacher at Trinity. The congregation then gave Miss Rentner a vote of confidence. It was later learned that the Conference never discussed Miss Rentner's status and that nothing had been implied.

In the fall of 1950, Trinity congregation met to hear more about the Faith affair. Wisconsin Synod officials spoke at one meeting, and later a meeting was held with Missouri Synod officials. Trinity congregation then voted to recognize Faith as a sister congregation. It was at this time that some members began to question Bergmann and the behavior of the congregation.

In February of 1951, Rev. Bergmann wrote Rev. Pankow, the pastor of an Appleton congregation, discussing his differences with him and the synod. The closing paragraph read: "Why do we want to dust the doorknob of the Missouri Synod, while we have a manure pile in front of our own door? Why?" The letter was mimeographed and copies were to be sent out with the Easter letter. The women who were to help in this mailing refused to include the letter because of the "manure pile" paragraph. Later, the church council voted against mailing the letter.

Sometime before the quarterly meeting on April 15, 1951, Pastor Bergmann received a call to a Missouri Synod congregation in Auroraville. The meeting was announced on two consecutive Sundays, and the important issues mentioned were the pastor's call and plans for a new church and school.

The only indication many people had of Bergmann's unhappiness with WELS and his possible inclination towards Missouri were copies of his letter to Pankow that he distributed along with his opinions of the Wisconsin Synod. It must have been evident that Bergmann was anti-WELS and pro-Missouri, but most people never anticipated the actions of that April 15th meeting.

Following the regular officers' reports, the chairman announced that the next order of business would be the pastor's call. Rev. Bergmann then talked for about an hour on his differences with WELS. Besides his unhappiness with the Faith affair, he also disagreed with Synod on its stance on Scouting and its refusal to acknowledge military chaplains as ~~as~~ proper ministers for WELS' soldiers. He is also quoted as saying that he had been "kicked out...they have refused me communion..." When he was finished speaking, the chairman asked the congregation what it wished to do. A member suggested that the usual procedure be followed and the congregation vote on the pastor's call. The chairman refused, saying, "No, we have to settle this other thing first." This was the first hint for many members of just what lay in store for them. The members discussed the idea of switching synods, and one member brought up the question of property ownership in case of a split. Pastor Bergmann replied that he had ~~already~~ already gone to a lawyer and had been assured that they could take the property with them as long as there was a majority vote to leave WELS at the meeting. This makes it quite obvious that Bergmann's hope of taking Trinity with him to the Missouri Synod was quite premeditated. When a member suggested patience concerning the Faith affair since it was hardly a year old and since a committee was working for a settlement, the pastor answered, "The chaplaincy question is more than a year old."

At this point the meeting seems to have degenerated into somewhat of a farce. The chairman asked for peoples opinions, and one lady said, "Trinity congregation has been a member of the Wisconsin Synod for 94 years and I think they should remain as such." The chairman is said to have replied,

"That's not what we want to know."

Another member then spoke in favor of joining the Missouri Synod and said the "if the rest don't like it, let them get out." Pastor Bergmann then told the people they didn't "have to do this for me" but that he would leave that meeting a Missouri Synod pastor regardless of what happened. The chairman asked what the people wanted to do, but there was no motion from the floor. He then said that if there was no motion he was to announce that the council had voted to recommend joining the Missouri Synod. He also announced that the women were going to vote. Although the constitution did not prohibit their vote, two years earlier Bergmann had admonished them not to, citing Scripture. When he was now asked for his opinion on their voting Bergmann had no objection, saying that since the congregation didn't change the constitution, the women were free to vote. When a member read from I Corinthians about women in the church, an elderly lady argued in favor of voting, saying, "After all, the Bible was written 2,000 years ago and we can't go by that now." Bergmann did not comment on her statement.

A vote was finally taken and the result was 107 - 49 in favor of joining the Missouri Synod. Bergmann then read his call ~~and~~, and the congregation voted 121 - 21 in favor of him staying. The chairman then said a vote would be taken to make the decision unanimous, and those who would vote "no" would have their names recorded and their communion status would be questioned until they settled with the pastor. Nine men stood on the "no" vote and had their names recorded by the secretary.

After the meeting it was learned that Bergmann had been soliciting support from various members to join the Missouri Synod before the April 15th meeting. He had also written Pastor Pankow, telling him "I have been trying in Menasha to hold the lid down on a movement in the congregation to break away from the Wisconsin Synod."

Thus Trinity Lutheran Church withdrew from the Wisconsin Synod and joined the Missouri Synod. As a result, a number of members decided they were unwilling to go along with the switch, and agreed to continue as Trinity congregation and seek a man to fill the vacancy. This meeting was held at the home of Henry Kloehn on April 17, just two days after the regular congregational meeting. It seems that this small group that remained loyal to WELS hoped to keep their identity as Trinity Lutheran Church, and perhaps recover the property. On April 22, the group held its first services in Menasha's city Memorial Building. Pastor Paul Hartwing officiated. On April 29, at another meeting in the home of Henry Kloehn, officers of the new congregation were elected:

President: Arthur Jacobson  
Vice-president: Harold Odegard  
Secretary: Russel Gmeiner  
Treasurer: Evan Jones  
Financial Secretary: Lewis Ehrenberg  
Trustees: Theodore Kluge and Arthur Oehlke  
School Board: Chauncey Suprise

For the next few months Pastor D.E. Hallemeier served as vacancy pastor. The splinter group hoped for a reconciliation with Trinity congregation, Mo. Synod, but met strong resistance. Trinity agreed to meet only with a committee that was acceptable to them, and was reluctant to have a neutral moderator present. That there were hard feelings between the two groups is evident from a quote from the Missouri Synod Trinity: "Our Wisconsin brethren are trying to break up our congregation because they jumped at wrong conclusions and because they believe more in gossip than the Gospel." Mr. Boettcher and Miss Quandt, Trinity teachers who had remained sympathetic to the Wisconsin Synod, <sup>received</sup> a letter on May 21 which read in part: "Please be informed that at a special meeting of the congregation held Sunday morning, May 29, 1951, a unanimous vote was cast discharging you ~~as~~ as a teacher ...of Trinity Ev. Lutheran School. This effective at the end of the current school term." When school closed, the teachers apparantly had a salary due them that Trinity did not pay.

The WELS splinter group then paid Mr. Boettcher a part of what was owed him. No mention is made of any remuneration for Miss Quandt.

The splinter group also went to court to attempt to recover their property or some type of financial settlement. The court awarded Trinity congregation, Missouri Synod the property, and no appeals were made.

On September 28, 1951, the congregation officially organized as a Wisconsin Synod church and the name Bethel was chosen. Ninety-four communicants and one hundredthirty-four members made up this new congregation. A call was extended to Pastor Arnold Tiefel of Yale, Michigan. He accepted this call, and was installed on November 4, 1951. Pastor and Mrs. Tiefel and their two year old son James lived in an apartment on Marquette Street. Services during this first year were held in the Memorial Building, the Ration Board Building, and an old frame house that stood on the present church property.

Bethel was placed at the top of the Synod's priority list for a loan from the Church Extension Fund, and on Sunday morning, February 10, 1952, a brief meeting was held. Three and one half acres of land were purchased for \$10,000, and a bid from A.H. Nimmer Construction Company for \$15,000 was accepted. Ground was broken that same day and the construction began the following day.

Membership had grown to 155 souls and 113 communicants, and these Bethel members proved their enthusiasm by doing much of the work on their new church themselves. All of the heating, electrical work, interior finishing, painting, and pouring of concrete floors was done by members. Men would often work eight hour days on their regular jobs, then come and work on the church far into the night. They would park their cars around the perimeter and use the headlights to light the construction site.

An altar for Bethel was obtained from Bethesda Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, seved by Pastor Irwin J. Habeck. The pews were donated and re-built by members to fit the building. Altar appointments, light fixtures, hymnals, schools desks and books and countless pieces of other equipment were donated by other congregations and friends.

Less than four months after ground was broken, the first Confirmation class of four boys was confirmed on the first Sunday in June. The ceiling and some of the finishing work was not completed, and the members sat on chairs and were accompanied by a piano, yet all rejoiced at the blessings this young congregation had received. The church was completed and dedicated on October 26, 1952.

For three years Bethel's children attended Trinity Lutheran School in Neenah, a sister WELS congregation. In July 1953 Bethel filed an application with the Mission Board to build its own school. Bids were rejected by Bethel and the members decided to build the school themselves. Ground was broken on August 8th, and the corner stone was laid one month later. Bethel opened its school in the fall of 1954 even though the school building wouldn't be complete for another year. Classes were held inside the church. Mr. William Birsching was called to teach grades one through eight, and Mrs. Fred Relien taught 10 kindergarteners in a small room in the front of church. For her work she received the sum of \$30 a month. Books for the kindergarten consisted of Bible Story Coloring books and number and ABC books from the local dime store.

By the fall of 1955 the new school was ready, and another teacher was called. The enrollment grew steadily, and by 1958 two additional classrooms were built, again with the effort of the members.



By June 1963 Bethel was able to become self-supporting. Pastor Tiefel accepted a call to Kewaunee, Wisconsin in 1965, and Pastor David Worgull was called from Mishicot. Pastor Worgull was installed in August of 1965. In 1966 it was apparent that Bethel Congregation and School needed more space, and so work on an "all-purpose" room was begun. This large room became a kindergarten room, dining room, kitchen, and library. This all-purpose room was finished in 1968. In 1972 a second teacherage was built for a second male teacher, Mr. James Schmidt.

Pastor Worgull accepted a call to be principal of Manitowoc Lutheran High School in the fall of 1975. Pastor Donald Nimmer accepted the call to Bethel and was installed on May 30, 1976.

In 1985 Bethel Lutheran Church numbered 587 souls and 449 communicants. Bethel School has an enrollment of 77 and has 5 teachers. Bethel has 6 of its graduates serving as WELS pastors, and currently has 5 more men studying for the pastoral ministry.

Special thanks is given to Pastor Arnold Tiefel, Mrs. Fred Relien, and Mrs. Ray Wenzel for their help.