

*The Development of
Trinity Lutheran Church,
Menasha, Wisconsin
1857 - 1951*

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITY, MENASHA

The first recorded Lutheran worship service in the Twin Cities was conducted on October 4, 1857 by Pastor Martin Stephan. Pastor Stephan was the Missouri Synod pastor in Oshkosh who came up to minister to the German Lutheran families who had settled in the Neenah-Menasha area. There were fifty people in attendance at this first service.¹ The list of members in 1857 includes the names of thirty-three men. From the list the following were elected as officers: Klaus Henry Watke, Friedrich Loescher, Wm. F. Bauer, Charles Gerhardt, Henry Wilfang, and Henry Menk.² On the very next day corporation papers were filed in Winnebago County Courthouse in Oshkosh. Thus Trinity, the German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation, was born.³

The congregation held its first congregational meeting on November 29, 1857. At this meeting the voters asked Pastor Stephan to conduct worship services for them once every five weeks.⁴ This must have been the most they could arrange to be served. However, just because these people did not have a resident pastor they were not inactive. On February 6 of the next year the members voted to build a church building for their congregation.⁵ Ten days later one of the members, Andrew Nussbicher, was engaged to build the church. The congregation had grown to seventy-nine souls by this time. This small group raised \$387.87 by February 18 for their church building, which at the time was almost enough to cover the cost of the building.⁶

Property proved to be no problem. A piece of land on the island was donated by James Deane Doty, one time gov^{er}nor of Wisconsin. The land which now belonged to the congregation was a wooded area in the northwest corner of the intersection of Naymut and Nicolet.⁷ Nicolet Boulevard divides Neenah and Menasha. The church would be located in Menasha, but right across the street would be Neenah. This was an ideal central location.

Work on the church was started already on April 1, and continued through the summer. By September 6 the foundation was complete.⁸ Meanwhile, sometime in 1858 Pastor Stephan moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he became assistant pastor.⁹

Pastor G. Fachtmann, the traveling missionary of the Wisconsin Synod, seems to be the next pastor to have served this area. In a letter dated September 1, 1858 he reported to President Muehlhaeuser on his journeys, which included the Twin Cities.

Yesterday, on Monday, I then preached in the little city of Neenah, situated on the other arm of the Foxriver, had Lutherans, Methodists, Jankees, in church and baptized six children. You see, wherever you take hold of the net, there are always more to be found. In Menasha and Neenah, on an island between the two cities, about fifty-one Lutheran congregation members are building a Lutheran church, at the head is a Dr. Bauer, from your home parts, formerly a lawyer in Germany, here a notary public, a beer brewer, and one Gerardt, the latter attended in Milwaukee at Lochner's and has the greatest interest and church consciousness. The pastorate has been offered to me, if we had a brother in our Synod to provide with a field of work, here it would be ready for him. For the church the former governor of Wisconsin, Mr. Daddy (Doty), owner of the island between Menasha and Neenah, with its acreage of nine eighties, has donated three lots, in addition another for a parsonage.¹⁰

Fachtmann must have returned to Menasha on occasion during his journeys. There is a record of his having preached there again on December 16, 1858.¹¹

As mentioned above, the foundation of the church building on the island was completed by September of 1858. This is as far as the work progressed. Differences of opinion ~~arose~~ concerning this site arose, and the work was stopped. At a meeting February of 1859 the members decided to abandon this location and choose a new site on the mainland in Menasha. No real reason can be found why the choice of the island property was now rejected. A lot was purchased on

Chute Street (lot 39, block 7¹²) and work was begun again. - This time the contributions of the seventy-two souls totalled \$572.73.

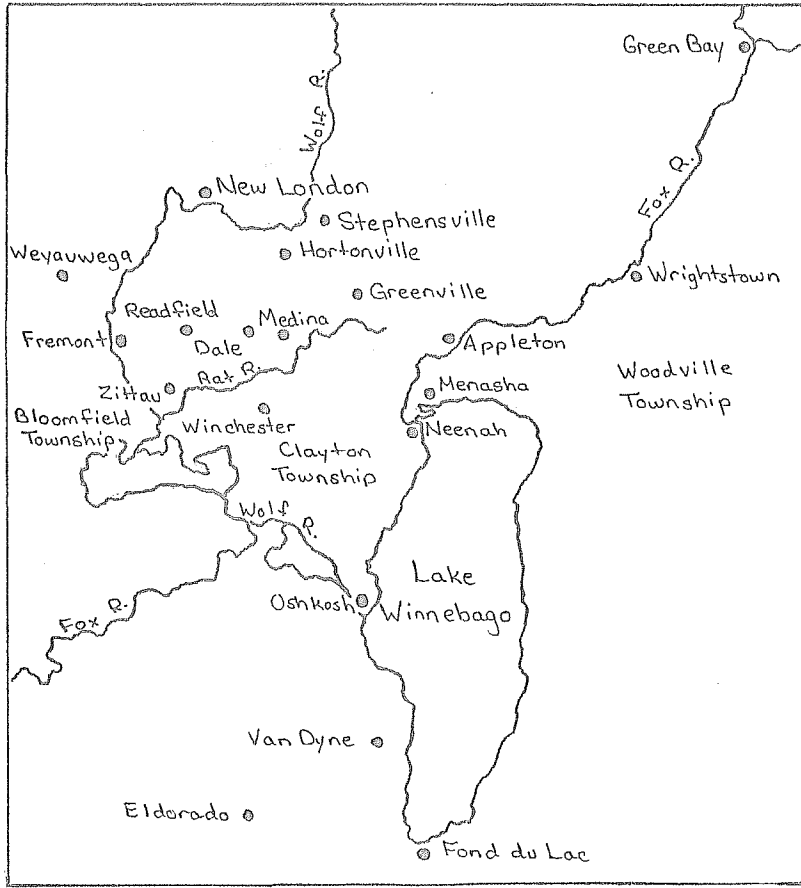
On April 9, 1859, Carl F. Waldt arrived in Milwaukee from Strassburg, Alsace, Germany. President Muehlhaeuser of the Wisconsin Synod sent him north to help Pastor Fachtmann, the traveling missionary. Fachtmann was at Fond du Lac at this time. Having located Fachtmann, Waldt was instructed to travel to Neenah-Menasha, an area Fachtmann had visited and felt needed a pastor. His instructions were "Go there, preach the Gospel, and gather a congregation."¹³

Arriving in Menasha by boat, the message quickly spread that a Lutheran pastor was to conduct a worship service on Easter Sunday. He remained in Menasha and preached several more Sundays with increased attendance. At a congregational meeting, the members decided to call Pastor Waldt to be their pastor, but before he could accept he had to be ordained. He was ordained on May 18, 1859 at Fond du Lac. The next day he returned to Menasha with his wife and child and took up residence there. Pastor Fachtmann at Fond du Lac was the nearest neighboring pastor, being fifty miles away. At this time this was the northernmost outpost of the synod.¹⁴

Because of his isolated location and the heavy workloads of the other pastors in the conference, no other pastor was present at Waldt's installation at Menasha. He installed himself "by reading a letter from the Northwestern Conference, in which, by the way, Synod's true confessionalism was developing. The letter addressed to the congregation, endorsed this procedure of self-installation."¹⁵

While at Menasha, Pastor Waldt served the surrounding area with the gospel message. His work stretched out to Woodville, Appleton, Medina, Clayton, Winchester, and Van Dyne.¹⁶ Truly the pastors of that day had to adapt themselves to the situation and spread themselves as thin as possible. The people were

widely scattered, and there just were not enough pastors to serve them all. But the people were appreciative for the Word whenever a pastor could arrange to preach.



Pastor Waldt remained in Menasha until 1862. A shortage of work at this time caused some of the people to move away, and the growth of the congregation stopped. In January of 1862 (one source states 1860¹⁷) Waldt accepted a call to Oshkosh and moved there. He still continued to travel up to Menasha once a month to hold services until June 26, 1864.¹⁸ Again the Menasha congregation found themselves with only an itinerant pastor who was only able to hold occasional services.

The size of the congregation was also reduced around this time when a sizeable group broke off to form a congregation in Neenah. There seems to have

been disagreement between the group from Neenah and the one from Menasha ever since the choice of the first site for the church was made. Pastor Waldt also served this group in Neenah from Oshkosh. Finally on December 26, 1865 the Neenah group officially organized as Trinity Lutheran Church of Neenah. With this break-off the Menasha congregation was reduced to thirty-five members.¹⁹

During this time the building of the first church was slowly progressing. As previously mentioned \$572.23 was collected at the beginning. Total collections finally amounted to \$1,137.02. In 1863 the church building was finished at last. It was a wooden building measuring twenty-four by forty-four feet with a height of eighteen feet.²⁰ The building of this church took place during the years of the Civil War and showed considerable sacrifice on the part of the members.

The church was dedicated on July 12, 1863. The communion set for the new church was given to the congregation by Pastor Muehlhaeuser. Pastors present for the dedication service were Waldt from Oshkosh, Boechner from Beaver Dam, Wagner from Winchester, and Reim from Green Bay.²¹ These pastors seemed to have filled the vacancy at Menasha for the next few years.²² Then from 1864 to 1870 the Menasha group was served by a Pastor Woehler. For the next two years, 1870 to 1871, a Pastor Siegmund served. The only information from these years is that in a confirmation service on October 27, 1867, a new organ was dedicated by Pastor Woehler. Also that by May 1871 the congregation had grown to number forty-four, eleven of which were charter members.²³

From 1871 until 1890 the Menasha congregation was served by the pastor of Trinity, Neenah. As mentioned before this group had broken off from Trinity, Menasha in the early 1860's. Organized in 1865, they were also served by Waldt from Oshkosh. Soon after this they also decided to build a house of worship. Two lots were bought on the corner of Washington and Walnut. Supervision of

the building was given to A. Nussbicher and J. Gerhardt.²⁴ Both of these men had been original members of the Menasha congregation in 1857 and Mr. Nussbicher had also been the builder of the church in Menasha.

There is some confusion over the exact date of the split between the groups. The separation could have taken place as late as March of 1864. The names of A. Nussbicher, J. Gerhardt, E. Elwers, A. Striddle, H. Hoehen (Hoepen), A. Schellin, H. Brehn (Bruhn) all appear on the membership list for Trinity, Menasha for January of 1864. On the membership list for March of 1864 they are missing.²⁵ But they do all appear on the minutes of the organization meeting for Trinity of Neenah.

The dedication of the first church building for Trinity, Neenah was on the fourteenth Sunday after Trinity in 1867. A small two-room parsonage was added to the rear and Pastor Waldt from Oshkosh was called. He thus became the first resident pastor. In 1870 he was persuaded by Synod officials to accept the call to Racine. He was followed by Pastor W. Hagedorn. Pastor Hagedorn came from Hanover, Germany and had been a student of the Hermannsburger Mission-Institute.²⁶ This brings the Neenah congregation up to 1871 when it was stated that the Neenah pastor^s began also to serve Menasha.

Pastor Hagedorn was serving the Neenah and Menasha congregations when the Menasha group joined the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States on January 1, 1872.²⁷ The Neenah congregation had already been accepted by the Synod at the Synod Convention in 1866.²⁸ However, under Hagedorn the Neenah congregation adopted the constitution of the Wisconsin Synod as the basis for membership on November 30, 1873. This was after they had taken a definite stand against the lodges, and those belonging to lodges had left the congregation to found the present day Immanuel Church.²⁹

In 1875 Pastor Hagedorn was forced to retire because of illness. After

several calls, Otto Hoyer, a graduate, arrived in the summer of 1875. He remained until 1879 when he accepted a call to St. Paul, Minnesota. While Hoyer was serving the congregation, the Ladies' Aid Society of Trinity, Menasha was organized on May 12, 1876.³⁰

Hoyer was followed by Gustav Denninger who served the Neenah-Menasha area from April 25, 1879 until May 22, 1887. At that time he accepted a call to Brillion.³¹ During the 1880's there was a great wave of German immigrants. Denninger "was instrumental in gathering in a large number of the German immigrants who came during the influx of Germans during the eighties."³²

The last pastor to serve the Neenah and Menasha congregations jointly was Pastor Traugott Gensike. He arrived in the Twin Cities in 1887, and served in Neenah until 1897 when he resigned.³³ However, by 1890 the Menasha congregation had grown to include fifty-seven voting members and twenty women. This group now felt the need of a full-time resident pastor who could also begin a Christian Day school.

In July of that year Pastor Carl Aeppler accepted the call. He was installed on September 7 by Pastor Gensike. His first sermon was preached on September 21, the delay due to the death of his oldest son in the diphtheria epidemic.³⁴ In preparation for their own resident pastor and the school he was to begin, the congregation had to purchase a parsonage. Early in the summer they agreed to buy the property of H. Bredendick for \$1000. This was changed when a more suitable piece of property was found. This was purchased from W. P. Hewitt for \$3000 in July.³⁵

Pastor Aeppler hardly had time to settle in before he opened the school. On October 14, 1890 classes were begun in the parsonage with the pastor as the teacher. The original enrollment of 29 children quickly grew to forty-two by

December. A few weeks after the opening of the day school, the Sunday school was also started. On October 26 Sunday school opened with fifty-eight children. The Sunday school quickly grew to have ninety children.³⁶

The whole congregation was growing and they soon found their original church building too small. On January 8, 1893, the members decided to build a new structure. Land was purchased on the north side of Chute street across the street from the old church. On March 9 the contract for the new building was let out to a Mr. August Branger. The needed amount of \$6000 had already been raised either in cash or in subscriptions. The cornerstone was laid on June 4, 1893, the First Sunday after Trinity. The new brick structure was finished and dedicated on October 1, 1893.³⁷ The final cost of this building was \$5,970 without the furnishings.³⁸

Some problems seem to have surfaced in the next years, but the exact nature of these problems is not evident. A Menasha Daily Record article from May 27, 1916 gave a brief summary of the history. "Then came a few years of stress and strain in which the outlook of the church was not very hopeful but because of the spiritual reserve of the church it held out against the waves of hardship."³⁹

In 1897 Pastor Aeppler resigned and Pastor John Helms was called. He arrived on April 30, 1898, from ^{Wisconsin} Mokesan which had been his first pastorate. In the 1916 newspaper article Pastor Helms was described as "a native born American but understands the German temperament and the German preferences and he was instrumental in gathering together the flourishing congregation now in existence."⁴⁰

Pastor Helms was the eleventh pastor who served Trinity, Menasha. And he would be the first one who stayed for any length of time. Pastor Aeppler's stay of eight years had been the longest, while most of the men remained only for a few years. Now with the turn of the century this would change.

Pastor Helms also inherited the duties of teaching in the school. The records of the churches history include some recollections by a lady who attended the Christian Day school and was confirmed in 1906. "She tells how school was in session all day letting out about 3:30. It was a one room school in the Parsonage and was taught by the Pastor and when he was busy the Pastor's wife took over. The students sat on benches at long tables, similar to a picnic table."⁴¹ Exactly when the Day school was discontinued is not recorded in the churches history.

On October 6, 1907 the congregation celebrated its ^fixtieth anniversary. The sermon for the Jubilee service was preached by the Rev. Phillip von Rohr, president of the Wisconsin Synod. In an evening service the Rev. Otto Hagedorn preached. He was the son of the former pastor, the Rev. W. Hagedorn.⁴² At this time the congregation consisted of eighty voting members and forty women members.⁴³

On Pentecost Sunday in 1915 the first English service was conducted in an evening service. Also during this year the members were invited to use the English language at voter's meetings in hope of encouraging discussion.⁴⁴ A Menasha Daily Record article of 1916 states that the congregation now numbered 175 families. There were 128 voters and about 500 communicants.⁴⁵

With the growing congregation there arose a need for better accomodations for the Sunday school and social activities. In 1917 a parish hall was built on Broad street behind the church. In this same year the parsonage at 335 Broad street was dedicated.⁴⁶

In 1923, after twenty-five years of service at Trinity, Pastor Helms left and was succeeded by Pastor J. G. Pohley. During the time that Pastor Pohley was serving at Trinity the voters decided to begin using an envelope system for contributions. Envelopes had been used back in 1899, but then only for a spec-

ial contribution. In 1927 the voters decided to use envelopes for the regular collections also. A note in the highlights of the church's history states that in 1931 a constitutional change granted suffrage to the women.⁴⁷

In 1936 Pastor Pohley left and was followed in October of the year by Pastor Paul Bergmann. A year later, at Reformation Service in 1937, the congregation celebrated its eightieth anniversary. But during that year it seems Pastor Bergmann had been very busy correcting some false practices to which the congregation had fallen prey. The anniversary article from the Northwestern Lutheran sums up the problems:

The past Reformation festival marked the eighty years of congregational existence for Trinity of Menasha with peculiar spiritual significance. Here was a church with a history very wayward, whose meetings record so many indifferent decisions of an apathetic membership, with its vigor of early youth slowly dying out, and with very certain signs of sterility of old age setting in. Here was a church whose members faced these shocking realities with a holy determination to repent and amend. It was only a year ago that we received warnings in no uncertain terms coupled with drastic actions from the Canaanites within our ranks, that, if we insist upon Biblical principles over against the wide-spread lodge-membership in this church, our congregation would be doomed. The church council together with their pastor remained firm in our Lutheran testimony. Results?

Here is a church today whose attendance has more than doubled, whose membership has increased in spite of some losses, which really proved to be gains; whose communion attendance, uncompromised with modern idolatry, has been better than any previous year; whose actual contributions and interest for the church has been on the gain ever since. Here is a congregation which has been reinvigorated by the renewing powers of God's wonderful grace. A new lease of spiritual life has been granted them. The members have been unified in a closer communion and the faith in the supreme powers of God's Word has been vindicated right before their eyes.⁴⁸

In preparation for the anniversary, the whole church interior was renovated, new light fixtures were hung, and new carpet was laid in the nave and chancel.⁴⁹ Former Pastors Carl Aeppler, J. G. Pohley and John Helms participated in the anniversary services.⁵⁰

The congregation was beginning to outgrow its facilities again. So already in 1940 plans were begun for a new church. In the spring of that year three lots were purchased on the north side of Broad street, just east of Tayco. Later that summer the lot was purchased on the corner of Tayco and Broad. Total cost of the property was \$6400. To raise funds for the building it was decided that beginning January 1, 1942, all communion offerings were to be put into the building fund. Finally in 1949 an architect was hired. The first one, Hugo C. Haeuser of Milwaukee, was dismissed after failing to give detailed plans. Finally Edgar A. Stubenrauch of Sheboygan was engaged. Not until May 25, 1952 was the ground breaking. Dedication of the new church and school was on July 12, 1953.⁵¹

Already in the mid-forties the reopening of the Christian Day school was discussed. The congregation had begun a school back in 1890, but it had been discontinued. At the January 1943 meeting the voters decided to make a survey of the congregation's members. By July they had decided to begin a school in September of 1944. Due to needed renovations to the parish hall, classes did not begin until September of 1945.⁵² The first teachers were Kenneth Bonn, Winifred Schaller, Lillian Quandt, and Corrinne Linsdau. A year later in 1946 Meilahn Zahn accepted the call as principal. He was succeeded by Theodore Boettcher in 1950.⁵³

The years 1950 to 1951 proved to be very stormy for Trinity congregation. A dispute arose between the congregation and the Wisconsin Synod. In April of 1951, Trinity congregation broke away from the Wisconsin Synod and joined the

Missouri Synod. Forty-eight of Trinity's families consisting of about 100 communicant members withdrew. After they lost in court proceedings this group organized as Bethel Lutheran Church. Meanwhile in May of 1951 Pastor Bergmann accepted a call to Carroll, Iowa and was replaced by Pastor Walter E. Lichtsinn on July 29.⁵⁴

Trinity Lutheran Church of Menasha had a difficult and stormy history from its beginning in 1857 until its split from the Wisconsin Synod in 1951. Despite all the problems, Trinity, now a Missouri Synod congregation still exists today.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Menasha News Times, July 1, 1953.
- ²"Highlights of Trinity's Historical Past"
- ³Carl Aepler, "The German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation of Menasha, Winnebago County, Wisconsin. 1857 - 1893."
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Rev. S.G. Ruegg, article in Menasha Daily Record, May 27, 1916.
- ⁶Aepler, op. cit.
- ⁷Menasha News Times, July 1, 1953.
- ⁸Aepler, op. cit.
- ⁹Luecker, Erwin, editor, Lutheran Cyclopedia, p. 735.
- ¹⁰John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 55-56.
- ¹¹Aepler, op. cit.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³Armin Engel, "Early Itinerant Preachers in Wisconsin" Northwestern Lutheran, Vol 46, p. 72.
- ¹⁴Ibid.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid.
- ¹⁸Aepler, op. cit.
- ¹⁹Ibid.

- 20 Walter E. Lichtsinn, "History of Trinity Lutheran of Menasha."
- 21 Aeppler, op. cit.
- 22 Paul Bergmann, "Eightieth Anniversary of Trinity, Menasha."
Northwestern Lutheran, Vol 24, No. 25 p. 396.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Gerhard A. Schaefer. "A Brief History of Trinity Lutheran Church,
Neenah, Wis."
- 25 Aeppler, op. cit.
- 26 Schaefer, op. cit.
- 27 Aeppler, op. cit.
- 28 "Proceedings" 1866 Convention of Wisconsin Synod, pp. 11-12
- 29 Schaefer, op. cit.
- 30 "Highlights of Trinity's Historic Past."
- 31 Aeppler, op. cit.
- 32 Ruegg, op. cit.
- 33 Schaefer, op. cit.
- 34 Aeppler, op. cit.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Lichtsinn, op. cit.
- 38 "Highlights of Trinity's Historic Past."
- 39 Ruegg, op. cit.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Misc. Church Records

- 42 Publius V. Lawson, History of Winnebago County, p. 707.
- 43 Lichtsinn, op. cit.
- 44 "Highlights of Trinity's Historic Past."
- 45 Ruegg, op. cit.
- 46 Lichtsinn, op. cit.
- 47 "Highlights of Trinity's Historic Past."
- 48 Bergmann, op. cit. p. 396.
- 49 Menasha News Times, July 1, 1953.
- 50 Bergmann, op. cit.
- 51 Lichtsinn, op. cit.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 "Highlights of Trinity's Historic Past."
- 54 Lichtsinn, op. cit.

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