

Petra Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Sauk Rapids, Minnesota

1968-1996

"Upon this rock I will build my church" Mt 16:18

by

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Many of the Wisconsin synod churches in Minnesota have a long history. Most of the Wisconsin Synod churches in Minnesota were founded in the southern part of the state, and churches in the north were few and far between. Petra Evangelical Lutheran Church has a relatively brief but vital history of service to members of the St. Cloud community. In 1966, the nearest WELS church to St. Cloud was in Monticello, located 25 miles southeast of St. Cloud. North of St. Cloud, the nearest church was in Duluth, 145 miles distant.

In 1966, exploratory services began in an effort to reach the Wisconsin Synod's students who were attending St. Cloud State University. The first service was held on November 6, 1966 in the Atwood Center on the university campus. Eleven people attended. Pastor Robert Sievert, who was serving a congregation in Montrose, Minnesota, and who also had participated in student ministry, conducted the first service. He was only able to conduct services at the Atwood Center for a few weeks, however, due to college restrictions.

After a short time, services moved to the Stearns Room of the Germain Motel in St. Cloud. Rental for the room was \$10.00 per week. Area pastors conducted the services on a rotating basis: Robert Sievert, Gerhard H. Geiger, Douglas L. Bode, and Norman Kuske each travelled between 40 to 80 miles one way to reach the worshippers in St. Cloud. They held services at the Germain Motel for almost one and a half years. In April of 1968, the rent for the room was raised to \$25.00 per week. Unfortunately, the weekly offerings did not match this and the people needed to look elsewhere for church facilities. The people approached other hotels, the Labor Home, the VFW Hall, and even a funeral home, but without success. They wrote a letter to the mayor of St. Cloud asking for help in their situation, but this did not solve their dilemma. The congregation finally settled on the Ronald H. Meier residence for their services. Services were conducted in the Meiers' house from April until the fall of 1968.

In 1968, the congregation, which now had four families, each with four members, requested to move from exploratory to mission status. The congregation noted that St. Cloud would be an excellent mission for many reasons. First, St. Cloud was one of the fastest growing cities in Minnesota. A study concerning people moving into St. Cloud showed that three out of every eight people moving in were Lutheran ("Upon this rock..." p.3). Other reasons included that 70 known WELS students were attending St. Cloud State University, and there was a Veterans Hospital and a prison for mission work. In May, 1968, mission status was granted (Proceedings '68 p.26).

In September, 1968 the congregation adopted the name Petra (meaning rock). This was an appropriate name for several reasons. First, St. Cloud is known as the "Granite City" for the many granite mines in the area. Also, St. Cloud is a very dominantly Catholic town (as a child the author thought that his family was the only Lutheran one in the world). "Petra" is taken from the words of Jesus to Peter in Mt. 16:18 which refers to Peter's confession in Christ. Matthew writes, "You are Peter (Greek-petros) and upon this rock (Greek-petra) I will build my church." The Roman Catholic Church uses these words to justify the papacy.

In September, 1968, John Ibisch was assigned to St. Cloud for his vicar year. Petra finally had her first full-time minister. Services were held in the basement of the Roman Catholic Newman Center near the St. Cloud State University campus. Vicar Ibisch contacted a member of the Mission Board with the hope that they would purchase the house for a fourfold purpose: As a place for Sunday worship services, a Lutheran Collegian Center, a place of residence for the vicar, and student housing rentals. Since the Mission Board was not scheduled to meet for some time, and time was of the essence, Vicar Ibisch and Rev. and Mrs. Roman Palmer each contributed \$2,000.00 for the down payment

on the house. Shortly after the purchase, the Minnesota District gave them \$2,000.00 from their 50th anniversary offering. The Campus House, as it became known, was operated on a pay-as-you-go basis. The rent receipts from the vicar's occupancy and the other student renters met the overhead expenses and monthly payments on the mortgage. The Campus House was dedicated on November 17, 1968, by Pastor Manfred Lenz, who was the supervising pastor <sup>For</sup> over Vicar Ibsch. His sermon theme was "I love my church!", based on Psalm 84:1-2 (Golden Jubilee History p.281).

During Vicar Ibsch's stay, services were somewhat unique. Due to the lack of piano players, Vicar Ibsch often played the music for the liturgy from a tape recorder. When it was time for the congregation to respond in song, he would push play on the tape recorder. For the hymns, Vicar Ibsch played the piano and then returned to the altar. Vicar Ibsch also travelled to Brainerd to conduct services for this new mission in Northern Minnesota.

After Vicar Ibsch's year, Vicar Thomas Liesner served Petra Lutheran. Vicar Liesner was very active among the Lutheran Collegians. A story that has surfaced concerning Vicar Liesner is the incident of his jumping off the 27 foot mark of the granite quarries into the lake below. A few of the Collegians figured if the Missouri Synod Vicar could do it, so could the Wisconsin Synod vicar. Outside of the fun times, Vicar Liesner also kept a very busy schedule. Because the congregation was searching for land to purchase, the congregation thought that a change in Vicars might be detrimental to their efforts, so they asked Vicar Liesner to stay one more year. He stayed an extra year, but the land was not yet purchased.

Vicar Alan Klessig took over in September, 1971. During his stay, much was done at Petra. The house was given a new coat of paint, the altar was moved for a better seating arrangement, and the Ladies Aid was formally

established. At this time, lack of money was still a problem, and there was more than one month <sup>in which</sup> where Vicar Klessig had to wait to receive his check.

In September, 1972, Larry Nast was assigned as Petra's vicar. He was married only a few weeks before coming to St. Cloud. Vicar Nast was very active in the congregation.

The evening of July 2, 1973 was hot and the Campus House was filled to capacity. During that service, Petra installed its first resident pastor. Peter J. Naumann was a member of the graduating class of 1973 from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He was installed and ordained by his father Oscar J. Naumann, President of the Wisconsin Synod.

At this time, Petra had a slow, but steady membership increase. The Campus House had become too small for her needs. In January of 1974, the church began to hold services in the Atwood Center on the St. Cloud State University Campus. While services were at this site, the search for land continued. After looking at numerous sites, on July 25, 1975, land was purchased in Sauk Rapids, a town located next to St. Cloud.

A road was built leading up to the property, and the men of the congregation in their spare time cut down trees to clear a site for the buildings. Onto this clearing, a portable chapel, which they rented from the Synod, was erected. The congregation said good-bye to the Campus House and to the Atwood Center and began holding services in the chapel. Pastor Thomas Liesner, who had served as second vicar to Petra, preached for the morning service and Pastor Martin B. Petermann, District Mission Board Chairman, preached for the afternoon dedication service on Sunday, January 25, 1976.

In the summer of 1976, the congregation built a parsonage adjacent to the Chapel. Pastor and Mrs. Naumann and their son Timothy were the first

occupants of the parsonage. A little while later their other children, Hans and Andrew, would join them.

By 1978, the congregation had outgrown the portable chapel. The Mission Board granted Petra's request for permission to build a permanent church building. However, this meant that the church could be placing itself in financial peril. An every-member visit was made asking the people the question, "Go? or No go?" The congregation's response was a resounding "Go!" Pledges were made to an average communicant giving rate of over \$300.00 for 1979. At the same time the voters unanimously decided to increase the mission pledge to the Synod from \$1500.00 to \$2200.00 for 1979. Permission was granted by the Synod and all the goals that were pledged were met. The men once again rolled up their sleeves and began clearing trees for the new building. They cut and sold an estimated 40 cords of wood.

After the worship service on November 18th, 1979, Petra Lutheran Church broke ground. Actual construction began in December. Winter in Minnesota is not usually the best time to start building outside, but the congregation would not be stopped. The congregation prayed for favorable building conditions and the Lord granted one of the mildest winters on record. Even in the dead of winter all of the cement work which had to be done was favored with above-freezing daytime temperatures.

By May, 1980, Petra no longer needed the portable chapel. They held a cornerstone service for the new church on May 4, 1980. The church needed to be swept out every Saturday for several weeks, chairs set up, the altar arranged, and the process repeated in reverse order on Sunday afternoon, but the work was well worth it to the members who had so long waited for their church. In May the congregation itself did all of the interior staining and painting. By August the construction was virtually finished. Members of the congregation

were not paid with money for their labor, but they worked tirelessly on the church, with many putting in over 40 hours per week.

The dedication of the church service also took place on May 4, 1980. Pastor Gerhard Birkholz, president of the Minnesota District, served as festival speaker. His sermon theme was "Petra's Dedication: A Call to Worship the Rock of our Salvation" based on Psalm 95:1-7. The membership at the time of this service was approximately 60 communicants and 100 souls. The blessings of the Lord were abundant as Petra Lutheran congregation continued to grow in membership and in dedicated service to the Lord of the Church.

Pastor Naumann served the Lord at Petra until October 23, 1983, when he accepted the Lord's Call to serve Him at Zion Lutheran Church and School at Mobridge, South Dakota. Pastor Naumann's work will long be remembered. He served the Lord tirelessly during his stay at Petra and led the congregation through the tough growing years. Petra Lutheran Church is indebted to Pastor Naumann for his faithful preaching of God's Word.

On May 20, 1984 Andrew Domson was installed as the second resident pastor of the congregation. He served until the end of February in 1990 and oversaw much of the involved work of starting a new Christian Day School.

Petra Lutheran Congregation was intent on providing Christian education for the children from the beginning. The first Sunday School class had been held on October 20, 1968. In the mid-80's the members began to discuss the possibilities of opening a Christian Day School. After many months of prayer and planning the Lord blessed the congregation by permitting Petra to open her Christian Day School on September 2, 1986. Miss Cheryl Rausch, a recent graduate of Doctor Martin Luther College, had the privilege of teaching eleven students that first year. Miss Rausch served as the school teacher until the end

of the 1987-1988 school year. She then married and left the St. Cloud area with her new husband.

On August 21, 1988 Mr. Mark Leitzke was installed as principal and teacher. With the Lord's blessing Petra Lutheran School had a slow, but steady growth. For the school year of 1992-1993 there were 27 students receiving a Christian education at the school. In order to serve the students as fully as possible, the congregation resolved to add a half day teacher in the fall of 1991. On August 11, 1991, Mrs. Jo Carmichael was installed as kindergarten/half day teacher in the school. In 1993, Mr. Leitzke accepted a call to serve a congregation in St. James, Minnesota. To replace Mr. Leitzke, Miss Pam Lenz, a recent graduate of DMLC, was called to Petra Lutheran. Miss Lenz served for a year and then was married to Mr. Kent Holz. In 1995, Mr. Peter Lemke received the call to teach at Petra Lutheran School. He accepted this call and remains the principal and teacher of the school at present. The school currently has 35 students and is now starting a pre-kindergarten class with 8 children.

The third resident pastor to serve Petra Lutheran is Pastor William Leerssen. Pastor Leerssen was installed on September 23, 1990 and continues to faithfully serve the congregation with God's Word to the present time.

In 1993, Petra Lutheran Church celebrated its 25th anniversary. For the morning festival service, Pastor Naumann returned and preached on Mark 13:1-2: "Praise the Rock of Our Salvation". The guest preacher for the afternoon service was Mr. Todd Engel, a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and a son of Petra Lutheran Church. The afternoon service celebrated the 25th anniversary and also served as the ground breaking service for the new school wing.

Up until 1993, the Christian Day School at Petra Lutheran was held primarily in the basement of the church. But in the years passing since it was



opened, the school grew in size and needed to expand. The people of the congregation again responded. The congregation was intent on building a wing off of the church for more school rooms. However, a lack of funding remained a problem. All of the members used their varied gifts and talents to build the new school. Everything from laying the foundation, installing all of the electrical wiring, to laying the carpet was done by the individual members of the congregation. In this instance again, the members worked tirelessly for months. Some put in over 40 hours consistently for weeks to have it finished in time for the next school year. The goals were met. The new school building was completed and is being used for the 1995-1996 school year.

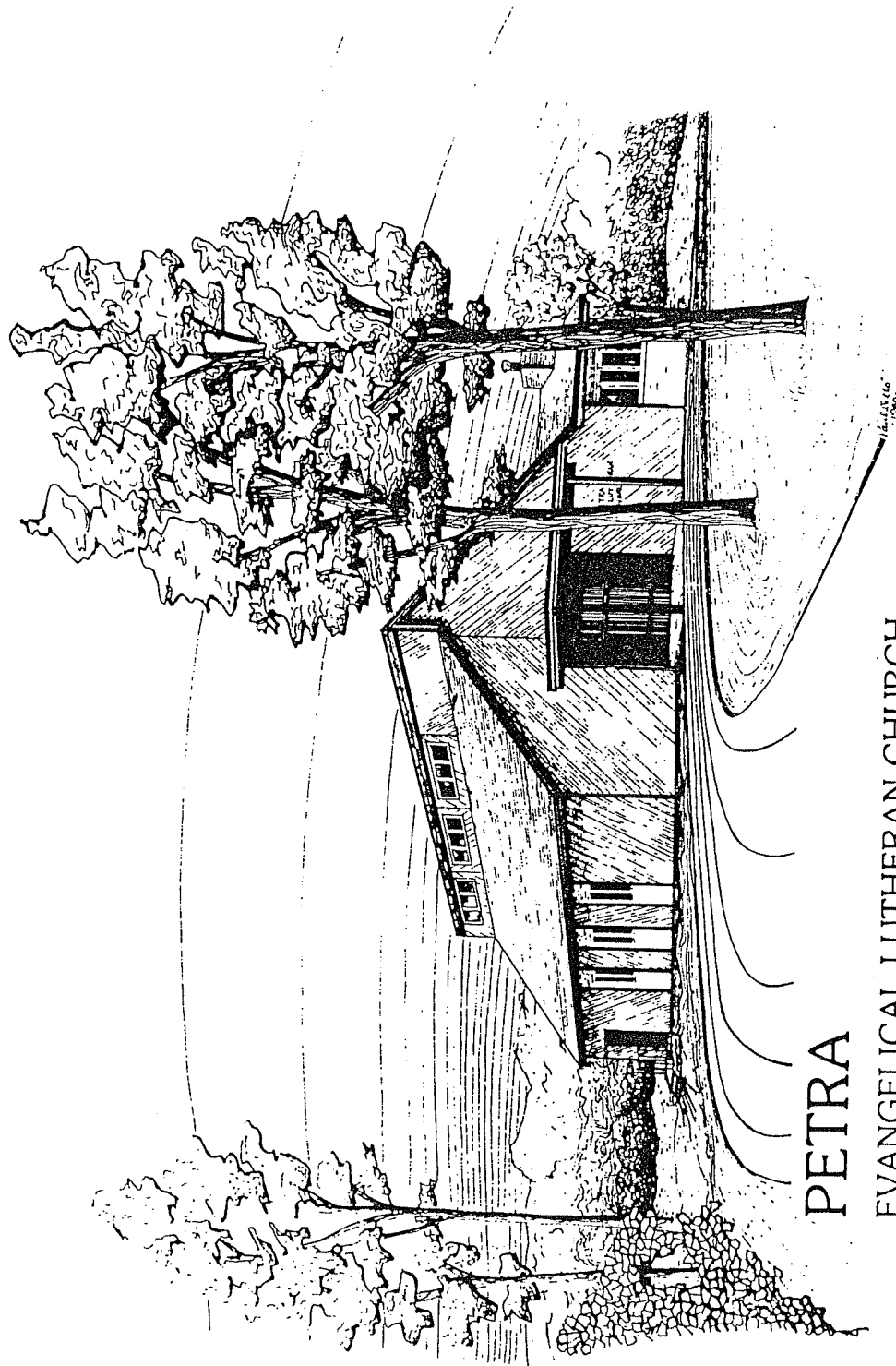
Currently, Petra Lutheran Church has 377 baptized members and 256 communicant members. Petra Lutheran School has 32 enrolled and 8 in their pre-kindergarten class (Pastor's Annual Report 1996).

Pastor W.R. Dorn, who was chairman of the Mission Board at that time, preached on February 18, 1968, "Do not despise small and humble beginnings!" Petra Lutheran Church certainly begin humbly, but the Lord has given this church a manifold of blessings in her service to him.

**SOLI DEO GLORIA!**

The Portable Chapel: 1976 - 1980





PETRA  
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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