

Marie Kohls Ashley: An Organist for Life



By Newton K. Trimmer
Senior Church History 331
April 22, 2002

Pictures and editing courtesy of Ashley Hall Photography
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The Lord in his infinite wisdom gives to each of us one or more gifts or talents. He also gives those gifts and talents in the exact proportion that he chooses. In his good favor, the Lord saw fit to provide Marie with many gifts and talents, among them the ability to play both the piano and the organ and the desire to use these talents to the glory of God.

From the tender age of sixteen, Marie took her God-given abilities as a musical leader and organist and used them to serve the Lord. Perhaps her service has found favor in his sight, for he has extended her ability to serve him this way for well over seven decades.

Today, at age eighty-nine, Marie continues to play the liturgy and hymns for two different congregations every Sunday with only an occasional Sunday off, usually for family affairs. In addition to Sunday worship, she also plays for most of the Advent, Lenten, and other midweek services as well as for many of the funerals and Sunday school program practices that take place within these two congregations.

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She was born Marie Emma Kohls on February 23, 1913 to German immigrant parents in her family home in rural Fall River, Wisconsin. Today this small but thriving community can be easily located. It rests in South Central Wisconsin near State Highway 16 just a few miles west of Columbus, about half way between the cities of Fond du Lac and Madison and just off State Highway 151. Of course, in 1913 these particular roads may not have even been in existence. In fact, the main mode of transportation at the time was horse and buggy,



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Marie's father, Albert Fredrich Kohls, was born December 18, 1891 in Germany. His family immigrated to the United States when Albert was only two years of age. Her

mother, Minna Charlotte Dorthea Wegner, was born November 27, 1888 shortly after her parents arrived in the United States. Although Marie remembers only a few words in German now, she learned German before she learned English, as this was the language spoken daily by the adults in her home when she was a child. As a first generation US citizen Marie represents the personification of what many imagine when they think about those early citizens in the "New World"; hard working, honest, striving for a better life, and, in her family's opinion, thankfully, Christian.

The year 1913 marked the beginning of Marie's life in the "New World," however, historians would record 1913 as the date in which Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as the 28th President of the United States and John Bading, the second president of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), died. Although neither Marie nor her parents ever met Presidents Wilson or Bading, both men would influence their lives; Wilson as the country's future leader and Bading as a former Synod leader. In fact, it was John Bading's work as the Synod's president, along with those before and after him, that permanently secured the WELS as a strong and viable Christ-centered, Biblically based, confessional group of believers. And, it is the WELS and its confession of Christ that have kept Marie, her parents, sisters, and many others in her extended family as active, life-long members of the church.

Marie is the oldest of three daughters born to Albert and Minna. She and her sisters, Ruth and Dorothy, would each marry, raise families, and remain in the Fall River area their entire lives. Each of the "Kohls girls" has faithfully served their Lord in a variety of ways within the church; a testament to their Christian upbringing and the Lord has truly blessed each of them in their efforts.

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Pictured in the front row, from left to right: Mrs. Ruth Evans (Marie's younger sister), Mrs. Martha Wodill (Marie's aunt), and Mrs. Hedwig Rimpler (the pastor's wife).
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right: Mrs. Dorothy Steel (Marie's youngest sister), Mrs. Minna Kohls (Marie's mother), Mrs. Elsie Kohrt, and Mrs. Marie Ashley. Mrs. Erma Madaus was absent. You may

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have noticed two things; not only was the choir heavily populated with Marie's family members, but also, Marie had changed her name. She was no longer Marie Kohls. At age thirty, she had married and become Mrs. Marie Kohls Ashley.

Marie married Donald Jerome Ashley from Hancock, Wisconsin on May 23, 1943. At the time, Don was serving in the military, assigned to Truax Field in Madison, Wisconsin as First Sergeant, 29th Technical School Squadron (Specialist). Although Don and Marie ("Donny and Marie" according to their son-in-law, Jim Hall of Houston) were living in Madison, Marie continued to attend worship in Fall River making the thirty-mile trip on Sundays. Her willingness to do this allowed Marie to serve as a substitute organist during the war years.

In 1945, Donald received an Honorable Discharge from the Army and he and Marie move back to the Fall River area where they settled on a small farm just outside of town. There they lived until 1951 when they moved into the "city;" purchasing a home on Kane Street. It is in this home that they would spend their lives and raise their four children.

In 1948, Marie gave birth to the first of their four children. David was born on April 23 of that year, Susan on December 28, 1949, Karen on September 26, 1951, and Mark on June 03, 1953. Over the years, Marie continued serving her Lord by devoting time to her husband, their children, a job, and playing the organ at church. Although times were sometimes difficult, the Lord provided the



Ashley's with everything they needed, including the blessings of a close and loving family relationship that has endured the test of time, surviving even today despite the fact that some family members now live a bit further away than the boundaries of the Village of Fall River.

From birth, Marie was steeped in the teachings and confessions of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod while she attended Trinity Lutheran in Fall River. Her husband Donald, however, was raised under the influence of Catholicism by his Irish-Catholic mother. This of course created certain difficulties when Marie was asked to play for Sunday worship. Sometimes the children would stay at home with their father but at other times, Donald would accompany Marie, bringing the children along to church. As the children grew, there were times when Marie would bring them with her while Don stayed at home. The children recalled, when this occurred, how their mother would set them in the pew near the organ, giving them specific instruction on the proper behavior for children in worship. Marie says, "I can't recall that they ever disrupted the service or misbehaved while in church."

Marie's example as a faithful servant of the Lord did not go unnoticed by her husband. After sporadic attendance during the early years of their marriage, Donald decided to attend adult catechism classes at Trinity Lutheran Church and on November 12, 1959, he was confirmed in the Lutheran faith. From then on, Don became more than your average pew sitter; he became a warrior for the Lord, serving, at one time or another, in various capacities. He particularly took great pride in coordinating Trinity's ushers and their weekly schedule; readily filling in himself for anyone who didn't show up as scheduled.

According to God's good pleasure, he saw fit to let Donald serve him faithfully for nearly twenty years until, on February 21, 1978, the Lord called Don to be with him in heaven. Don died suddenly and unexpectedly of a massive heart attack while driving home from work. Although, the loss of her spouse was a crushing blow, it did not destroy Marie's faith or cause her to cease her service as a church organist.



Over the past eighty-nine years, Marie has under-gone many personal trials and has experienced her share of setbacks. For example, her Mother died in 1966 and her father in 1969. As mention-ed earlier, her husband suddenly died in 1978. In 1990, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, underwent a radical mastectomy, and received a five-year drug treatment therapy aimed at preventing a reoccurrence of the cancer. When she discovered a second small lump in 1998, which was surgically removed, she was once again placed on an anticancer medication, which she has been told she will continue taking for the rest of her life, to prevent further reoccurrences. In 2001, her youngest sister, Dorothy, was diagnosed with bone cancer and died in March of the same year.

Marie has seen many innovations, accomplishments, and changes in the world; personal changes for Marie that include dealing with the loss of many friends and relatives, yet, through these changes and losses she remains faithful to her Lord and continues to serve him as a full time organist at both St. Stephen's in Fall River and St. John's in Doylestown.

When Marie was asked to reflect back on her seventy-five years of service and describe some things she might have done differently, her answer was simply, "I wouldn't change a thing."

What are Marie's future plans for playing the organ? As for now, Marie says, "I enjoy playing and I plan to keep on as long as the Lord gives me the strength to do so, or until someone tells me that my playing is no longer acceptable. I'm in church every Sunday and as long as I'm there I might as well keep playing." Marie also expressed more than once during our discussion that she felt it was her "duty" to use her God-given talent and continue the responsibility of playing each Sunday.

Marie does have one concern as she looks at the congregation that she has been a member of for the past 89 years, "there appears to be no one willing or able to take on the responsibility of becoming a church organist." The thought of having so few people interested in learning to play the organ saddens Marie. Yet, her heart is



uplifted when her sixteen year-old Grandson, Noah Trimmer, comes to visit because he too enjoys playing the piano and organ and has occasionally relieved his Grandmother of her duties on Sunday morning and played for worship in Fall River and Doylestown.

Marie truly appreciates how much the Lord has blessed and guided her for so many years. Others also recognize the sacrifices Marie has made and feel blessed to know her. Truly, Marie is a blessing to her family and friends, as well as to the

congregations of both St. Stephen's and St. John's. She continues, year after year, to faithfully serve as Mother, Grandmother, sister, friend, and organist and is devoted to all of them. Although those who know her could list example after example of her dedication, Karen, Marie's youngest daughter gives this illustration of her mother's commitment to both church and family.

Even during the busiest of holidays, Mom would never use the excuse that she needed to prepare either her home or a meal as an excuse to miss services or her commitment to play. But at the same time she would always find a way to be sure that a wonderful meal was prepared for her family and relatives in order to celebrate the holiday.

While Marie remains an active and faithful member of St. Stephen's, she is confident that one day the Lord will transfer her membership from the church here on earth to his Church in heaven. Until such time, she plans to continue serving as she has already done for so many years now.



This project is dedicated to
Marie K. Ashley
on behalf of all who love and admire her

Sources

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Ashley, Susan. Marie's eldest daughter, Houston, Texas. April 3, 2002.

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Hall, James. Marie's son-in-law, Houston, Texas. April 3, 2002.

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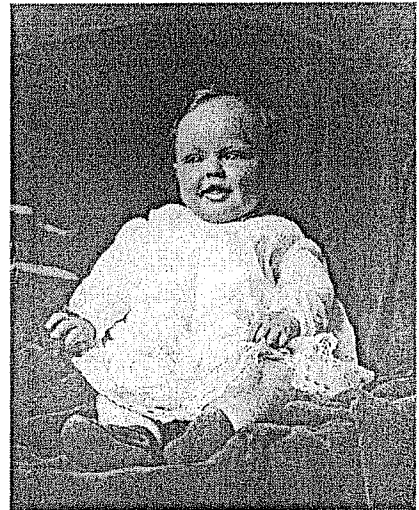
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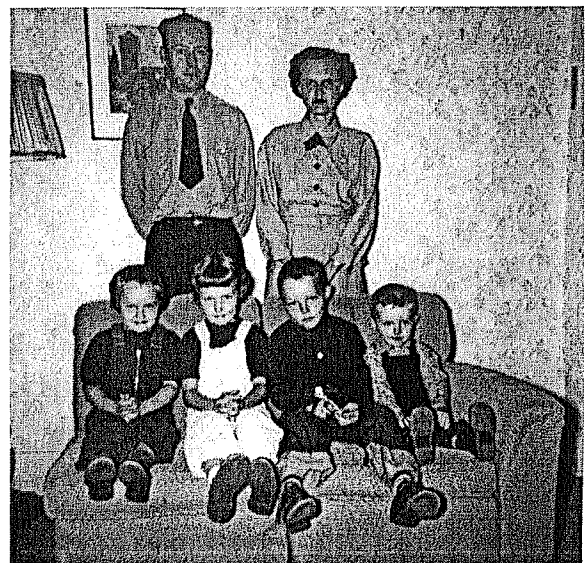
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Ashley's with everything they needed, including the blessings of a close and loving family relationship that has endured the test of time, surviving even today despite the fact that some family members now live a bit further away than the boundaries of the Village of Fall River.

From birth, Marie was steeped in the teachings and confessions of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod while she attended Trinity Lutheran in Fall River. Her husband Donald, however, was raised under the influence of Catholicism by his Irish-Catholic mother. This of course created certain difficulties when Marie was asked to play for Sunday worship. Sometimes the children would stay at home with their father but at other times, Donald would accompany Marie, bringing the children along to church. As the children grew, there were times when Marie would bring them with her while Don stayed at home. The children recalled, when this occurred, how their mother would set them in the pew near the organ, giving them specific instruction on the proper behavior for children in worship. Marie says, "I can't recall that they ever disrupted the service or misbehaved while in church."

Marie's example as a faithful servant of the Lord did not go unnoticed by her husband. After sporadic attendance during the early years of their marriage, Donald decided to attend adult catechism classes at Trinity Lutheran Church and on November 12, 1959, he was confirmed in the Lutheran faith. From then on, Don became more than your average pew sitter; he became a warrior for the Lord, serving, at one time or another, in various capacities. He particularly took great pride in coordinating Trinity's ushers and their weekly schedule; readily filling in himself for anyone who didn't show up as scheduled.

According to God's good pleasure, he saw fit to let Donald serve him faithfully for nearly twenty years until, on February 21, 1978, the Lord called Don to be with him in heaven. Don died suddenly and unexpectedly of a massive heart attack while driving home from work. Although, the loss of her spouse was a crushing blow, it did not destroy Marie's faith or cause her to cease her service as a church organist.



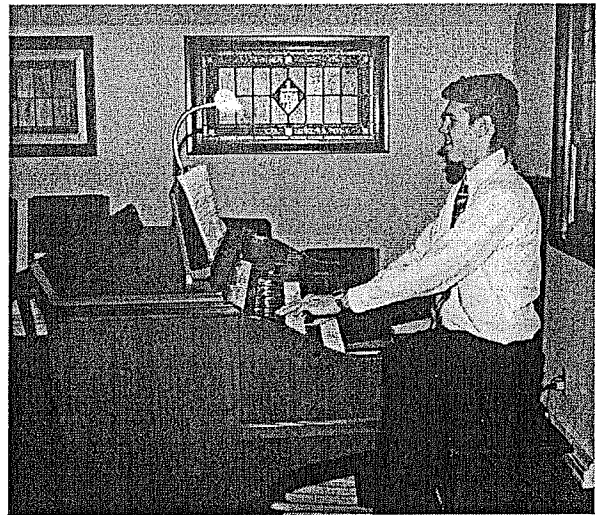
Over the past eighty-nine years, Marie has under-gone many personal trials and has experienced her share of setbacks. For example, her Mother died in 1966 and her father in 1969. As mention-ed earlier, her husband suddenly died in 1978. In 1990, she was diagnosed with breast cancer, underwent a radical mastectomy, and received a five-year drug treatment therapy aimed at preventing a reoccurrence of the cancer. When she discovered a second small lump in 1998, which was surgically removed, she was once again placed on an anticancer medication, which she has been told she will continue taking for the rest of her life, to prevent further reoccurrences. In 2001, her youngest sister, Dorothy, was diagnosed with bone cancer and died in March of the same year.

Marie has seen many innovations, accomplishments, and changes in the world; personal changes for Marie that include dealing with the loss of many friends and relatives, yet, through these changes and losses she remains faithful to her Lord and continues to serve him as a full time organist at both St. Stephen's in Fall River and St. John's in Doylestown.

When Marie was asked to reflect back on her seventy-five years of service and describe some things she might have done differently, her answer was simply, "I wouldn't change a thing."

What are Marie's future plans for playing the organ? As for now, Marie says, "I enjoy playing and I plan to keep on as long as the Lord gives me the strength to do so, or until someone tells me that my playing is no longer acceptable. I'm in church every Sunday and as long as I'm there I might as well keep playing." Marie also expressed more than once during our discussion that she felt it was her "duty" to use her God-given talent and continue the responsibility of playing each Sunday.

Marie does have one concern as she looks at the congregation that she has been a member of for the past 89 years, "there appears to be no one willing or able to take on the responsibility of becoming a church organist." The thought of having so few people interested in learning to play the organ saddens Marie. Yet, her heart is



uplifted when her sixteen year-old Grandson, Noah Trimmer, comes to visit because he too enjoys playing the piano and organ and has occasionally relieved his Grandmother of her duties on Sunday morning and played for worship in Fall River and Doylestown.

Marie truly appreciates how much the Lord has blessed and guided her for so many years. Others also recognize the sacrifices Marie has made and feel blessed to know her. Truly, Marie is a blessing to her family and friends, as well as to the

congregations of both St. Stephen's and St. John's. She continues, year after year, to faithfully serve as Mother, Grandmother, sister, friend, and organist and is devoted to all of them. Although those who know her could list example after example of her dedication, Karen, Marie's youngest daughter gives this illustration of her mother's commitment to both church and family.

Even during the busiest of holidays, Mom would never use the excuse that she needed to prepare either her home or a meal as an excuse to miss services or her commitment to play. But at the same time she would always find a way to be sure that a wonderful meal was prepared for her family and relatives in order to celebrate the holiday.

While Marie remains an active and faithful member of St. Stephen's, she is confident that one day the Lord will transfer her membership from the church here on earth to his Church in heaven. Until such time, she plans to continue serving as she has already done for so many years now.



This project is dedicated to
Marie K. Ashley
on behalf of all who love and admire her

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