



# The History of San Juan Lutheran Church

La historia de la iglesia  
luterana San Juan

1966 - 1996

580 Giles Road  
El Paso, Texas, USA

## HISTORY OF SAN JUAN LUTHERAN CHURCH EL PASO, TEXAS 1966 - 1996

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San Juan Lutheran Church, El Paso, Texas, a congregation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), has stood on the corner of Giles and Carolina since the middle of the 1970's. But it had its origin nearly a decade before, when, in 1966, the Rev. Ernest Zimdars was commissioned by the WELS' Board for World Missions and the Executive Committee for Latin America to undertake missionary work in El Paso's Spanish-speaking community.

Progress was unspectacular. By 1968, however, a small congregation of Mexican and Mexican American families was meeting periodically at members' homes or a rented facility at the corner of Ranchland and Phoenix for worship and fellowship.

The WELS missionary effort in El Paso acquired an international dimension in the middle of 1968, when one of the El Paso members moved to Juárez, Mexico. Pastor Zimdars continued to minister to this member in Juárez, and soon Saturday services and "Sunday" school attendance was averaging 30-40 people, including children. The Juárez group eventually formed the nucleus of a full-fledged WELS congregation in Juárez under the pastorate of the Rev. Vicente Guillén.

Meanwhile, progress continued to be slow in El Paso. There were a number of reasons for this, the most important being that Lutheranism proved to be a "tough sell" in a region where an often nominal Roman Catholicism and a usually vigorous Pentecostal or Reformed Protestantism had long worked successfully among the target Spanish-speaking population. It needs to be remembered, too, that only in 1989 did the El Paso mission, later known as the San Juan mission and later as San Juan Lutheran Church, obtain a pastor whose exclusive responsibility was to serve the San Juan flock. While it is true that for nearly two decades there were two and at times even three WELS clergymen stationed at San Juan, their duties extended well beyond the sphere of the congregation. These duties included seminary classes, supervision of the Mexican national church and mass communications for Latin America.

In addition to Pastor Zimdars, who would leave for other missionary duties in 1974, the Rev. David Haeuser and the Rev. Ruppert Eggert found themselves involved in varying degrees with the El Paso (San Juan) mission. By the end of 1973, the San Juan mission numbered a half dozen communicant members, perhaps 35 baptized souls and had a Sunday school enrollment of about 15. Offerings totaled some \$861. Three years later the archives reflect significant growth: Communicant members had reached 22, Baptized souls numbered 44, Sunday school attendance averaged 45 and offerings exceeded \$1,500.

By 1977 San Juan Lutheran Church came to occupy the grounds and building on which, thanks to God and the generous support of our brothers and sisters of the WELS, it yet stands. Still, the congregation evinced little expansion over the next half dozen years or so, despite the efforts of Pastors Haeuser and Eggert and the Rev. Gary Pieper, who also served San Juan and other WELS missionary endeavors between 1976-1980. By 1982, the membership figures were about the same

as they had been a decade before, though Vacation Bible School (VBS) and Sunday School enrollments were considerably larger, as were the financial offerings.

The year 1982 in fact marked something of a milestone in the history of San Juan. In that year Pastor Haeuser's long stint at San Juan came to a close. He had been the principal missionary, whatever his formal designation, at San Juan for nearly a decade, and he made, under God, a contribution of love, time and creativity that would do much to ensure the congregation's survival and vitality in future years. The year was also significant for another reason. The WELS missionaries modified their outreach strategy to emphasize adult ministry rather than one oriented mainly on children. Though the strategy was doubtless the correct one in the long term, the VBS and Sunday School programs would not again reach the impressive totals of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The years from 1983 to 1989 witnessed slow but perceptible growth under the successive pastorates of the Rev. Paul Hartman, the Rev. Larry Schlomer, and the Rev. Mark Goeglein. It should be noted once again that all of these ministers had other extensive missionary and clerical duties in addition to those related directly to the San Juan mission. By 1989, the year in which San Juan Lutheran Church received its first full time Pastor, the Rev. James Connell, available statistics indicate that the Church was serving approximately 50 baptized souls and 36 communicant members. The average Sunday worship attendance was approximately 30 persons.

The 1990s have not been without problems for the men and women of San Juan. Though attendance at Sunday worship has shown a heartening increase (from an average of about 30 in 1989 to well over 50 in 1995) and the Church now has pastoral responsibility for nearly 100 souls, both the Pastor and congregation at times experience frustration that more has not been achieved.

Yet a more balanced assessment immediately lends encouragement. Thanks to the hard work of Pastor Connell and the parishioners of San Juan, and building on the achievements of our predecessors, a great deal has been accomplished. San Juan now has a functioning Church Council and Christian Ladies Group, a corps of dedicated lay and clerical Sunday school teachers, an organist who would do justice to any cathedral in Christendom, and best of all, a congregation of faithful Christian men, women and children whose diversity rivals that of the Tower of Babel. Not only do we offer public worship in Spanish and English and conduct religious instruction in both languages; we have people in our congregation who could offer it, if push came to shove, in languages as diverse as Arabic, Indonesian and several dialects of Nigerian. What God began in El Paso nearly 30 years ago as an outreach to the Spanish-speaking community He now appears to be using as a vehicle to bless and save "all sorts and conditions" of men and women within commuting distance of San Juan. Our congregation consists of former Roman Catholics, former non-Lutheran Protestants, former Muslims, former atheists and agnostics and a relative handful of "born" Lutherans. We are brown skinned, black skinned, pink skinned and every other shade except "thinskin." All we have in common are our sins and our Savior.

This summary history of San Juan Lutheran Church has necessarily dwelt on our problems and achievements as a congregation of believing men and women. But of course San Juan is not really

about either difficulties or triumphs. Even less is it about statistics of membership and finances, important though they may be in other respects. San Juan Lutheran Church's sole reason for being---and if needs be its excuse---is to bring the authentic Christ, through word and sacrament, to as many people as we possibly can.

Over the past 30 years, thousands of people have heard and seen this message of San Juan through pastoral visits, canvasses for VBS, inquirers' classes, and food pantry and anti-drug programs as well as through bilingual worship services. Thousands more have passed our church with its wooden cross (at once the symbol of human guilt and redemption) as they travel the nearby streets.

To imagine that these efforts have been in vain simply because our congregation has remained small is to insult the triune God. It is his work to make Christians, as and when he wills. It is ours to serve as his instrument.

To Him, then, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, ever one God, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

By Order of the Council of San Juan Lutheran Church,  
Javier Tostado, President

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