

The Lutheran Controversy in Crete, Illinois:
More Than a Matter of Geography

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Anytime a thriving church successfully starts a daughter congregation it is cause for joy and celebration. The Church at large is growing and spreading out. On the other hand, there are also those moments which are not so heartening, as when a Christian church suffers a split. Such is the case with Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church of Crete, Illinois.

On the surface the cause for the split, which ultimately led to the Supreme Court of Illinois, was nothing else than simple geography. The site on which the congregation built its church in 1860 was three quarters of a mile south of the village of Crete. This had been selected as a central location between the farmers of Black Walnut (located four miles southwest of Crete on Crete Monee Road) and the farmers from Beebe's Grove (located one and a half miles southeast of Crete on Faithorne Road). Fifty years later the situation was greatly changed. The majority of the membership (around 180) lived within the village of Crete. As a result, in the first decade of the century many people felt that the congregation's needs would be better served if the church were within the village. Many people felt that way, but not all. The resulting split marked the birth (or rebirth, as some would have it) of Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church of Crete, Illinois.

To be sure, geography played an important role in this unfortunate turn of events, but it was not the only factor. While geography may have sparked the fire, personal conflicts,

the winter weather, the growth of the village, legal haggling, general resentment over past events, and a lack of Christian love all fueled the fires that turned a peaceful country church into two warring factions.

The Early Years

Lutheranism made its first lasting impression in Crete, Illinois in the year 1849. At that time twelve farmers from Black Walnut and Beebe's Grove founded "Zion's Congregation" and held services in Beebe's Grove.

Six years later, in 1855, there was a change for the congregation. The people of Black Walnut formed a filial congregation known as "St. Johannis Congregation." Ties between the two congregations were close. They worshiped together each Sunday, alternating between worship facilities at Beebe's Grove and Black Walnut.

This situation lasted all of three years. Transportation was the problem. Few members owned horses, roads were terrible, bridges nonexistent, and ox carts were slow going. At the urging of Pastor Selle the two congregations consolidated and formed "The German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation." As a single congregation they worshiped at one site located between Beebe's Grove and Black Walnut. That common ground was a piece of property three quarters of a mile south of Crete which was deeded to the congregation on April 15, 1858 by John and Martha Cole. The Cole's did so with the proviso that the trustees hold the property for all members "as adhere to the unalterable articles and of

the constitution now in force in said congregation, may there ever be so few of such members, and this acre is only to be used for such purposes."1

These "purposes" were attained to in 1860 when the congregation built their worship facility. How ironic it is that this building which unified St. Johannis and Zion was the same one which would tear Trinity apart fifty years later.

From the start this congregation held a high regard for Christian education. While the congregation held services at one location, there were two separate school districts—Beebe's Grove and Black Walnut. Eventually, with the influx in the number of members from Crete, a third school district was started in the village in 1872.

The Building Committee of School District #3

Trinity's first fifty years were good ones. The Gospel was preached, children were educated, and the congregation grew. At the turn of the century Trinity was basically the church of the area. In fact, there was no other church for the villagers besides Trinity. This is where the problem began. While the church had been founded by farmers from Beebe's Grove and Black Walnut, villagers constituted a the majority in the congregation. At the time of the controversy about 180 members lived in the village of Crete. These members could see no practical reason for the church's location three quarters of a mile outside of the village. More and more, the possibility and practicality of building

a new church or moving the old building into the village became the topic of discussion—but only among the villagers.

In June of 1908, building a new church in the village became the chief concern of School District #3, the village district. At that meeting a building committee was elected consisting of Fred Wilkening, John Diersen, Henry Schrage, Fred W. Saller, and William H. Rohe. This group considered all the reasons for a move to a new church and explored the possibilities of locating in the village. They also tried to overcome any argument opponents might raise.

One such argument was land. The church possessed no suitable property in the village on which to locate a church. A great deal of property was necessary for sheds to protect the horses from the elements during services. The committee solved this problem in a roundabout and unofficial way. Twelve members each purchased a portion of land from Gustav Ruppert for \$1000 apiece. This land, consisting of three blocks was then available for the congregation to purchase. By proceeding in this manner the committee hoped to convince opponents that a move was possible, and at the same time buy the land while it was still at a reasonable price.

The other problem the committee foresaw was money. Building a new church would be expensive and would put a burden on those who might oppose a change in location. For this reason moving the church appeared to be the better option. Since this was deemed to be the best move for the

congregation, School District #3 of Crete sent the resolution to the congregation that the move be made.

The September 20th Meeting

This resolution to move the church to a new site was brought before the congregation in its quarterly voters meeting on September 20th, 1908. The resolution was introduced with the reading of the minutes from the July 12th School District #3 meeting:

Among others the following reasons (for a move) were advanced: The way to church is too arduous for old people and for women with children. This is one of the reasons why our church attendance is not better, because others also excuse themselves by saying: It is too far. Also the danger is not distant that a church will be erected in Crete soon by people of a different faith. Then the following resolution was passed: It is our wish, to have a church in Crete soon, and the Secretary shall inform the congregation of this resolution at its next meeting.²

In the discussion which followed, the people of the village indicated that this was no new matter for the church since it had been discussed a few years earlier. They also made it clear that they had no desire to split the congregation.

When the resolution was put to a vote, it lost by a small majority of 40-44. However, another resolution was passed that they take up the matter again at the next meeting.

More Meetings in School District #3

School District #3 met one week later on Sunday, September 27th, 1908. Once again the topic of discussion was moving the church into the village. Since the question

of available land came up at the congregation meeting, a land search committee was elected. This committee went about their assigned task, and at another district meeting on October 18th, 1908, announced that they had purchased seven and a half acres of land from Mr. Gustav Ruppert for \$2500. They also reported that the moving of the church would cost \$785. With this information officially in hand, School District #3 called for a special church meeting to be held two weeks later.

The November 1st Meeting

This special meeting was opened with the reading of the September 20th minutes. The minutes were approved. Immediately after, an objection was raised as to whether the meeting could address the moving of the church since the motion had been made to take up the matter at the January meeting. A review of the minutes, which had just been approved, showed that the matter was to be taken up at the next meeting, not the January meeting.

The next order of business was a reading of the minutes from School District #3's September 27th and October 18th meetings. This revealed the fact that land had been purchased and the cost of moving had been estimated. Reaction to this report was mixed. There were those entirely in favor of a move, those who were vehemently opposed to it, and those who would not oppose a move if the necessary funding could be subscribed in advance. After some lively debate the vote was taken viva voce. The chairman decided that the

"ayes" had the majority. This decision caused quite a stir, so that the chairman rescinded his decision and decided that the vote was too close to call.

The voters did approve a different resolution. Ten men were appointed to a moving committee. The committee consisted of three men from Beebe's Grove, three from Black Walnut, and four from the village of Crete.

The November 15th Meeting

This meeting was by far the most controversial. The first order of business for the meeting was the report of the moving committee. The total expense for the move would be \$5000. At that time they had solicited \$4510 for the move. That included \$4065 from the Crete district, \$415 from Beebe's Grove, and \$30.00 from Black Walnut.

Once again the matter of moving the church was put to a vote, except this time by ballot. The result of this vote was clear: 76 for the move, 56 against. The church would be moved into Crete.

Then they were confronted by a different issue: when would this resolution be carried out? Some people thought it might be too late in the year to move the church since winter weather was expected soon. Others were of the opinion that there was no time like the present. If they waited until spring they could have a difficult time pulling the building through the fields since the ground would be soft.

Discussion on this matter came to a halt when Mr. Engelking made the surprising resolution to move the church

at once. It was such a surprise because Engelking was among the dissenters in the congregation (later named "The Old Site Faction" by the judge). There are two strikingly different views on how that motion was made.

In his affidavit to the circuit Court August F. Meyer described the action this way:

Engelking, who had earnestly protested against and voted against the removal of the said church, in pique and anger declared that if the church be moved, the congregation should proceed to do so at once. This statement was not intended as a motion, but was seconded, and amid the confusion of members leaving, the chairman put such motion to vote in favor of which about fifteen and not more than twenty voted audibly, while a number voted against the motion."³

Pastor Brauer and other members presented an entirely different picture of those events. They heard Mr. Engelking make the motion that they move the church at once. His motion was seconded by William Winzenburg and Fred Rohe. The chairman, William Ruhe, and Pastor Brauer were both surprised by the motion and so they asked Engelking if his motion was made in earnest. Engelking affirmed that it was. Contrary to August Meyer and other dissenters, these men noted that, although four or five men left the meeting, there was no noise or confusion. When the vote was called, about twenty voted for the motion, but no dissenting voice was heard. The vote was then recorded in the minutes as being unanimous.

Immediately following the meeting a formal protest was drawn up. Fifty-six men signed their names to a document

which protested against the removal of the church from the site three quarters of a mile south of Crete. The protest was never presented to the congregation.

The Church Relocated

In keeping with Mr. Engelking's resolution, the villagers and half of the farmers from Beebe's Grove immediately went to work at moving the church. The move was completed less than a month and a half later, before the new year. The new location of the church was near the center of the village on Block 3 of H. Schragge's Subdivision.

A New Church Started

For the Old Site Faction the sudden removal of the church into the village was too much to handle. On January 2nd, 1909 the "Deutsche Evangelisch Lutherische Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde" was incorporated. The Old Site Faction had translated Trinity's name into German and adopted that as its congregation's name. This new church group held its first service in the orchard of Otto Piepenbrink (presently occupied by the Leroy Hartmann family) across from the old church site.

Soon thereafter, the group quickly erected a white schoolhouse at what is presently the trailer park half a mile south of Crete. This facility served as their temporary worship center.

Unsuccessful Synodical Intervention

Ever since 1852 the Lutheran congregation of Crete had been a member of the Missouri Synod. Since this congregation was being torn apart, it was only natural that the district

president become involved. On January 31st, 1909, Rev. Henry Engelbrecht, President of the North Illinois District met with the members of Trinity church (and Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde). At this meeting the minutes of all the meetings concerning the removal of the church were read and both sides were allowed to present their side of the story. The question was then asked of Rev. Engelbrecht, "What is the congregation?" He is reported to have said that "the church that held the records and abided by the church doctrine was the church, and as long as this party had a majority, that that was the church."⁴ When asked "Who is the congregation?" the district president replied, "I could not decide otherwise than to say, that this is the old Trinity Congregation here now assembled."⁵ This was quite a blow for the Old Site Faction and the significance of this decision really struck home when their request for a Missouri Synod pastor was denied until such time as they admitted their error. The Old Site Faction would not. Instead they persuaded Pastor Wente from Northwestern College to move down and serve them as their pastor. He willingly accepted the call.

The Old Site Contested

From the founding of the new congregation on, the members intended to build a new church building. All along they had one site in mind for their building—the Cole acre on which they had first built in 1860. The villagers opposed any such action and indicated the same by locking the gates on January 28th, 1909. In reply, members of the Old Site

Faction broke the lock. Again the gate was locked on March 9th and once again they hammered off the lock. A third attempt at locking the gate on March 10th was just as futile. This time the dissenters did not even break the lock. Instead a group of men (including Christ Koelling Sr. and William Siefker—two of the trustees) lifted the gates off their hinges. This opened up the way for their teams of horses and wagons which were filled with stone. They then proceeded to unload the stone on the old church site as the initial part of their building project.

The Court Injunction

This action on the part of the Old Site Faction angered the ~~the~~ New Site Faction. Their response to the building program on the old site showed the extent of that anger. That same month during the March term of the Circuit Court of Will County, Trinity requested that the judge place an injunction against the dissenters from interfering with Trinity. The judge granted that injunction, which prevented the Old Site Faction from hauling stone or other material onto the property, from building any church building or other structure at the old church site, or even from going onto the property. The injunction also forbade them from using the name "Deutsche Evangelisch Lutherische Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde U.A.C. in and um Crete, Illinois." The injunction was only the beginning of a long drawn out court battle.

The Circuit Court Trial

In May of 1909 the defendants (the Old Site Faction)

mentioned in the injunction asked the court to dissolve the injunction and to dismiss the bill of complaint placed by Trinity. By August affidavits were filed by both parties as they squared off to fight each other in court. The Old Site Faction made the next move. In November they filed a cross-bill against Trinity which sought to dissolve the injunction, award them with the church's properties, and allow them to use the name "Deutsche Evangelisch Lutherische Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde".

The circuit court battle was hard fought. Each side mustered all the witnesses they could and cited the constitution, bylaws, and property deeds and certificates as supporting evidence.

The defendant's case tried every tactic in the book to secure the church property for themselves. 1. In their argument they pointed out that the name "Deutsche Evangelisch Lutherische Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde" was not the same name as "Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church" (despite the fact that they say the exact same thing). 2. The defendants pointed out that two of the four trustees, who held the land in trust for the congregation, belonged to their dissenting group and therefore were entitled to the land. 3. The Old Site Faction claimed that Trinity had failed to supply a certificate of election of their trustees when the land was purchased in 1858. This was the reason the Old Site Faction incorporated themselves as Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde and registered a certificate of election for their new trustees.

According to their contentions this gave their trustees the rights to the property. 4. The defendants questioned whether there were enough votes for the resolution to move the church to put it into effect. Eighty-seven of one hundred seventy-six voting members voted for the resolution, but this was less than half of all the eligible voting members. (However, the constitution stated that one half of all voting members had to be present and a majority of that group had to be for the resolution for it to be put into effect.) 5. The defendants maintained that the November 1st and November 15th meetings were not official meetings because the motion had been passed at the September 20th meeting to discuss moving the church in the January meeting.

The dissenters gave a great deal of testimony and presented quite a few arguments for their case, but their case was very weak. Since they had very little legal ground to stand upon, they had to resort to legal technicalities and misinterpretations of the constitution in order to make their case.

Trinity had no such problem. They virtually had an airtight case. 1. They held a clear majority when the vote to move was passed on November 15th. 2. The minutes verified that the matter of moving the church should be brought up at the next meeting, not the January meeting. 3. The German word "Dreieinigkeits" is equivalent to the English word "Trinity", so that the Old Site Faction should not be allowed to use the same name. 4. A certificate of election of the

trustees was presented as proof that the trustees of Trinity held the land in the name of all members. 5. Trinity's two trustees were the only ones who had "adhered to the unalterable articles and of the constitution now in force in said congregation" because they had followed the resolutions of the congregation.

After hearing both sides, the circuit court judge came to a somewhat surprising decision on December 31st, 1909:

1. The court found that in all respects the New Site Faction had legally moved the church building into the village.
2. The Old Site Faction was prohibited from any further use of the name "The German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, in Crete, Will County, and Vicinity" and "Deutsche Evangelische Lutherische Dreieinigkeits Gemeinde Ungeanderter Augsburgischer Confession, in and um Crete, Illinois." 3. Since the Old Site Faction had never forfeited their rights as members, all property of the congregation would be sold, the money being divided up with six seventeenths for the Old Site Faction and eleven seventeenths for the New Site Faction.

Undoubtedly the Old Site Faction was delighted with this decision. While they had not received the Cole acre, they did receive assets (between \$5000 and \$6000) they wouldn't have otherwise received. The decision did mean a loss for them though: they could not build their new church on the Cole acre, the site at which they had worshipped since 1860, and they would have to give up the name "Dreieinigkeits

Gemeinde."

This latter problem was easily solved. The group adopted the name of the original congregation, "Zion's Congregation." Perhaps this choice was intended to demonstrate to Trinity that they were the original congregation in the area.

The former problem was a bigger undertaking. Mr. Philip Engelking was the man who came to the rescue. He offered to sell about ten acres of land on the south end of the village to Zion for two hundred dollars. On September 10th, 1911 their new building was dedicated.

The Supreme Court Ruling

It would be nice to say that this was the end of the controversy between the two churches, but that was not the case. While Zion had been pleased with the circuit court ruling, Trinity felt as though they had received an unfair ruling. For this reason they appealed the court decision and took the matter to the Supreme Court of Illinois. In that higher court Judge Charles B. Campbell reviewed the case once more. In June of 1910 Judge Campbell reached his decision: The Old Site Faction had no legal claim to any of the property or money of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. This ruling was entirely favorable for Trinity and needless to say, the members of Trinity were delighted.

The Cease-fire

The Supreme Court ruling brought to an end the long and drawn out legal battle between the two churches. At the

same time it also served to increase the rift between Trinity and Zion. Any hope of a peaceful and equitable settlement between the groups was dashed to pieces by this decision. Finally, in 1913 the synod brought about what might be called a "cease-fire". Even still, relations remained frozen for many years to come.

Peace at Last

The thaw in relations didn't come until the 1940's when Rev. A. T. Kretzmann became the pastor of Trinity. Pastor Waech, his predecessor, had informed him of the hostility of Zion's members toward Trinity. He even cautioned him not to attempt any form of reconciliation between the two churches since the members of Zion might react violently. Despite this strong warning Pastor Kretzmann attempted to bridge the gap. At a meeting of the congregation he made the motion that Trinity invite Zion to participate in a joint Reformation service in 1946. The reaction was positive. The motion was adopted unanimously by Trinity and was received well by the members of Zion. Finally there was peace in the Lutheran churches of Crete, Illinois.

Conclusions

The controversy between the Lutheran churches of Crete, Illinois was a tragedy. Two groups of Christians who were committed to a common confession and were united in faith allowed an external matter such as the location of the church split them into two warring camps.

An analysis of this unfortunate controversy shows one simple reason for the split—geography. The people of the village saw no good reason why the church should not be centrally located in the village. On the other hand, many of the farmers living south of town were satisfied with the status quo—the church located three quarters of a mile south of the village. This was essentially the heart of the problem.

Closer analysis shows that other factors also played their role in stirring up the controversy. Take, for example, the matter of timing. School District #3 of Crete began discussion on the move in June of 1908. The matter was first brought before the congregation on September 20th, and again on November 1st. At the November 15th meeting the decision was made to move the church. The only question left for them to decide was when. Winter was fast approaching, but a spring move would be difficult. Mr. Engelking then made the crucial motion to move the church at once. The question comes to mind, why was it so important that they move the church within that time frame? The church had been at that location since 1860. Considering the opposition and dissatisfaction voiced by the large minority, urgency in the matter seemed to be the last thing that was needed. In time the people of Black Walnut might have even yielded to the effort to move the church.

Social status and the "urbanization" of the area may also have contributed to the controversy. Twelve farmers

founded the church in 1849. In 1860 farmers built the church at a central location between the two groups of farmers. However, over the years there was a significant shift in the social status of the congregation's membership. By 1909 farmers no longer dominated the church. Rather, the villagers and those farmers living in close proximity to the village held a majority. That which had been founded and built by farmers came under the control of the villagers.

Throughout the entire struggle among these Christians, one aspect is most striking. There was a consistent lack of Christian love and concern for a fellow brother. Neither side can claim exemption in this matter.

From the onset, the villagers could have handled the matter differently. Most of their discussion about the move was conducted at meetings of School District #3 of Crete. They even considered the acquisition of land at these meetings. By the time the proposal was presented to the church, many of the details needed only to be rubber-stamped. While there was nothing wrong or malicious in the procedure they followed, the entire matter might well have been handled in the open on the congregation level and not the school district level. This was a matter of concern for all the members.

The Old Site Faction had also shown a lack of Christian love in the way they reacted to to the congregation's decision to move the church. The majority of the members had been in favor of the move, and this minority group should

have respected that decision and complied peacefully.

The most obvious place where this lack of Christian love exhibited itself was in the courtroom. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asks "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? . . . Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?" (1 Corinthians 6:1, 7b). It might appear as though this passage did not exist in the Bibles of the people of Crete or at least did not apply to them in this controversy. Trinity obtained a court injunction against some of its members. Those members file a counter suit. When the decision favored Zion, Trinity pressed even further to the state supreme court. Two groups of Christians, two congregations of saints, entangled in high-power court battles? Love would have stopped them long before the court injunction was obtained or the lock on the gate was broken.

There are some very practical lessons to be learned from this controversy:

1. Move slowly, but purposefully.
2. Yield to the will of the majority in matters not pertaining to articles of faith.
3. Consider the wording of any motion carefully before it is made or voted upon.
4. Deal with matters through the proper channels to avoid any signs of "railroading" an important matter through.
5. When there is a significant minority dissenting to a

resolution, perhaps a peaceful and equitable split is the best possible solution.

Without a doubt the controversy in Crete, Illinois had its own unique aspects. Yet, in so many ways it is so similar to disturbances in other congregations over the years. The only things that change are the issues and the personalities involved. Time after time Satan will set up the circumstances where a single item might embroil a congregation in heated dispute. We must constantly be on our guard against his devious ways, lest we repeat the mistakes of Crete all over again. After all, the Lutheran controversy in Crete, Illinois was more than just a matter of simple geography.

The primary source for this paper was the court record from the trial at the Circuit Court of Joliet, Illinois. This was made available by Rev. Curt Lyon of Trinity Lutheran Church in Crete, Illinois.

Secondary sources include telephone interviews with Mrs. Adella Kregel of Crete, Illinois, Rev. A. T. Kretzmann of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Mrs. Nora Rinne of Crete, Illinois.