

FAITH EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, NEW ULM, MINNESOTA
THE FORGOTTEN CHURCH IN NEW ULM

by

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Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Ulm Minnesota began as a result of the controversy which led to the forming of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. The reason for the unusual title for this paper is that Faith Lutheran is often overlooked by many people. In the 1985 Mission Seminar at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Norman Berg, then chairman of the GBHM, gave a presentation on "New Mode" mission work. As the model for such mission work he used the newly begun LCA church in New Ulm, although he did not mention New Ulm by name. He stated that this LCA church was started in a town with four Lutheran churches, two Roman Catholic churches, two Methodist churches, an Episcopalian church, a Baptist church, and a Congregational church. He failed to mention the fifth Lutheran Church, a member of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church.

On September 9, 1959, there was a voters meeting at St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in New Ulm, a member of the Wisconsin Synod. At this meeting, Pastor Rollin A. Reim, a 1948 graduate of the Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary in Thiensville, Wisconsin, and who coincidentally has the same last name as the Seminary professor who left the Wisconsin Synod, tried to get the congregation to join him in leaving the Wisconsin Synod because the Wisconsin Synod had not broken fellowship with the Missouri Synod. Reim had been at St. John's since 1955. At this meeting, the congregation voted to remain with the Wisconsin Synod, thus Reim was forced to submit his resignation as pastor

of St. John's. There was, however, a substantial group of members of St. John's who were loyal to Pastor Reim and left St. John's with him and called him as their pastor. This group organized as Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church on October 15, 1959. Faith had 113 souls and 79 communicants.(1) They held services in a meeting room in Turner Hall in New Ulm.(2) "Almost at once it became a haven for isolated fellow confessors in such area towns as Winthrop, Madelia, and Springfield, as well as New Ulm."(3)

The members of Faith needed their own facility, as Turner Hall was founded by a group determined not to let any churches be built in New Ulm and holding services there was not the best witness. By December of 1960, construction was under way on their own worship facility. At this time, Faith had dropped in communicant membership to 71.(4) They bought property on 1106 South Broadway in New Ulm and began building a combination parsonage and church building. It had the parsonage upstairs and a worship facility downstairs. The building looked much like a house. The reason it did was so that Faith could get financial support for it. "The congregation's financial resources were already heavily taxed with operating costs. And it had no reserve funds. Since a church building has little resale value, the congregation could not build the usual type of church on borrowed funds without exposing the lenders to undue risk."(5) This first building for Faith was built entirely by volunteers from among the membership, so the cost was kept to \$25,500 with \$18,500 financed.(6) This facility served Faith well and the members were very fond of the church they built themselves.

In 1965, Pastor Reim accepted a call to the CLC mission congregation in San Francisco California. The vacancy at Faith was filled by Pastor Gilbert Sydow, a member of the class of 1939 from Wisconsin Lutheran Theological Seminary in Mequon. Pastor Sydow was a big man in the CLC. He was the manager of the CLC bookhouse in its early days in New Ulm. He was the editor of the Lutheran Spokesman, the CLC's counterpart to our Northwestern Lutheran. Sydow was also a member of the CLC's board of doctrine. (7)

Under Pastor Sydow's leadership, Faith Lutheran was led to purchase the property of the historic Friedens Church in 1968. This property, located at 26 North State Street, one block from St. Paul's Lutheran, was made available when Friedens merged with the Congregational Church in New Ulm. Friedens had been the Evangelical Reformed Church in New Ulm which had split from St. Paul's due to a disagreement on the Lord's Supper. This property consisted of a church building, a parsonage and a garage. Faith was able to purchase the entire complex for \$40,000. The older members of Faith were sad to have to give up the building they had built themselves, but they recognized the growth potential of having this historic church building to worship in. (8) After ten years of existence, Faith was able to be debt free, after paying of the mortgage on their newly acquired property. (9) It is interesting to note that the groups that broke away from the Wisconsin Synod churches in New Ulm both occupied the same building. This building was remodeled and renovated in 1974. By 1974, Faith had grown to 100 communicants. (10)

In August of 1979, Pastor Sydow retired as pastor of

Faith. (11) After his retirement, he served as vacancy pastor at various congregations in the CLC. On May 25, 1988, Pastor Sydow died at a nursing home in Roseville, Minnesota. (12)

Pastor Sydow's successor at Faith in New Ulm was Michael Thom, a 1979 graduate of Immanuel Lutheran Seminary in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He took over the congregation, which numbered 86 communicants by this time, as his first assignment out of the seminary. Pastor Thom was the first and only pastor of Faith who received his seminary training within the CLC. Pastor Thom is a graduate of Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown. He went on to Northwestern College. "In his third year of college, he found that the Wisconsin Synod's teaching on the doctrine of church fellowship was unscriptural. Therefore in obedience to Scripture and by the grace of God he was led to leave that church body [the WELS]." (13) It is my opinion that there must have been some outside influence on Pastor Thom, perhaps in the form of an attractive woman, that also led to his decision to leave the WELS.

In January of 1984, Pastor Thom accepted a call to Spring Texas. The vacancy at Faith was filled by Keith Olmanson, a 1956 graduate of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary in Mankato, Minnesota, who also served Faith Lutheran in Nicollet, Minnesota, fifteen miles from New Ulm.

Due to the uncooperativeness of Faith's current pastor and due to other factors, I am unable to get any current membership statistics for Faith Lutheran in New Ulm. Judging from the figures from the past and since Faith is a dual parish with Faith

Lutheran in Nicollet, I am led to assume that their membership is the same, if not less than in 1979, the year for which I have my last figures.

If the CLC and the WELS were to restore fellowship, then the future of Faith Lutheran in New Ulm would look to be rather doubtful. With two WELS congregations in New Ulm and one in Nicollet, and with Faith Lutheran in New Ulm being so close in location to St. Paul's, I would fail to see the need for an additional church of the same fellowship except for sentimental reasons. Judging from the reports from recent meetings with the CLC, a merger with the CLC does not seem imminent. Also judging from the lack of cooperation from Faith's current pastor, it seems that the CLC still wants to remain separate from us.

ENDNOTES

- (1) The Lutheran Spokesman, vol. 3, no. 5, Roseville, Church of the Lutheran Confession, 1960, p. 13
- (2) Spokesman, vol. 28, no. 7, p. 15
- (3) Spokesman, vol. 3, no. 5, p. 13
- (4) Spokesman, vol. 3, no. 7, p. 13
- (5) Spokesman, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 13
- (6) ibid.
- (7) Spokesman, vol. 22, no. 2, p. 7
- (8) Spokesman, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 11
- (9) Spokesman, vol. 28, no. 7, p. 15
- (10) Spokesman, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 11
- (11) Spokesman, vol. 22, no. 2, p. 7
- (12) Spokesman, vol. 31, no. 7, pp. 13-14
- (13) Spokesman, vol. 26, no. 9, p. 15

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The Lutheran Spokesman, vol. 3, no. 5, p. 13, no. 7, p. 11; vol. 4, no. 3, p. 13; vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 15-16; vol. 11, no. 1, p. 11, no. 8, p. 9; vol. 17, no. 1, p. 11; vol. 22, no. 2, p. 7, no. 4, p. 14; vol. 26, no. 9, p. 17; vol. 28, no. 7, p. 12; vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 13-14; Roseville, Church of the Lutheran Confession, 1960-1988.

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