

REDEEMER EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH --

THE FIRE AND ITS AFTERMATH

Fond du Lac, WI.

Jonathan Kolander
Prof. Fredrich
Church History
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11831 N. Greenway Drive. ~~GW~~
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"Fire!" What is a person's first reaction when he hears this word? Well, it might be to first look where the fire is. Second call the fire department. Third marvel at the destruction a fire can produce in just a few minutes of time. Fires do intrigue most people. Some people like to sit and relax at night in front of a campfire or fireplace. Others like to marvel at the power of the heat and flames which a fire put off. While fire may be pretty to gaze at; it can also be a powerful destructive force.

When listening to the news on television or reading it in the newspapers we often hear or read reports of a fire striking a home, an apartment building or a business. Seldom do we hear about a fire plaguing a church building. But how do these fires get started in the first place? Some by carelessness. Some by electrical shorts. Some by arson. And some others by acts of nature. Whatever the cause, whether it be by someone putting a blanket too close to an electric heater or by lightning, the event can be a horrifying experience.

What would the reader of this paper do if your house was burned by fire? How would you react? With joy? With sadness? With regret? How would you react if your church building was ruined by fire? Would you give up and say "this church was not meant to be;" or would you say "let us build again and overcome this tragedy.?" Unless a fire has struck close to home it is hard to determine how we would react. But one emotion is for sure, we would have a feeling of awe for fire.

There is a congregation in Fond du lac, Wisconsin that can

relate personally to fire and what damages it can inflict. The members of Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Wisconsin Synod experienced firsthand what a bolt of lightning can do to an electrical system of a church building. This lightning bolt was so intense that it caused a fire of tremendous heat and smoke to ruin Redeemer Church. Truly a tragedy!

The history of Redeemer is quite interesting for it started as daughter congregation of St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church of Fond du lac, WI. "A committee of nine men was appointed by St. Peter's Church Council which spent the first five months of 1939 investigating the possibility of establishing a mission congregation in the city of Fond du lac." (1) The committee decided to locate this new mission congregation on the west side of the city of Fond du lac. On June 11, 1939, a residence and lot were purchased on the corner of Hickory Street and Forest Avenue. "Further support was given to the findings of this committee when the Mission Board of the North Wisconsin District gave the assurance of financial support for a mission congregation." (2)

During the month of October, the 16th day of the year 1939 nine voting members had the distinct privilege to sign the church roll and become the "charter members" of this new mission congregation. Seven days later, the congregation voted on and adopted the name "Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church." In December of this same year Pastor W. O. Pless accepted the call to be their first pastor. When the fifth anniversary jubilee rolled around the congregation celebrated another milestone in its brief history. On September 17, 1944 the congregation was able to make the claim that it was debt free. By

this time Redeemer had grown to 272 souls and had 70 voting members. In 1947 the membership of Redeemer had grown to a point that they needed to make a decision: add on to the church building or not. They decided to add on increasing the chapel seating capacity from 99 to 157. The year 1948 marked yet another milestone. This year marked the year when the congregation voted to go self-supporting.

Just to emphasize how this congregation was blessed through the years we turn to the school. In 1962 Redeemer was blessed by God by going ahead with the plans to build their own school building. On June 3, 1962 groundbreaking services were held and construction began at once. By the time September rolled around the building was ready for operation.

For most people this sounds like the ideal congregation. It started out as a mission, grew to a self-supporting operation and opened its own school. But then, the tragedy struck. The church building which the members broke ground on November 18, 1956 and dedicated for use on July 28, 1957 would not be the same anymore. On Friday, July 15, 1988 the church building was struck by lightning.

In October of 1989 Redeemer Lutheran planned to pay off early the mortgage of the original church property and last addition to the school. The idea to pay off this mortgage early came up in connection with plans to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Redeemer Ev. Lutheran Church. What a good idea to celebrate at the same time the dual blessings received from the Lord Almighty. However, when the fire struck these plans were put on hold. Surely some people, if not almost everyone, must have thought that there would be no way possible to pay this mortgage after being hit by such a disaster as

this. Yet, there must have been those who believed without a doubt that the Lord would work such an event for their good.

Well, before going any further we need to discuss the day and events of the fire itself. As was stated the day of disaster was July 15, 1988. July 15 that year was a Friday, a stormy Friday night. CRACK! BOOM! CRASH! Lightening had struck the huge wooden cross and the electrical transformer mounted behind it. Neighbors had seen the lightening bolt hit the transformer, but saw nothing else. Forty minutes later, around 8:00 a.m., the windows of the church blew out. Around 8:15 a.m. the fire station was called to the scene. The church custodian arrived just ahead of the fire trucks and went to open the door located at the far end of the school (door farthest away from where the lightening had struck). When he opened this door he was almost blown back by the heat and flames. The fire had spread rapidly through the hallways leading from the church to the school (the church and school are connected). The transformer and cross is located in the middle of the back of the church. There is a long narrow hallway located behind the altar and the back wall of the church building. The secretary's office is on one end of this hallway, with the pastor's office located on the other end. The fire hit the secretary's office severely. The office machinery that was located in this office was burned beyond use. At the same time this office was being destroyed the office of the current pastor, Pastor M. Putz, was also being charred. The pastor's desk was charred deeply, leaving it heavily darkened. The desk was not flaky like some fires leave furniture; rather the darkness was burned right in. Almost all of his books were ruined. He was able to salvage a few

books, but the fire left its mark on these books. The gold lined pages and the bindings of those books that remained in tact were darkened immensely. The typewriter in his office was melted, even the inside carriage was melted right into the casing. The florescent lights in this office were quite the sight. Pastor Putz described these lights, "one hung like a towel; another was on the floor and looked like a wet towel."

We move next with the damage report to the church proper. As was stated the windows had blown out. It is not hard to envision why the windows would blow out when we hear that the heat had reached about 2200 degrees. I cannot even imagine how hot and intense this kind of temperature would feel like. But the damage it left behind was very evident and very real. The pulpit and lectern were charred. The Bible which was sitting on the pulpit was burned, yet, it was not consumed (reference p. 11). The pews were also charred. The ones in front, those located closer to the original location of the fire, where charred more severely than those toward the back. It was estimated that the front pews were burned a good $1\frac{1}{4}$ - $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch; while the back pews were darkened heavenly. The lights in the church fell to the floor. One light fell leaving the "phi-rho" symbol, which were on the lights, engraved in the pew below it. The beams in front were charred $\frac{3}{8}$ inch deep; while the beams in the back were charred $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch. The insides of the organ were melted beyond repair. The blades of a fan placed next to the organ, located in the back of the church - upstairs, said Pastor Putz "hung like a hound dog." The firemen estimated that there were not flames in the church proper; yet, the heat which this fire produced did all this damage.

Since the door between the church and school were opened the school was also filled with intense heat and smoke.

Yes, this was a horrendous sight to envision. Your church building is destroyed. Pastor Putz, "It was a sickening mess to see." "Where to turn?" After all "Destruction surged through the church's network of electrical wiring, discharging an explosion of sparks and flames in the secretary's office. In the thirty minutes before the fire was discovered, heavy smoke and blistering heat exceeding 2000 degrees transformed Redeemer Lutheran from a place of peace to a place in pieces." (3) The last place the members of Redeemer would have thought to have a fire occur. What were they going to do? Give up? NO!

The members of Redeemer were going to overcome this disaster. There were many things for which they were to count their blessings. No one was in the building at the time of the fire, the communion ware and church records were untouched by the fire, the members of Fond du lac's Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, of the WELS, were willing and able to offer their assistance, and the faithfulness and the encouragement of their pastor.

Even though Pastor Putz was visiting his son in Little Rock, Arkansas, he can be called faithful to his flock. Pastor Putz was down in Little Rock for his grandchild's Baptism. The chairman of Redeemer had called Pastor Putz's son to inform him of the fire. The son was the first to reveal to his father what had happened to his church in Fond du lac. After some hard decision making Pastor Putz decided that he needed to be with his people, so he left for Fond du lac.

Pastor Putz did what all pastors need to do for their members when disaster strikes, he comforted and strengthened his members through the Word. At times of such affliction we need to turn to God and His Holy Word. It is only in His Word that we find true and lasting comfort under any circumstance. Pastor Putz reminded them of the words from the book of Job: "When all of Job's property was taken from him, what did he do? Job said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" The Lord had given us this nice church and it is his privilege to take it from us. And so we say, blessed be the name of the Lord! We don't turn against him or rebel or question his wisdom. This church was his from the beginning and we want to acknowledge that." These are important words to remember for all times and especially when tragedy does strike. God is the Creator, Protector and Provider of all. He is in control of everything, thus we are not to question Him for all things are His and known by Him. Who are we to question the actions of our God? We are to trust in the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind. It is His right to strengthen the faith of His people through tragedies such as this fire. The members of Redeemer seemed to have their faith strengthened through this tragedy by how they acted afterwards.

The voters of Redeemer Lutheran had given permission to go ahead and call an assistant from the Wisconsin Synod for Pastor Putz. The first assistant assigned was reassigned later. The second assistant assigned to Redeemer, Guy Purdue, arrived in October of 1988. Pastor Purdue "had endeared" himself to the people through his sermons. He had an excellent way with words; he was sincere. At the April

Quarterly Voter's Meeting, the year 1989, The elders by way of the church council recommended that Redeemer keep the two pastor role intact permanently. Two resolutions were decided upon: "1) call to Synod Assignment Committee for a pastor, 2) ask for Pastor Purdue to be that pastor." The voters voted positively to go ahead with these two resolutions.

Nine months after the fire Redeemer was going to celebrate the dedication of their rebuilt church. On April 24, 1989, services were held in the morning at Faith gym and at Redeemer Church in the evening. There were special prayers for the friends which helped Redeemer and also to God for allowing them to rebuild. This day was an emotional high for Pastor Putz; while the fire was his emotional low.

Yet, there is another date that we need to bear in mind - May 25, 1989. The teachers had noticed that the clocks were not functioning in their rooms. After closer examination it was noted that the clocks were burned. The day the lightening struck did quite a bit of damage and some even went unsuspected. What gave it away that the Church had been struck again by lightening was when the organist went to try the organ, WHAM! The organ blew out. The chimes started ringing every 6 seconds all by themselves. There was a hum in the air. What next? Who wanted to know? Pastor Putz went to check the sound system, BOOM! The sound system was out of commission. Disaster had struck twice. Many people would have high tailed it out of this church, it was bad luck. But again, thankfully no one was hurt. The \$57,000 organ and the \$3,000 sound system was covered by insurance. Through these two fires the church was

improved. In some respects they were a blessing in disguise.

The members of Redeemer were generous. Not only were the members of Redeemer generous with their gifts, but also many people not associated with this church were generous. Pastor Putz put it this way, "People are always looking for ways to help those in need, especially their Christian brothers and sisters." Through the gifts of others, gifts such as money, hymnals and construction skills Redeemer is in good shape. In October of 1989 Redeemer Lutheran celebrated their 50th Anniversary and debt retirement. Yes, debt retirement. The congregation was left enough money to pay this mortgage. The Lord was truly with this congregation.

Many important things came out of the 1988 fire. Replacement coverage on your insurance policy is a must. Without replacement insurance Redeemer would have had a tougher time paying for the rebuilding costs. With replacement coverage everything that was declared damaged was replaced at "today's" prices. Just to give you an example of how important this coverage is. Redeemer lost 330 hymnals. Without replacement coverage the insurance company would have given Redeemer \$2.00 for hymnals which originally cost \$7.00. With replacement coverage the insurance company would pay the cost of the new hymnals which is \$11.00 per hymnal.

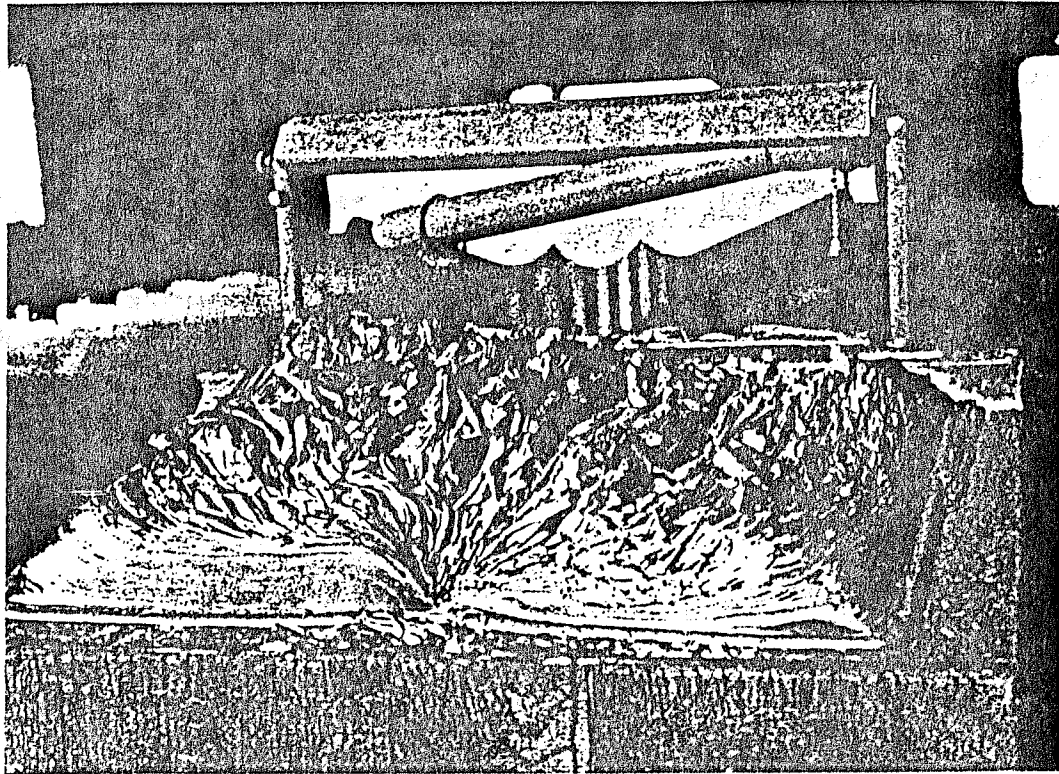
Always remember to trust in the Lord. Redeemer was truly blessed by God through generous offerings, friends and emotional support. The congregation for the most part is grateful. When I say "for the most part" I mean to say that there will always be some who do not see the positive side of things. The fire has brought members closer together. It enabled people to work and suffer and praise God

in ways that they had not before. Members got to know other members they had only seen in passing. Yes, Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church has been blessed through the fire of July 15, 1988. Blessed through sorrow. Strengthened in faith. Renewed by the Spirit.

The lesson in this for all of us, pastors and laypeople, is to always keep the Lord in first place. The Lord is the true source of strength, comfort and hope. He has promised to never leave or forsake His sheep. Study your insurance policies carefully; make sure you are adequately covered. Remember "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!"



The Church
Before The
Fire.



The Pulpit
After The
Fire.

The Pilot Bible

ENDNOTES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Quotes 1 & 2 were taken from the "Tenth Anniversary Jubilee" of Redeemer Lutheran Church.

Quote 3 was taken from the Northwestern Lutheran "Energized by lightening -- energized by grace." Sept. 15, 1988.

The bulk of this history was personally recorded by an interview with Pastor M. Putz. I wish to thank him for his help which he gave by taking the time to discuss this fire with me and also by giving me literature on the history of Redeemer.

"Energized by lightening -- energized by grace." Northwestern Lutheran, Sept. 15, 1988.