

THE HISTORY OF LUTHERANISM IN SHEBOYGAN COUNTY

by

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Sheboygan county has been called the county of chairs, cheese, and churches. Today the main chair manufacturing company is suffering through a strike. Many of the small cheese factories have closed their doors. The churches, well the churches still remain a vital part of this county. Their history and heritage are very interesting. Already back in 1938 there was one church for every 400 people in the county. The success of 1938 goes back to the period between 1840-70. During these 30 years immigration changed this county from a wilderness to a thriving part of Wisconsin. After considering immigration, we will consider the role that the Lutheran church played in the early history of the county. A portion of the paper will also be devoted to the oldest church of the WELS, which was the only WELS church in the county until 1960.

In the early 1800's Sheboygan county was part of the vast frontier that was only dreamed about by many people. A place that had great forests and fertile farm soil. A land that had a plentiful water supply from Lake Michigan to the great Sheboygan marsh. Add to this several rivers that could create enough energy to run sawmills and other industry. The only thing lacking was the human element.

1840 found the "city" of Sheboygan with slightly more than 100 people. In seven years the population grew to more than 5,000. It wasn't a gold rush that brought all these people to this area, it was the land. The government was selling it at \$1.25 per acre. A man could buy 20 acres of forest for twenty-five dollars and soon be in the money. It took the right people to make a go of it in this area, and, the right people came. The first immigrants were Germans from Brandenburg and Pomerania. This group settled in the area that is today the city of Sheboygan. Almost immediately they set up a

Dutch began with a market

sawmill on the banks of the Sheboygan river and began a profitable logging operation. North and west of Sheboygan a group from Hameln Germany established the township of Herman. This group was a mixture of loggers and farmers who found this area to their liking. Another group from Germany, from Lippe-Deimond settled in the area west of town Herman. These Reformed quickly built a few churches and in 1859 founded Mission House. Today it is better known as Lakeland College. In its ^Rhayday _{was} it was one of the main theological training schools for the Reformed Church. The land south of Sheboygan was settled by Dutch immigrants. These people were on their way to settling in Iowa when they found out that Wisconsin also had good farmland and also trees that Iowa didn't have. The trees and the idea of a shorter trip from Chicago brought many of these people to Sheboygan county.

It didn't take these immigrants long to get settled. Soon Sheboygan county was a land flowing with cheese and chairs. It took a little longer for the churches. Trying to cover the religious history of a county is not easy to do, moreover, part of it has to do with the Reformed Church. In the days when pastors were not plentiful, it was not uncommon for the Lutherans and Reformed to share a Pastor. Such was the case of one Casper Pluess. According to J.P. Koehler, this Basel dropout was sent to the Sheboygan area by Muehlhaeuser. Soon he was in control of four different churches. One of these churches was in Sheboygan. The importance of this is that the WELS DID have a church in Sheboygan around 1850. He also was the first resident pastor of Emanuel Reformed Church in Franklin. He soon ran into a ^{what?} problem with his Sheboygan congregation and was dropped from the Synod roster in 1852. Immediately he applied for membership in the Reformed classis of New York and remained pastor at Emanuel until 1854.

The church Pluess left vacant in Sheboygan seemed to be doomed.

The man sent to replace him was also a Basel man, Gotthilf Weitbrecht. An emotional man as Koehler tells us, he soon decided that the Methodist church was more appealing. Two pastors, two problems. After this, it seems that the fathers gave up on sending a new man to Sheboygan. Perhaps the reason for this had to do with the Missouri Synod and it's roots in the Sheboygan area.

In the late 1840's the Missouri Synod instituted their "Besucher" program, the idea of sending out a man to the new settlements to see what the need was for pastors in different areas. In 1847 at a meeting in Chicago it was decided to send a man up the lake Michigan coast to check on the new settlements. In 1849 August Selle came to Sheboygan and found a sorry situation. There were 5,000 people and no churches. Obviously there was a need, but there also was a problem. Pastors were in short supply and there were very few coming out of the new seminaries that were being established. It took until 1853 for them to be able to send a sem candidate to Sheboygan. Otto Eisfeldt came to Sheboygan in the Spring of 1853 and found immediate success. He founded what is today Trinity Lutheran Church- one of the largest churches in Sheboygan. An energetic man, he opened one of the first schools in Sheboygan and began to build a church building. ^{tragedy} tragedy struck again in 1854. Pastor Eisfeldt died of sun stroke while traveling to a synod convetion. In 1855 the synod sent Pastor Steinback who remained there till 58. He was replaced by Pastor Stecher.

The Wisconsin Synod's traveling Missionary G. Fachtmann traveled to Sheboygan while Stecher was there. Koehler tells us that Fachtmann found a large Lutheran church that had a school with over 150 students. Stecher also had another congregation in Plymouth. Even though Wisconsin had the first roots in Sheboygan, Missouri had all the success.

The Lutheran Church had no luck south of Sheboygan because of the strong Dutch Reformed influence. Even today this area is very

influenced by this church. Don't expect to find any stores or businesses owned by these people open on a Sunday. For that matter, don't even try to buy a cow from one of these people on a Sunday, because they won't even walk out to the barn unless it's to do the necessary chores.

Even though the Reformed were strong in the county and Missouri had a foothold in Sheboygan, the Wisconsin Synod did play a role in the county. The pastors who started churches in the county did so by expanding their parishes in Manitowoc county south into Sheboygan county. A good nucleus of good men made the Manitowoc story into a good one for the WELS. These pastors did not sit at home, but went out in all directions. One of these men came south into Sheboygan county and set up several congregations. His name is J.P. Sprengling.

The first parish that he set up, the church that he used as his headquarters, was at St. Peters in town Mosel. He also went into Sheboygan and had some success at re-organizing the Wisconsin church there. At this point we'd have to say that the history books have not been kind. We don't know anymore about what happened to that church in Sheboygan, whether it was swallowed up by a larger church or finally disbanded we just don't know. His other Church St. Peter s joined with St. John in Cleveland in Manitowoc county. One church that Sprengling founded and still exists as a WELS church today is St. Pauls Sheboygan Falls. Actually it is closer to Howards Grove.

St Pauls was officially organized in 1862, but many of the people who organized it had gathered for services and may well have been served by some of the men previously mentioned. Like most churches, very few early records exist, but this is what could be found.

It is known that a cemetery was laid out near the Mahler school in the town of Sheboygan Falls on Co. Trunk J before 1862. It is also known that a ^P pastor Erbe and a Pastor Kolbe conducted services

in this schoolhouse and in the Millersville schoolhouse on Co. Trunk JJ before 1862. Pastor Kolbe was also serving as Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church located on the north side of Howards Grove. Today this church is a MissouriSynod church that is having many problems.

The Rev. J.P. Sprengling, resident pastor at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Town Mosel, officially organized the congregation in 1862. Immediately, plans were made for a church building. The 20 x 26 feet structure was dedicated in 1863.

The congregation was served by Pastor J. Sprengling until 1866. His successor was Pastor John H. Brockmann of Town Mosel. He served from 1866-1868. Pastor Junker served from 1868-1870.

The oldest document in the possession of the congregation is the warranty deed of the real estate upon which the church and schoolhouse stand. This piece of land was donated by Mr. and Mrs. Gottlieb Kuck. This document is dated February 13, 1865.

In 1870, the congregation extended a call to Pastor August Kleinhans who became the first resident pastor. At this time, the congregation bought a portion of land on which there either was a house or one was built.

The first minutes of the congregation are dated January 3, 1873. The report of the January 18, 1874 meeting shows that the congregation possessed a large piece of land. Trustees were elected to supervise church matters and also the farm. For this reason a double treasurer's report was kept. A resolution was also passed that a new floor be laid in the church. This bears witness to the fact that our forefathers made such diligent use of their church that the floor wore out.

The service of Pastor August Kleinhans ended in 1878. Pastor G.J. Hillemann was his successor.

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have been
terminated*

It was in 1884, that a larger church, 36 x 56 feet, at a cost of \$4,000 was erected on the old cemetery lot. A new church cemetery was laid out on the congregation's property in the town of Sheboygan Falls. The foundation of the church was made of stone, and everyone possessing a team of horses was asked to furnish two loads of stone for the building of the new church. The building itself was of brick, the windows were arched, a new pipe organ and a bell were installed. Church dedication took place on October 26, 1884.

At the close of 1898, Pastor Hillemann resigned because of advanced age. Pastor F. AveLallemant entered upon his duties in the same year.

The first renovation of the church was made in 1902, when art glass windows were installed. The cost of the windows was \$498.00, and they were considered to be gifts from the bequest of Mr. Henry Ohse. In 1909, the congregation celebrated the 25th anniversary of church dedication.

It was also in 1909, that Pastor AveLallemant accepted a different call. The Reverend L.B. Mielke was installed on April 25, 1909.

The first schoolhouse of the congregation was erected in 1917, at an expense of \$3,450.00. Though this building served the congregation well through the years, its usefulness came to an end. In 1964, a new school building was built with the hopes of someday being the home of a Christian day school. The Lord fulfilled this hope in 1974, when Ted Lau was called to teach grades 1 - 4. As the school grew and expanded to all eight grades, Pat Loersch was called to teach the lower grades, while Mr. Lau handled the upper grades.

It was in 1923, that English services were first conducted in the church. Today, 2 services a Sunday are in English, but German services were held two times a month until the late 1960's.

An addition for the altar and vestry were added to the church in 1926. The pointed steeple was torn down and replaced with a square steeple having a battlemented tower rail. This, however, proved impractical, so in later years, it was replaced with another pointed steeple.

The Reverend H.A. Kuether followed Pastor Mielke in December of 1930. Numerous improvements were made on the congregation's property during Pastor Kuether's time.

The Reverend O. Heier was installed as Pastor of the congregation in April of 1950. In 1952, the church was completely renovated and redecorated. The basement was made usable as a social gathering place. The interior of the church was redecorated; a new organ, new pews, new lighting fixtures, a new rug, and a new heating system were acquired. The total cost of the renovating program was about \$40,000.00. On September 27, 1955, the 90th anniversary of the congregation's founding was observed.

The Reverend H.G. Meyer served the congregation from 1956 to April of 1962. In 1959, the congregation observed the 75th Anniversary of the Church Dedication.

The present pastor of the congregation is the Reverend H. Juroff, who was installed on May 20, 1962. It was during the end of Pastor Meyer's service and the beginning of Pastor Juroff's that Calvary Lutheran Church (WELS) was begun in Sheboygan. Neither pastor was involved directly with the beginning of this mission, but several members of St. Pauls were instrumental in wanting a church closer to their homes in Sheboygan. Calvary was organized in 1959 and was first served by Pastor Bode. Today is is served by Rev.

V. Dobberstein.

Pastor Juroff and members of St. Pauls had more of a hand in the beginning of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Plymouth(WELS). Pastor John Baumgart of Campell/sport canvassed the area and did much of the preparatory work in 1975 and 76. A vicar, Peter Kassulke, was called in 1976 to work under Pastor Juroff and serve this nucleus. All this groundwork led to the calling of a full-time pastor the next year. The congregation has been served by Rev. R. Fleischman.

Not only has St. Pauls helped these two mission congregations get started, but has also supplied more than twenty sons and daughters to serve the Lord in the preaching and teaching ministry. Six men have entered into the preaching field, among them, Donald Bitter, who is now the president of the Western Wisconsin District. A daughter of the congregation, Edith (Schneider) Hintz, served as a missionary nurse for two years in Zambia, and also two years in Malawi, Africa.

One reason why St. Pauls has been sending more students into our worker-training schools today than in years gone by is the grade school program. With more children receiving a Christian education on the primary level, the parents are more willing to send their children to our synod schools to continue their education on the secondary level. Most of the children have been enrolling at Manitowoc Lutheran, and making the 20 mile trip every day. Some are venturing directly to MLPS and NPS for a Christian education.

Looking at the history of St. Pauls leads one to ask some questions about the WELS in Sheboygan county. Why did ST. Pauls survive in the WELS while other churches that were also founded by WELS pastors changed

synods? Why did it take the WELS so long to do mission work in a town the size of Sheboygan, or even the size of Plymouth, when the potential was there?

These questions have no one answer if indeed there is an answer. St. Pauls was not the only WELS church in the county, but the only one that remained in the Synod. A Lutheran church in Haven was also a WELS church until the late 1940's. Internal conflicts in the congregation lead to a split from the Synod. The reason that St. Pauls was able to withstand all the attacks thrown at it has to do with leadership. When Sheboygan was suffering through bad pastors in the 1800's St. Pauls was fortunate to have good men serving them. They also didn't have to suffer through lengthy vacancies when the Reformed influence was so near. More than anything, we must thank God for allowing St. Pauls to prosper for 123 years with the gospel message that remains in it's truth and purity.

It's even harder to answer the second question. When the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods were in fellowship, they had many verbal agreements regarding where each synod would do their work. It is rumored that the reason that the WELS didn't expand it's efforts in Sheboygan county until 1959 was because of one of these agreements which stated that Missouri would work in Sheboygan county and The WELS would work in neighboring Manitowoc county. The reasoning behind this agreement is easy to understand because of the roots that each had in these counties. Add to this the fact that as was mentioned before, Sheboygan county had so many churches that the mission outlook was not very good until we split with Missouri and the need to proclaim the truth was there.

St Pauls of Sheboygan Falls is not the oldest church in the WELS nor is it the largest. It's history is not the most colorful or

noteworthy. St. Pauls was a country church that is now existing in a more residential area. The only thing that sets St. Pauls so high up in my eyes is because for a time it was my church. I was baptized there, I was confirmed there. It was there that I came to love my Savior and it was there that the Lord put out His call to serve Him for me to accept. By looking at the history of St. Pauls we can see that God's hand is always over those who love Him, protecting them and blessing them for their faithfulness.