

The History of
Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church
Fond du Lac, WI

By

Aaron C. Schultz

Professor Korthals
Senior Church History
Section B
December 12, 2005

At the end of 2004, Faith Evangelical Lutheran congregation had 1548 baptized members and 1147 communicant members. The church has made great statistical strides in its 50-plus year history. The membership has seen rapid increase. New school and church buildings were added and the pastoral and teaching staffs have grown. The Lord has certainly blessed Faith congregation as they continue to preach the gospel and administer the Sacraments. The current membership might seem like a rather large number, but how has it grown so quickly? This paper will look at the many changes of Faith and how it has grown to where it stands today.

On April 8th, 1947, the first service was held in the basement of 400 E. Johnson St. with an attendance of 135 people. The cost of the basement chapel was \$19,000. At the 29th biennial convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) held August 6-12, 1947, at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, Faith Ev. Lutheran Church was accepted into membership.¹ However, there were many things that happened prior to the first service and accepted membership into the WELS.

In the early 1900's, St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, under the direction of Pastor G. E. Bergemann, started mission outreach to North Fond du Lac after the Wisconsin Central Railroad established its headquarters there and brought with it many men. Mission expansion then waned until 1928 when Pastor Gerhard Pieper was called to St. Peter's as co-pastor. In his own notes on the subject Pieper writes,

"I put this question to the Church Council in one of the very first meetings, 'How large are we going to let St. Peter's grow?' The members of the council were quite stunned by this question wondering what the pastor had in mind. He quickly advised them that it was not good policy to build a congregation to such a size that it might become unwieldy, but advocated that a program of mission expansion be considered and undertaken. The council did not at once become enthusiastic over the proposal in view of the fact that there was much work to be done right within the congregation which had just completed its new grade school

¹ Taken from the convention proceedings of 1947. This book can be found on the reserve shelf of the library at WLS.

building in 1925. The congregation was also battling a debt of nearly \$62,000 on which the interest alone at the time amounted to just about \$4000.”²

Pastor Pieper continued to impress upon his congregation the idea of mission expansion.

However, he was met with some resistance. In 1936, St. Peter’s formed a Mission Expansion Committee which met and formulated plans for future expansion. Shortly after this committee was formed, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) contacted Pieper about starting their own mission on the west end of Fond du Lac. Pastor Pieper expressed gratitude to the LCMS, but advised that it would be best not to disturb the undertaking St. Peter’s had at the time. The church then formed Redeemer Lutheran congregation on the west end of town in 1939.

During the following years, no special efforts were made toward expansion. However, Pieper kept a mission attitude in mind at all times and continually reminded the people in public meetings and private conversations. Then after a congregational meeting in 1946, the congregation agreed so wholeheartedly to expand that they voted to start two new missions, one on the south side and one on the northeast side of town. And in May of the same year, the congregation presented its plan to the Synodical Committee of the WELS. The Synodical Committee approved the request and Pastor John Raabe was called to serve as a missionary in Fond du Lac. As the new mission congregation organized, they obtained permission to build a basement church on a previously purchased lot on East Johnson Street. After coming together rather quickly, the Lord continued to bless the efforts of the members, and the men who served the congregation as pastor, as they continued in the gospel work of the early years.

During the first two years of existence, Pastor John Raabe served both mission churches in Fond du Lac. At first he spent most of his time canvassing the neighborhoods on both the south and east sides of town. Then in 1949 Pastor Raabe was called as Faith's first full-time

² Quotation taken from Pastor Pieper’s comments found in the voter’s meeting minutes of St. Peter’s Church Archives.

pastor serving until September 1950. When he first arrived full-time, Faith was in its fledgling years as an organized church. They had their first service as a daughter congregation of St. Peter's with 51 baptized souls and 38 communicant members. When Pastor Raabe left, there were 174 baptized souls and 119 communicants, while the average church attendance was 90 people.

After Pastor Raabe left Faith, Pastor Robert J. Voss was assigned to become Faith's second pastor in 1951 and served until 1955. During Pastor Voss' service to Faith, the Lord continued to bless the congregation. The infrastructure of the church boards took place as the work of the new church on the east-side of town began to take shape. It was also apparent that the church was extremely dedicated to Christian education. It is well noted in the minutes of the 1952 annual meeting that Faith supported its' members by subsidizing tuition to send their children to St. Peter's grade school and to Winnebago Lutheran Academy for the high school years. When Pastor Voss left Faith, there were 253 baptized souls and 171 communicants with 138 people on average for Sunday morning worship.³

1955 saw another change as Pastor John W. Mattek was installed on October 2. During Pastor Mattek's years at Faith, the congregation became self-supporting in 1956 and also purchased the parsonage at 472 E. Merrill Ave. from the Synod. When Pastor Mattek left Faith in 1965 there were 506 baptized souls and 312 communicant members⁴ with an average attendance of 290 for Sunday morning worship. Surely the continued rapid increase in membership was a blessing of the Lord!

The building committee was hard at work. At the end of 1960 they had completed two-thirds of its assigned work. Initial contacts were made and contracts awarded so that

³ Numbers are approximated because there was no annual report on file for 1954 through 1956 in the Faith Lutheran Church archives. The average was taken by dividing the difference between 1953 and 1957.

⁴ For a full membership growth Chart of every year from 1961-2004, cf. Addenda 3.

construction could begin. Faith dedicated its new church building at 400 E. Johnson on August 20, 1961. The cost of new building was \$175,000. Faith would remain in this building until December 25, 1992. The church was constructed in such a way that it was, and still is, affectionately named “the barn” by the members.⁵

In 1959, Faith started its first Christian day school. Mr. Robert Bame served as the principal until 1970. The start of a school was a new endeavor for the church. At the annual voters’ meeting in January 1960, the members were presented with the figures of children of school age. They were as follows: 65 in 1959, 74 in 1960, 82 in 1961, 89 in 1962, 90 in 1963 and 1964, and 92 in 1965.⁶ The Lord led the voting members of the church to consider these figures and resolve to continue building the foundation of Christian Education which is prominent today.⁷

Pastor Martin Janke accepted the call to Faith in 1965, replacing Pastor Mattek who left Faith for Trinity Lutheran in Kaukauna. Pastor Janke served until December 1979. During his time at Faith, he led the congregation through several challenges and opportunities including the decision to build a new school at the present-day location in October 1979. The school also faced many challenges during Pastor Janke’s service to Faith. Mr. Gary Graf taught 5-6 grades and served as principal from 1970 to 1978. For the next two years, however, the school went without a full-time principal. During this time Pastor Janke served as interim principal in a school building and facilities that were inadequate for the enrollment.⁸ When Pastor Janke left

⁵ For a picture of “the barn,” cf. Addenda 1.

⁶ The figures for 1961 through 1965 were tentative to increase or decrease depending upon the number of families joining or transferring from the congregation.

⁷ Before 1960, Faith supported Christian Education through the Sunday School and by subsidizing the cost of tuition at St. Peter’s for the children of members. Beginning in 1960 Faith Lutheran Elementary School was started to offer the Christian education without help from St. Peter’s.

⁸ It is interesting to note that the school enrollment reached its’ peak during Pastor Janke’s tenure in 1969 at 140 students. It fluctuated until Pastor Janke left in 1979 with 118 students. The need for a new school building was

Faith, there were 811 baptized souls and 589 communicant members with an average Sunday worship attendance of 458.

There was a vacancy at Faith for a full year and a half until May 1981, when graduate Mark Schroeder was ordained and installed as Pastor, and served until 1987. When Pastor Schroeder left Faith, there were 993 baptized souls and 717 communicants with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 608. During his time as Pastor in 1981, Greg Theisfeldt was installed as Principal. He replaced Mr. John Bauer who served Faith for one year before accepting a call to Wisconsin Lutheran College as Academic Dean.

Before Pastor Schroeder arrived in January 1978 at the annual voters meeting, the voting members decided to form a seven member building committee and a five member finance committee to undertake the work of building a new school. Their two-fold purpose was: to formulate plans for canvassing the congregation for pledges and donations; and to propose ways and means of financing the new building.

There were many big decisions that would change the future of the church. The first big decision hinged on where to build, on the present location of 400 E. Johnson St. or plans to build on the congregation's vacant property on Prairie Rd. Before they came to a decision they gathered some facts first. Both properties were appraised. Cost comparisons were done between the remodeling and addition of a new school or a brand new building. Tests were taken to determine energy costs. And finally, adjacent properties were investigated for the possibility of expansion at the present location. Another consideration for the committee was the sentimental value of "the barn," because many of the members had grown up with that building and some had gone to the school as well.

well documented in the reports and minutes, starting in the early 70's. The church would finally have a new school building in 1983, equipped to handle increased enrollment.

In order to get a congregational majority on board for a new school at the Prairie Rd. location, cottage meetings and every member visits were held. The leaders of the church wanted an informed membership to make an informed decision, that way no one could suggest manipulation by the Church Council or the two building committees. It had become evident to the committee the best long term decision for the church was to build at the new location. Finally at an October 28, 1979, meeting, the congregation approved four resolutions: The resolutions were as follows: that Faith church be relocated on the new property; that a construction goal be initiated for a school and gymnasium; that at least 35% of the total cost of whatever phase is approved, be on hand in contributions before any construction begins. Only two short months later in December of the same year, Pastor Janke accepted a call to David's Star, Jackson, WI. The congregation, however, continued towards its goal of a new school building.

After the architect firm of Ahern and associates was contracted to design the building, the Building Finance Committee was faced with more challenges. The problem was the size of the membership, now at 589 communicant members, and how to raise the needed funds to support such a task. There were, then, several steps taken towards the financial backing of a new school. Included was an advanced gifts program where member families were able to commit themselves financially to the new building project. In addition to this was a lending program where each member could loan money to the church and set their own interest rate up to 8%. Also a congregational canvass was done, along with a printed booklet describing "The Venture of Faith."⁹

⁹ "The Venture of Faith" was the name of the booklet as well as the theme of the work being done toward building a new school. This will not be the first time that this name is used, however. In subsequent years the special project of buildings at 55 Prairie Rd. was concluded with a sanctuary and new commons area and 4 new classrooms. Phases three and four of the initial construction plan were completed in 1995.

In July of 1981, there was a joint meeting between the Finance Committee and the Building Committee. A report was given that proposed construction of the new building in 4 phases: six classrooms; gym and cafeteria; sanctuary; and four additional classrooms. The idea of building in phases resulted from concern over rising construction costs and the immediate need for a school. At the next quarterly voters' meeting in August, the congregation approved a start date of August 1, 1982, for construction of at least phase one and two, the six classrooms, gym and cafeteria. Throughout that next year, the burden lay on the Finance Committee and the members of the congregation to meet its pre-construction goal of 35% total cost contributions.

Finally on August 17, 1982, the voters' approved overwhelmingly¹⁰ to start construction at a cost of \$704,000¹¹ with a groundbreaking service and ceremony that took place two weeks later on August 29. The new school was finally taking shape! Then one year later on October 16, 1983, a dedication service for the new school¹² on Prairie Rd. was held. The members were pleased with the progress that the church had made and thanked the Lord for his rich blessings!

In 1988 Pastor James Schumann was installed February 7. During Pastor Schumann's service at Faith church growth and ministry continued to expand under the Lord's guidance. When Pastor Schumann left Faith for Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and the new mission exploratory church in 2000, there were 1454 baptized souls and 1054 communicant members with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 581.

In 1989 WLS graduate David Haugly was ordained and installed as associate Pastor on July 16. This was the first time in Faith's history with two pastors working together at the same time.

¹⁰ The final vote was 54 to 8 in favor of construction for the new building.

¹¹ The final cost of construction was reduced by an increased number of bids from sub-contractors, thus creating competition. Also, members had volunteered their time and talents toward the finish work of the building. This member help saved the church around \$50,000.

¹² For picture of new school, cf. Addenda 2

Pastor's Schumann and Haugly were at Faith for no more than 4 years before more change took place. On December 25, 1992, the last worship service was held at the Johnson St. location. The congregation had decided earlier that year to sell the property to a Baptist church and embark on another building experience. Many of the same strategies used during the school building project of 1983 were employed in raising funds for the new sanctuary. Every member visits were completed and pledges were taken. And finally on March 27, 1994, a groundbreaking service for new church at 55 Prairie Road was held. Phases three and four of the construction plan were now under way.

On March 19, 1995, the first worship service in the new church¹³ was held. The approximate cost of the church with four new classrooms and commons area was \$1.2 million. At the time there were 1265 baptized souls and 859 communicant members with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 548. It seemed as if financial difficulty was imminent. The church was faced with a budgetary deficit near \$100,000. However, the Lord continued to bless both the church and school, as growth in each went hand in hand. In 1995 annual income rose for the church by over 9% and the budget was met and exceeded by \$1,000.

In 1998 Tim Zunker, who at the time served on the faculty as teacher of the upper grades, was called as Principal. The enrollment for the school had topped out at 213 students. In the following years, the school enrollment remained around 200.

In 2001 Pastor Joel Gaertner was installed on February 11. And as of January 2005, there were 1548 baptized souls of congregation, and 1147 communicant members with an average Sunday morning worship attendance of 776. In August 2004, Jon Woldt was installed as principal. School enrollment was 204.

¹³ For a picture of the new church, cf. Addenda 2

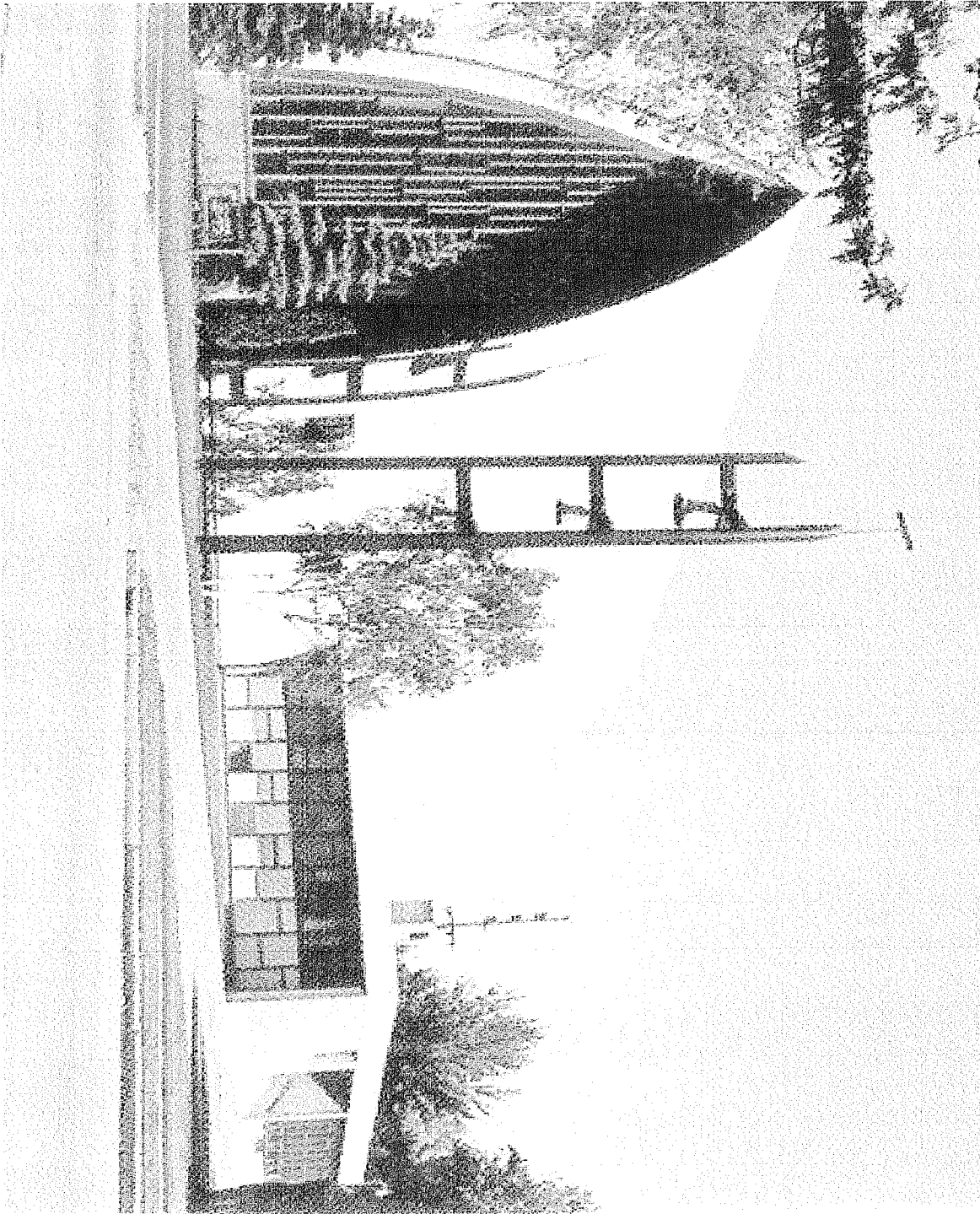
As Faith Lutheran Church saw continual blessings from the Lord, there remain struggles. In April and May 2005, every member visits took place as the “Family of Faith Focuses on Ministry.”¹⁴ The idea behind these visits was additional staffing of a third pastor. In addition, there was a focus on the financial needs of the church, primarily, to reduce the debt and meet the current budget.

Many members have seen the blessings of the Lord at Faith Lutheran Church. As Faith looks to future endeavors, may it always continue to look at the past blessings that they may serve a reminder of the rich blessings of the Lord! As a vicar at Faith for only one year in 2004-2005, I have seen first-hand the gospel work that continues there today. To God alone be the glory!

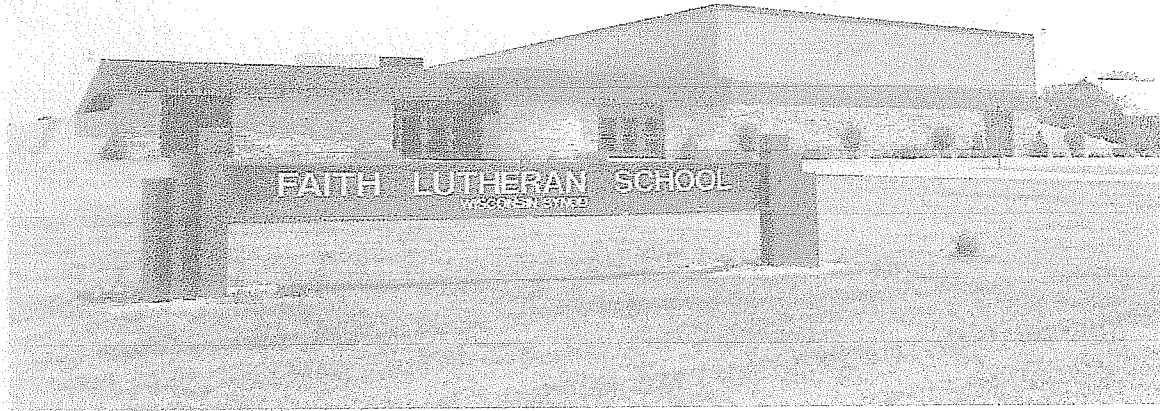
Nota Bene: The majority of information for this paper was obtained from the Faith Lutheran Church Archives as well as St. Peter’s Lutheran Church Archives. In addition, information was obtained by the author from various personal interviews and minutes while serving at Faith Lutheran Church. Also of service to the author were two church history papers that can be found in the WLS Library: Richard A Waldschmidt. “The ‘Hope Church Incident’ in Fond du Lac, WI,” (EF 2431); and Robert F. Raasch. “A venture of faith: the history of the school building project of Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fond du Lac, WI (EF 2214).

¹⁴ This was the theme of the every member visits. A color booklet was produced to coincide with a presentation of the ministry of the church. The thirty-minute presentation started with a bible class encouraging those members visited to remember the blessings the Lord has so richly showered upon them and the congregation. The presentation continued with a look at the past, present and future of Faith. The specific purpose of the visit was the same as the bible study that started it: Remember the blessings of the Lord! The ad hoc committee that was formed by the Church Council to study the ministry of Faith produced this booklet as both a reminder to the people and a vision for the future. The ministry work that was being considered for expansion was adding a third pastor. As of August 2005, these discussions were still taking place.

Faith's first permanent church and school dedicated in 1961.
Also known as "the barn."



Prairie Rd. School was built in 1983.



Prairie Rd. Church was built in 1995.



A Period of Growth — 1961-1982

