

A History of God's Grace at
Nain Evangelical Lutheran
Church, West Allis, WI.

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As I look through all the material and history compiled for this paper on Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, one word rings clear in my mind--continuity. In its ninety-one years of existence, Nain has only been served by three pastors; one of which only served there for three years. Stability at the pastoral position has provided steady leadership for the members of Nain. Possibly the greatest benefit of this has been a faithful proclamation of God's Word.

But when someone hears of continuity, the impression that word might give him is a sense of complacency, or a stagnant church. This, though, could not be further from the truth. This paper will explore the activities of Nain and God's guiding hand through the gospel ministry at Nain.

General History of Nain

In 1913, the Mission Board of the Wisconsin Synod called Pastor Walter Motzkus, a recent graduate from the Theological Seminary in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, to canvass the town of West Milwaukee and eastern West Allis, Wisconsin for mission prospects. His early efforts yielded success in West Milwaukee. For a short time, Sunday services were held in the homes of these families Motzkus served. But as Pastor Motzkus' mission work continued, the area of eastern West Allis showed more potential. So the central hub of the mission was moved to this location, but still near West Milwaukee.

Shortly thereafter, the Mission Board of the Wisconsin Synod bought a lot for this group of people on the west side of 58th Street, between Burnham St. and Rogers St. They also built a portable, wooden chapel for \$395.00. This little edifice was completed in 1914 and dedicated on

May 14th. It would serve as their worship space until 1922. Not long after completion of the chapel, plans were set in motion to formally organize as a congregation. A constitution was drafted and on October 15th, 1914, the church was given the name 'Nain,' named after the town where Jesus raised a widow's son from the dead. The rationale for this name was that just as Christ raised that boy from the dead, so also he will raise us on the last day.¹ The following June, 1915, Nain officially joined the Wisconsin Synod.

In June, 1916, Pastor Motzkus received and accepted a call to Cameron, WI. The vacancy he left at pastor, though, was short-lived, as another seminary graduate, Walther Keibel, was assigned to Nain to be the next pastor. Over the next forty-six and one half years pastor Keibel would faithfully serve God's children at Nain.

In the next few years following Keibel's installation, the congregation grew in size to thirty-six voting members, excluding women and children. Truly this was a testament to how God quickly blessed Nain Lutheran Church in its early years. This quick growth led the congregation in 1919 to see a need for a larger facility for worship. After looking at several sights, a piece of property on the northwest corner of 57th and Mitchell St. in West Allis, one and one half blocks north and one block east of the original sight, was settled on. This new sight continues to serve as the current location of Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Two years later, in 1921, though there was no new church building to speak of yet, a parsonage for the pastor was built on this new site at a cost of \$6,500.00. When the parsonage was finished, the congregation set its eyes on constructing a new church. A humorous bid of

¹ Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 5.

\$11,111.11 was accepted. On September 12, 1922, excavation began. The new church was finished and then dedicated on February 11th, 1923. The old chapel was sold that year and moved to Wind Lake in Racine County to serve as a cottage.

As the congregation got settled into its new building, it was apparent that the size of the building was much larger than their current needs mandated. But once again the Lord's hand was at work in this situation, and the congregation quickly grew from the 198 communicants it had at the time of the new church dedication. Between 1924 and 1928, new homes were being built in the area at a rapid pace, and since many of those families new to the neighborhood were Lutheran, Nain experienced a large growth.²

In the late 1940's, the Lord sent Nain a mixed blessing--they had already outgrown their still relatively new church building. So on February 15th, 1953, the congregation approved a resolution to build a new church. As funds were continuing to be gathered, different plans were proposed. Finally the plan by architects Steffen and Kemp was accepted and in 1956 a contract was awarded to Meredith Bros., Inc.

The next challenge in their third building process was finding a temporary place of worship. It had been resolved to build the new church on the site of the current one. Efforts to receive permission to worship at Horace Mann Middle School, located on 61st and Lapham St., and at the Paradise Theater, located on 63rd and Greenfield St. in West Allis fell through. So the congregation decided to move the church building at a price of \$2,500.00 to an adjacent lot that

² Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 11.

had been purchased in 1944.³ At the end of April, 1956, ground was broken for the new church building. The members of Nain continued to worship in the old, relocated building until November 11th of that year, when cold weather and the lack of a heating system forced them into the basement of the partially completed structure.

Finally, on March 31st, 1957, the new church was dedicated to the glory of God. Over the last forty-nine years this facility has served and continues to serve Nain well. The approximate seating in the nave is 400 people. The basement holds the bathrooms, a stage, a large kitchen, and a spacious gathering area for various activities. Yet with the changing of the times and the awareness of handicap accessibility, Nain has had to seek ways to overcome its structural shortfalls in this area. Within the last few years the congregation has installed seat lifts in some of their stairwells. But this measure has served as nothing more than a stopgap. More recently there has been speculation about installing an elevator. Plans to build handicap accessible restrooms in the basement are also in the mix.

Once this new facility was completed, it allowed the congregation to increase its activities. But with Pastor Keibel showing signs of age--he was in his 44th year in the ministry--the congregation granted him an extended vacation in 1959. During that time, Frederick Jungkuntz was installed as a vicar at Nain, and served there until his graduation. For the next few years during Pastor Keibel's waning days Nain continued this practice of acquiring a seminary assistant to serve as Youth Director. These names include: Robert Hartmann, Marvin Doelger, and Dale Arndt.

³ Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 12-13.

Sadly, 1962 was the last year Pastor Keibel served at Nain. After Christmas of that year he went to Los Angeles to visit his son, Armin Keibel. While he was there he died of a heart attack on January 11th, 1963. Under Keibel's watch Nain grew to about 500 members in 1963. Over the next few months, various professors and students from the seminary and various guest preachers filled the pulpit on Sundays. Then on April 16th, 1963, a call was extended to Pastor Gordon Snyder of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in North Platte, Nebraska. He accepted the call and arrived in West Allis in early June. Since his installation on June 18th, 1963, Pastor Snyder has served as only the third pastor in Nain's existence. Considering that Pastor Keibel had been the pastor for the last forty-six years, it could have been a challenge for Pastor Snyder to incorporate his own ideas into the ministry. But the sense Pastor Snyder got from his members was that they were ready for a little freshness to the pastoral position. Nevertheless, he did not wish to take advantage of this situation, but stressed a smooth transition, always careful to emphasize that even though things may be done differently now, this does not mean that what the former pastor did was wrong.⁴

During the first few years of Snyder's time at Nain, the size of the church continued to grow up to about 600 members. But some time after that, especially in the beginning of the 1980's, the number of members has steadily declined until this day, when Nain has about 250 members in 2005. Pastor Snyder cited multiple reasons for this. One reason is that families are smaller than they used to be. Another reason deals more with the economic situation in West Allis. Earlier in the 20th century West Allis experienced a large population growth due in large

⁴ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

part to the many, industrial jobs the area had to offer. After all, West Allis was named after the Allis Chalmers factory in the area. As the winds of change affected industry, there were numerous layoffs to industrial jobs, as well as entire factories that moved out of the area. This job vacuum caused many members to move away in search of a job.

Another reason is that for years Nain had been a neighborhood church, drawing upon the families from around the church for its members. As those people moved out, a newer culture has moved in that is much more transient in nature. These new neighbors have no strong ties to the area, but are only living there until they are able to move on. Pastor Snyder stated that they have had adult confirmands from the area, but when those new members move out of the neighborhood, they often join other WELS congregations closer to them. This is evidence of God's hand still working through Nain to bring people to faith, even though they may not remain there for long.

A final reason is that as the neighborhood changes, so does the culture. Hispanics and African Americans are moving into the area that was so recently a Caucasian community. At this point in time, the church is not well-equipped to reach out to the needs of these people, but recognizes this need and will be taking steps to reach out to these new families.

With the number of members declining, it was seen in the early 1990's that the two Sunday services needed to be consolidated into one while retaining a Monday evening service. Ironically, though church attendance has dwindled, the midweek Advent and Lent services Pastor Snyder started continue to do pretty well.⁵

⁵ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

Areas of Ministry Outside of Worship

From the church's inception, the Lord has blessed Nain with an active Sunday School program. In 1964, the number of students enrolled was listed at 175 children.⁶ Vacation Bible School over the summer months has also seen much activity in years past. Pastor Snyder said that at one point there were over 100 children that attended VBS annually.⁷ But over the course of the last several years those numbers for Sunday School and VBS have been in steady decline. This has much to do with the reasons listed above. Also, it seems as though parents are not as willing to bring their kids to these activities as they used to be.

Another area of ministry that churches are often active in is a Christian Day School. However, Nain has yet to speak of a Christian Day School they can call their own. Instead the members of Nain have sent their kids to Christian Day Schools that different Lutheran Churches provide. Pastor Snyder said that when he arrived at Nain, it was common practice for a family to send their child to Jordan Lutheran School (WELS), or to St. Paul's Lutheran School (LCMS), both in West Allis. Not long after his arrival, though, Pastor Snyder and the pastor of St. Paul's realized that this situation could no longer be supported, given the fact that WELS and LCMS had split only two years prior. But rather than remove the Nain students from their rosters, St. Paul's allowed the existing Nain students to continue on to graduation while at the same time not allowing new ones into their program.

It also was not long after this that the trend of sending their children to Jordan changed.

⁶ Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 19.

⁷ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

In about 1972 an arrangement was made with Fairview Lutheran Church and Day School in Milwaukee, which allowed for Nain students to attend classes there. To assist with the teaching ministry there, Nain called Stanley Cole to serve as a teacher at Fairview. In the beginning of the 1980's, Stanley took a call elsewhere and Bob Sawall was called to replace him, and he serves there until this day.

Some may wonder why Nain never had a school of its own, especially with its active Sunday School and VBS programs. One answer is logistics. There was no place for them to build a school. Nain, and Pastor Keibel specifically, had hoped in the late 1950's and early 1960's to use the basement of their church for this very purpose, but the Wisconsin Industrial Commission denied their request to do so.⁸ Further efforts to initiate their own school Keibel left up to his successor. The other reason is a practical reason. Pastor Snyder said that given the number of students that currently went to Fairview, it would not be good stewardship for them to seek a school of their own. Annually they average about twenty students at Fairview.⁹

Current Blessings and Challenges to the Ministry at Nain

Early in the life of the congregation, outreach came easy to the members of Nain. Many reasons contribute to this. One is that neighborhoods were more of a tight-knit community. You were more likely to know your neighbor quite well. Also the majority of the people shared the same basic culture and background. Another reason was that some were already Lutheran and were simply looking for a church to join. All of these reasons made outreach an active part of

⁸ Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 19.

⁹ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

Nain's early history. But as the community has changed and as more and more members live outside of the neighborhood, outreach involvement has become much more of a challenge in recent years. One possible reason is that the blessings that were evident in the early years are no longer there, and so people have to think and act outside of the box in order to reach out to those around the church. Professor Vallesky from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was invited to do an outreach presentation to the members of Nain, but that only sparked small interest.¹⁰

One of the blessings Nain has enjoyed is in the area of supporting its renovations to accommodate the physically handicapped. Some members have shown their love for our Savior God by giving generous donations to help support these changes to the building.¹¹

Another issue which in many ways is both a blessing and a challenge is that in the next few months Pastor Snyder will be going to the church council with a proposal of finding a possible future pastor with Hispanic capabilities. Though he would only consider partial employment and not complete retirement, Pastor Snyder has served at Nain for forty-two and one half years and sees that the time is coming soon when he should step down. It is Snyder's hope to find a seminary graduate who is able to communicate in the Hispanic language.¹² The main question that lies before them is: can Nain afford two pastors?

Another tool Pastor Snyder hopes to use to reach out to the community is their Sunday School program. English as a Second Language is also becoming more and more of an option

¹⁰ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

¹¹ Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

¹² Interview: Snyder, Gordon. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.

for use in mission work.

It is a wonderful blessing that the leaders of Nain have enough wisdom and love for all nations to stick with the neighborhood. Back in the 20th century when the inner city of Milwaukee neighborhoods became less and less populated with the members of a particular church and more populated with another race, the practice was to move the church to a new location in the out-lying areas of the city, such as St. Jacobi did. Not only did that create a spiritual vacuum in that area but it also showed a lack of understanding in God's great commission. Nain, however, is looking to reach out to these different cultures. What a wonderful blessing God has given through them. May he richly bless this work. At the same time though, the leadership has to maintain cultural sensitivity to both groups--current members and potential prospects.

Conclusion

Ninety-one years, three pastors. When one looks at those two factors, he might think of Nain as a stagnant church. But when one digs deeper into the ministry at Nain it is very evident that Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church is very active in the ministry of the gospel. True, they face challenges that were not present many years ago. But the fact is that this church is not shrinking away from those challenges, but facing them with the help of God. God's guiding hand has blessed their labor, even to this day. May He truly bless this church always.

Bibliography

1. Nain Evangelical Lutheran Church, "Nain: 50 Years of Grace." N.P. p. 19.
2. Snyder, Gordon. Interview. December 8th, 2005. 1:30 pm.