

ST. LUKES EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, *Watertown, WI,*
A SLOW PATH TO LUTHERANISM; 1848 - 1909

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Watertown, Wisconsin could be called one of the great strongholds of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod. In this relatively small city of 18,000, there are four large WELS churches. As one considers these churches and their impact on Lutheranism and the WELS, one would consider first and foremost St. Marks Ev. Lutheran Church with its rich historical background and strong synodical stand. One might consider St. John's and the roles it played in the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. Even Trinity, the break-away English church might come to mind. But very rarely would one, at first, put St. Lukes into this picture. But St. Lukes, the oldest of the WELS congregations in Watertown, does have an illustrative background. And this is a background which did have an impact on Lutheranism and the Lutheran congregations of Watertown. The history of this congregation is a history of a slow progression from Protestant "free" to Wisconsin Synod Lutheran.

Officially and formally the present St. Lukes congregation had its origin in the year 1849. On March 26 of that year the congregation was incorporated under the name, "The Evangelical German Church, Watertown, Wisconsin" (Deutsche Evangelische Protestantischen Gemeinde.)¹ This was a congregation of German Protestants with Reformed leaning.

Yet, to get at the real formation of the congregation, one must go back about five years. At that time there was a big movement in Watertown to form a large Protestant congregation. This was to be a Protestant church which would represent all the Protestant groups in Watertown. So the United Protestant Con-

gregation was formed in 1844 and had the Rev. John Jones as its pastor. But soon it was easy to see that this "united" church was far from being united. The Methodist began to take charge of the congregation and in no more than a year, 1845, this congregation was calling itself the Methodist Episcopal Society.²

In backlash to this Methodist takeover of the Protestant church, one finds the Evangelical Protestant Church being set up. From the beginning this congregation would be a free church--having no ties with any church group or denomination. Though the official founding date for this congregation is 1849, it was already in existence in the year 1848. There is a church council report from Jan. 7, 1849 which speaks of the council that had been elected in 1848. Some of the early members who were instrumental in forming this church were the following: Peter Rose, William Roeber, Peter Seaburg, George Meyer, and Zacharius Theurind.³

The first services which this German Ev. Protestant Congregation held were in the Buena Vista House on Fourth Street. The group was served primarily by a Protestant minister from Milwaukee whose name is not remembered. When he was not available they were served by the Rev. H.H. Winter, a self-professed "Latin farmer" living in Farmington, and also by "Senator" Meyer (who wasn't a minister and the title of senator was conferred on him because he held a minor city office.)⁴

This first congregation was a relatively small one, totaling no more than ten families. Yet a year after incorporating, 1850, they hired their first regular pastor--the Rev. Fredrick Reutsch (some sources had his name spelled Rentsch.) He rallied the

congregation into building a small frame church on a site on Fourth Street, one block north of Main. This church served the group until 1866.⁵

Before getting into a further history of this congregation, it might be good to give a general overview of the character of this congregation throughout its Protestant years. During the time of its formation until when The Rev, Sterz came in 1890 the word which would best depict this congregation is the word, INDEPENDENT. This congregation wanted virtually nothing to do with other churches or other church groups. It operated as a "free" congregation, having no ties with any Synod or denomination (other than being Protestant.) In regards to their pastors this independence was there also. They hired their pastors on a yearly basis. During these years, 1850 -1890, there were thirteen different pastors. When there was a vacancy the congregation would advertise the position in local newspapers and Protestant journals. The applying candidates would preach trial sermons. After the new pastor was chosen he would be put on a three month or six month trial period to see if he would work out. If he passed the test his contract was extended to a year and he would be rehired each year.⁶ During these years of thirteen pastors, the community took to calling the congregation by the name of the pastor who was there--the Doerner Church or the Joerris Church, etc.⁷ To keep the pastors from totally running the show, the congregation forbade the pastor from attending the church council or voters meetings. If the pastor wanted anything done he would have to send a formal letter to the President of the congregation.⁸ It wasn't

until 1868 that the congregation allowed the pastor to confirm.⁹

Returning to the history of this congregation, little can be said of the history of the years 1850 - 1858. In these years two different pastors served the congregation: the Rev. Goerges and the Rev. Henry Doerner.

The year 1859 marked an event which was to play a very important part, not so much in the history and development of the German Protestant congregation, but in the very foundation and course of neighboring St. Marks Ev. Lutheran Church. This event helped St. Marks stabilize itself on a course of conservative Lutheranism. In 1859 the Rev. Peter Joerris (some sources have the name spelled Joeris) was the shepherd of the Evangelical Protestant Church. The Rev. Sans was the pastor of St. Marks. Rev. Sans was a competent and likable pastor who tended to be liberal and unionistic in his preaching and teaching. As this event unfolded, Pastor Sans was getting a bad name because of newspaper reports about him. Because of these bad reports the German speaking citizens of Watertown were getting riled up against Sans. It's interesting to note that it wasn't just the members of St. Marks, nor the German Lutherans who were involved in this, but nearly all of Watertown form the Mayor on down. It turned out that the author of these bad reports against Sans was the Rev. Peter Joerris. In the newspaper, the Weltbuerger, he publicly accused Sans of being an imposter. He accused Sans of living under an alias; that his real name was Langhoff. He also accused Sans of having no theological training. All these accusations led to much public debate, mob action, and the near

lynching of Pastor Sans.¹⁰

The upshot of all of this was that Pastor Sans admitted he had received his religious training at a teachers' Institute and that he had taken the surname of his step-father.¹¹ Nevertheless, he felt that he had been (falsely) slandered. So he brought libel charges against the Rev. Joerris. In the trial at Jefferson, the jury found Joerris not guilty. But Sans, still smarting from this controversy, appealed the decision to the State Supreme Court. There the decision of the county court was overturned and Joerris was found guilty of unsupported slander. Sans was vindicated while Joerris had to publicly retract the statements which he had made and pay a fine of one hundred dollars plus the court costs of both trials.¹²

But the matter wasn't settled yet. Because of the bad publicity and the huge controversy that was caused, Pastor Sans soon resigned from St. Mark's. St. Mark's next pastor was the sainted Rev. Bading, a conservative Lutheran pastor who ~~kept~~^{led} the young WELS on a conservative course. He did the same for St. Mark's. He brought St. Marks back from the liberalism of Sans to the conservative course it has followed to the present. So one can say that the Evangelical Protestant Church struck a blow for conservative Lutheranism and for the Wisconsin Synod. This congregation was responsible for the removal of a liberal pastor who undoubtedly would have put St. Marks on a far different course than it followed.

In the few years following this incident, the Evangelical Protestant Church hired a new pastor, the Rev. Rettig. In 1866 the Rev. H.C. Tack was hired (\$300.00/year) to minister the needs

of this flock. At this time the congregation was greatly expanding and felt the present frame church would no longer serve its needs. So the congregation moved the old frame church to a site on Second Street and Cady where it ^{had} ~~home~~ ^{was} the Concordia Musical Society.¹³ A new brick building was erected at the old site for the sum of four thousand dollars. The membership had now grown from the founding few to about twenty-five families.¹⁴

(The following history of this congregation from 1867 to 1889 is a compilation of events taken from the church council minutes of those years. These were translated by Prof. Em. A.O. Lehmann.)

The most difficult problem facing the congregation in the year 1867 was whether to buy a new organ or not. It was finally decided to buy one for three hundred dollars, while selling the old melodean through a raffle (tickets fifty cents each.)

Pastor John Boetsch was pastor of this group when the momentous decision was made to allow the pastor the right to confirm the children. This took place in 1868.

In 1869 the church council passed the resolution that the unmarried women and widows of the congregation who paid their dues and fulfilled all their obligations would ^{be} ~~have~~ the "Stamm-faehig" or ^{have} the right to vote. However they were not eligible for office. In this year the pastorate was vacant.

1870 was a year of change for this congregation, as well. In this year the congregation decided to restrict their independence by joining another church group. They became members of the As-

sociation of Free Evangelical Protestant Congregations of North America. As will be seen later, this was a short lived merger. In this year the congregation also experienced problems with their newly hired pastor, the Rev. Heyer. It seems that Pastor Heyer had become involved in some sort of public scandal, for the church council was forced to pass the resolution: "Since our preacher, Mr. Heyer, did not keep his promise and is guilty of open scandal, we pass the resolution that his position with us will come to an end in three months." Faced with a debt of about sixteen hundred dollars, the congregation sold stock (7% interest) to cover this, using the church property as collateral.

In 1872 Pastor Gustavus Kuns was hired. This new pastor apparently had a running feud going with the church council; the church council publicly accused Kuns of being in error according to one of the articles of the constitution of the congregation. Kuns came before the church council and successfully defended himself against the charges. But, not surprisingly, Kuns soon resigned. The independence of the congregation and the personal attack were apparently too much. During this year, the church council voted to withdraw from the Association of Free Evangelical Protestant Congregations. The cost of sending delegates to the convention was thought to be too much of a burden. While the congregation couldn't find the money to belong to the Association, it did get the funding to open up a school behind the congregation. (This school lasted only a few years, falling victim to the money crunch.)

The altercation between church council and Pastor Kuns wasn't over with, though. In 1873 the church council got the last lick in against their former pastor. Supposedly in one of his last sermons Pastor Kuns had hurled some charges of impropriety against the church council. So in their Jan. 5 meeting, the church council members passed the following resolutions:

1. Resolved--to express regret that Pastor Kuns instead of reconciling, so spitefully stepped on the council.
2. Further resolved--that the council consists of considerate men, all of whom during several terms have served with distinction, and who, duly elected by the congregation, performed their duty correctly and always with free common sense.
3. Resolved that the council try to get back the proposed dismissal (of the pastor) in order to (unreadable) according to their powers that they represented the congregation faithfully.
4. To publish this in the Weltbuerger, and at the next service in the church to bring them to recall to the attention of the listeners by reading them.
5. To appoint a committee to publish these resolutions.

Between the years 1874 - 1884 things were quiet with the congregation. Sometime in these years the Rev. Sylla was the pastor. Also from a reference in an 1888 church council meeting, there may have also been a Pastor Zabel serving the congregation. (He may have been pastor in 1886, but this seems unlikely according to the records found in the Watertown City Directory.) This Pastor Zabel also ran afoul of the congregation. He was referred to in the Church Council minutes as a liar, defamer, slanderer, and enemy of the congregation. In 1875 the church council decided to bring in more money by establishing fees which would be charged to non-members who desired the services of the pastor: Baptisms were \$2.00, burials without sermons were \$3.00, with sermon \$5.00,

confirmation \$5.00, wedding in the church \$5.00, wedding in the pastor's home \$3.00, and for any of the services held outside of Watertown an additional fifty cents per mile was charged.

Around 1885 the Rev. Edward Knaak served as pastor of this Evangelical Protestant Congregation. By this time the church had grown from the twenty-five families of 1866 to the size of sixty families.¹⁵ In the next year there was a new pastor--the Rev. Julius Koehler; and there was a new problem. At a quarterly meeting it was brought up that the new pastor had many unpaid debts. It was further reported that he had absconded with some money and couldn't be found. The meeting resolved to publish this in the paper to warn other congregations to beware. After this the Rev. F.A. Kaemmerer was hired to pastor the congregation.

This then leads up to the beginning of the period of change for the congregation--the slow path to Lutheranism which the Rev. Herman Sterz took the congregation on. In January of 1890 Sterz came to the Evangelical Protestant Church. One of the first things Sterz undertook was the changing of the practice of annually renewing the pastor's contract. In the Dec. 26, 1890 meeting, the Church Council decided to change Article 11, paragraph 7 of the constitution (dealing with the annual renewing of the pastor's contract.) They said this "regulation was against God's Word, it is of no purpose and detrimental." They, however, retained the right to give the pastor three months notice when they wanted him to leave the congregation. It's interesting to note that before this change there were thirteen pastors (1850 - 1889); but after the change there have been only four (1890 - 1986: Sterz,

Lorenz, Uetzmann, Vomhof.)

This change in the practice of annual hiring of the pastors was only the first step which Sterz undertook to reorganize the congregation. It wasn't too much later when Sterz got for himself the right to attend the church council meetings and voters meetings. In the year 1897 Pastor Sterz brought in a new order of service. This presumably was a Lutheran liturgy. Slowly but surely Sterz was leading them over to the side of Lutheranism.

The biggest and most important change for this congregation came in the year 1909. This was the year when the Protestant church emerged as the Lutheran church. In the Sept. 15 council meeting, the church council took up the wish and motion of Pastor Sterz to change the name of the congregation from Evangelical Protestant to Evangelical Lutheran. After much deliberation and discussion on this point, weighing the advantages and disadvantages, "the council came to the conclusion that the change would be good." There was only one dissenting voice; and after the changeover this person left the congregation. While the congregation still wanted to remain independent, this is the time when one can say that it entered confessional fellowship with the WELS. (Specifically, they first entered confessional fellowship with the Michigan Synod. At the 1910 Michigan Synod convention, Herman Sterz was listed as a pastor of that synod and as a delegate to that convention. St. Lukas was listed as a church in confession with, but not a member of, the Michigan Synod.¹⁶)

On Oct. 27 of 1909 the name of the congregation was officially

changed to St. Lukas Evangelical Lutheran Congregation. Among the members most prominent in leading this congregation to the changeover into a Lutheran church were (besides Sterz): U. Habegger, H. Stolz, R. Radke, E. Zadler, H. Lammerhirt, and R. Zabel.¹⁷ The memorial which they drew up to make this change official is as follows:

"We the undersigned members of the Evangelical Protestant Congregation of Watertown, Wisconsin, declare herewith that it is our wish and will, and we support it, that the upto the present name of the congregation be changed to Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, and we ask that this memorial of the congregation be presented at the thyeeto designated congregation meeting and accepted and that the congregation at the same time take the necessary steps and make the alterations in order to make the name change legally correct. However this proclamation must in no way be looked upon or interpreted as if we are attaching ourselves to any Synod."

At the time of this change, the congegation was listed as four hundrend souls and nearly three hundred communicants. Two years after the chnyage Pastor Sterz held a joint meeting with the pastor of St. Marks. At this meeting resolutions were drawn up and adopted that the role of the Synodical Conference concerning releases and acceptences of members from sister congregations would be observed.

In the year 1916 Pastor Sterz transferred from the Michigan Synod into the Wisconsin Synod. From that time on St. Lukes was listed on the roster of WELS congregations (independent but in confessional fellowship.) Sterz had brought the church into the Wisconsin Synod. The final chapter in this history of St. Lukes slow progression to Lutheranism took place in 1966 when the congregation entered into full membership in the WELS. This

was reported at the June 13-15, 1966 Western Wisconsin District Convention: "In addition St. Lukes Congregation of Watertown which has been confessionally associated with and supported the work of the WELS since 1909, is now formally applying for full voting membership"(p. 14 of Proceedings.) Though St. Lukes remained independent for fifty-seven years, yet it was a faithful supporter of the WELS. Statistically it contributed money to the Synod in the same proportion as member congregations.

From the years 1909 to the present, St. Lukes has experienced many blessings from the Lord. Rev. Sterz remained pastor until 1926, when a WELS pastor, the Rev. Paul Lorenz was called. In 1941 the Rev, I.G. Uetzmann became the minister. During his ministry the church experienced much growth, going from 225 souls to 700. The present pastor, the Rev. Ervine Vomhof came in 1971. At present the congregation has stabilized around six to seven hundred souls.

During the past thirty years the congregation had the privilege of building a new church on three acres of land on the south side of Watertown. This took place in 1960 at the cost of \$170,000.00.¹⁸ In the year 1981 St. Lukes went into joint partnership with Trinity E. Lutheran Church in maintaining a Christian Day School.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Article on St. Lukes, Watertown Daily Times, March 4, 1955.
- ²John Henry Ott, PHD., Ed., Jefferson County Wisconsin and Its People, (Chicago, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1917), p. 98.
- ³Article on St. Lukes, Watertown Daily Times, March 4, 1955.
- ⁴Ott, op. cit., p. 99.
- ⁵The History of Jefferson County, Wisconsin, (Chicago, Western Historical Company, 1879), p. 418.
- ⁶Arnold O. Lehmann, "Lutheran Beginnings in the Watertown Area," WELS Historical Institute, Spring 1984, p. 33.
- ⁷Elmer C. Kiessling, Watertown Remembered, (Milwaukee, Franklin Publishers Inc., 1976, p. 85.
- ⁸Article on St. Lukes, Watertown Daily Times, March 16, 1984.
- ⁹Arnold Lehmann, Translation of Church Council Minutes from 1867 - 1909.
- ¹⁰A Century With Christ 1854 - 1954 (Centennial Booklet of St. Marks Ev. Lutheran Church, Watertown), p. 13.
- ¹¹Kiessling, op. cit., p. 128.
- ¹²A Century With Christ, p. 15.
- ¹³Lehmann, Lutheran Beginnings in the Watertown Area, p. 33.
- ¹⁴The History of Jefferson County, Wisconsin, p. 418.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 418.
- ¹⁶1910 Synodal Bericht (Ev. Luth. Synod Michigan.)
- ¹⁷An Article on St. Lukes, Watertown Daily Times, Dec. 13, 1940.
- ¹⁸An Article on St. Lukes, Watertown Daily Times, May 1, 1959.

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