

Martin Luther Church 1941-1963:
Experiencing God's Changeless Grace

By

David C. Rau

Church History 331
Prof. Brenner
April 18, 2000

The Need for a Second Neenah Congregation

Trinity Lutheran Church had been the only Church located in the city of Neenah since its founding¹ 1869. However, as the city began to grow, so did Trinity. From the late 1930's through the 1940's Trinity approached 2,000 members. Early in 1941, recognizing the need to have more help in reaching the growing community with the Gospel, Trinity passed a resolution to ask the Mission Board to begin a mission on the west side of town. Trinity was eager and even "expressed a willingness to release members to serve as nucleus for this new mission."¹

Seeing the need in Neenah and understanding the zeal of Trinity to assist in the matter, the Mission Board called Adalbert Geiger, Pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Oshkosh, to begin the outreach work. The first service was held Nov. 16, 1941 at the voting poll booth of the Fourth Ward in Neenah. This would serve as the worship facility for a number of years, six to be exact. (It wasn't funds or lack of ambition that kept the congregation from building a worship facility. Rather, because World War II had broken out, there was a limited the amount of building that could be done.) Twenty-nine people attended this first service. The total membership at the time of organization was 17 communicants and 29 souls^A, among these were 8 families who transferred from Trinity.²

Formal Organization and Early Beginnings

For a full month, Pastor Geiger held services without a formally organized congregation. But on December 15, 1941, just eight days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the first congregational meeting was held. The first line of the minutes of the

¹ Trinity Lutheran Church. 100th Anniversary Booklet. 1969. p.6.

² Martin Luther Church. 25th Anniversary Booklet. 1966.

congregation reads, "The first meeting to be held for the purpose of organizing a "Lutheran" church in the fourth ward of Neenah was held on Monday evening Dec. 15, 1941."³ The reason that Pastor Geiger had been called was coming to fruition. The need for a second congregation in Neenah was quickly being realized. "The meeting opened with a short service and prayer. Rev. Geiger took charge of the meeting and opened nominations for President."⁴ Present at this first meeting were W. Schroeder, S. Voss, A. Glebke, W. Krueger, F. Krueger, L. Kroening, S. Bisel, Ed. Otto, R. Westphal, Rev. Geiger, Rev. Schaefer, Rev. Lederer and Gus Kalphas. Llyod Acheson and Rienhardt Alfertig wanted to attend but were not present.

Mr. Fred Krueger won the election and immediately took charge of the meeting. R.C. Westphal was elected Secretary and Sylvester Voss, Treasurer.

Nominations were accepted for names for the new congregation. The names suggested were Bethel, Bethlehem, Messiah, Martin Luther and St. John. Martin Luther won with seven votes verses one each for Messiah and St. John. (Martin Luther was a particularly fitting name in view of the fact that Pastor Geiger's canvassing effort began on Oct. 28, 1941.)

They moved to adoption and ratification of the constitution. Article five was revised (presumably from the working constitution they would have been using) to require students not attending parochial school to attend a minimum of two years instruction.

³ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting, Dec. 15, 1941.

⁴ Ibid.

A motion was made and carried to “affiliate ourselves with the ‘Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States.’”⁵

It was decided at this meeting to hold services at 7:30 P.M on Sundays. The services were held in the Fourth Ward voting house that the city allowed the congregation to use. There was a catch however. Anita Stocker said that in order ^{to} provide enough room to worship in the voting house, they needed to move ~~out~~ the Christmas decorations that the city was storing inside out on to the grass and bring in chairs and other worship materials. ⁶ They did this weekly for the six years they were worshipping there.

The second congregational meeting was held January 7, 1942 in the voting hall. The voter’s agreed to use ~~d~~ the new hymnal, The Lutheran Hymnal, which had just come out the previous year, and order 4 dozen for use.

The congregation had officially begun as a mission congregation, receiving operating subsidy from the Synod. As part of this, the congregation, by a motion from the first council meeting held on January 22, 1942, agreed to give fifteen dollars toward support of Pastor Geiger. Pastor Geiger at this time was still not the congregation’s full-time pastor though, since he was still serving full-time at Immanuel in Oshkosh. This would change soon however as a special call meeting was held on February 8, 1942. The Mission Board’s Pastor Pankow reported on the Mission Board’s findings and said that they would grant a full-time pastor. “The reports from Pastor Geiger were very satisfactory and encouraging.”⁷

⁵ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. Dec. 15, 1941.

⁶ Interview with Anita Stocker, April 8, 2000.

⁷ From the Minutes of the Special Call Meeting. Feb. 8, 1942.

Pastor Pankow read a letter which he had written Pastor Lederer, who was also present at this meeting as was Gus Kalphos, recommending a full-time pastor and suggesting the following candidates: Adalbert Geiger, Clayton Krug, Lloyd Lamber, Arnold Tiefel, Edward Frederick. Of the fourteen ballots cast, 13 were for Geiger and 1 for Krug. A unanimous call was extended to Pastor Geiger. He accepted. After the vote was taken, Pastor Lederer “encouraged all of the members to be missionaries in ourselves and help Pastor all we could.”⁸ Among the other things that were accomplished at this meeting was the congregation giving support of the council’s earlier decision to give fifteen dollars towards the support of the pastor. The installation service was held at Trinity Lutheran Church on March 15, 1942.⁹

Over the next few months several Council recommendations were brought before the congregation to vote on. First, on April 17, 1942 the congregation passed the Council’s recommendation “to have men and women go to the altar together for communion.”¹⁰ In this same congregational meeting the motion carried to relieve the Mission Board of five dollars more toward Pastor’s salary. Then on June 29, 1942, the congregation passed the Council’s recommendation to grant the pastor “vacation at his own discretion of two Sundays.”¹¹ In this same meeting they voted to change the time of services when it was necessary to hold two services to 8:30 and 10:30. Only a month earlier they had voted to hold services at 9:00 and 10:30. In the October meeting they would return once again to 9:00 and 10:30. This might seem like a strange topic for a

⁸ From the Minutes of the special call meeting. Feb. 8, 1942.

⁹ Westphal, Steve. *Martin Luther Church 50th Anniversary Booklet*, 1991.

¹⁰ From the Minutes of the Council Meeting. April 14, 1942.

¹¹ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. June 29, 1942.

young congregation to be considering since they were currently in no danger of outgrowing their current facilities. Yet, it seems this discussion arose mainly ^{to be considered of?} on the basis of the various special or otherwise well attended services which would come up such as at Christmas.

A Growing Congregation Looks to Build

As things continued to progress, the congregation decided that it would not sit idly by but would ^econtinual to press to get this congregation to be a visible one in the community. Less than one year after its official organization, on November 30, 1942, the congregation appointed a committee to begin looking for lots for the church.¹² On this committee were Rev. Geiger, Arthur Buntrock, Raymond Gilbertson and Fred Krenger. On April 12, 1943, a committee was formed to examine the abstracts and measurements of the lots and given authority to contact an attorney if they felt it necessary. This committee moved quickly ^{as} by April 30th, the Treasurer had paid a total of \$1700 towards the purchase of lots plus \$100 dollars that had previously been paid. The bills included paying ^alawyer for examining abstract and recording deed of property at Oshkosh. The money for these purchases came from a variety of sources including:

100.00 Memorial from M. Krenger family to be used for communion set when it can be had.
410.00 Borrowed from treasury including some building fund money
440.00 Gifts from Trinity (75th Anniversary)
750.00 Borrowed from Trinity @ 1% interest
100.00 paid Dec. 1942
1800.00=Grand total paid for lots.¹³

¹² From the Minutes of a Special Congregational Meeting. Nov. 30, 1942.

¹³ From the Minutes of the Congregation Meeting. July 12, 1943.

One gets the impression from reading the minutes of the meetings that by this point the congregation must have been doing quite well both financially and from a membership stand point. I say this because in the minutes from the same meeting, July 12, 1943, the congregation agreed to boost the congregation's support of the pastor to \$45 per month. Other signs that this was a thriving congregation are motions which were passed to give each man of the congregation entering the service a prayer book and Testament and to pay organists \$.40 per service from the general fund.¹⁴

The congregation continued to work towards having a building of its own by scheduling a lot cleanup day being scheduled for August 9, 1943.

The first talk of an actual physical structure came on July 16, 1945 when it was determined that Pastor Geiger would seek permission from the Mission Board to begin building.¹⁵ Permission was soon granted and plans were being considered.

Meanwhile, the congregation that was worshipping at Mears Corners (the corner of Hwy GG and Hwy 45 in the Town of Vinland) extended a call to Pastor Geiger to serve as their Pastor on a shared time basis. The congregation voted to allow him to accept the call in a congregational meeting held on October 15, 1945. Shortly thereafter, the Pastor Geiger received a call from Trinity in Liberty, WI. The call was read at a special congregational meeting on November 26, 1945 and Pastor Geiger was granted a peaceful dismissal.¹⁶

The need for another pastor was great. This young congregation was in the midst of trying to build. A sister congregation, Mears Corners, was also without a pastor. A

¹⁴ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. April 12, 1943.

¹⁵ From the Minutes of Congregational Meeting. July 16, 1945.

special joint congregational meeting with the members from Mears Corners was held December 10, 1945 in order to call a replacement. At that meeting, Mission Board Chairman, Rev. Behm, said he could give a list of candidates but suggested that the congregations take candidate Paul Hartwig who would graduate from Lutheran Theological Seminary in Thiensville on December 13, 1945. A motion carried to accept this recommendation.¹⁷ He was installed on January 13, 1946.¹⁸

With the new pastor installed, attention quickly focused back on the building of a worship facility. After studying a number of rather simple options, it was decided to move a step further and make plans to build a sanctuary in steps with the basement being first and the floor of the first floor would serve as a temporary roof until the rest of the building could be completed.

Having made this decision, work moved even more quickly. After celebrating the congregations 5th Anniversary in February, 1947, the congregation would waste little time in getting its first house of worship up. A special congregational meeting was held at Trinity on April 13, 1947 for the expressed purpose of “explaining to the members the progress made by the Building and Finance committees.”¹⁹ The building committee made a few recommendations. They were: “A Quonset Hut, a basement type church and an old school building which could be converted into a church, a concrete block building, and to build a school which can be used as the church for the present time.”²⁰

¹⁶ From the Minutes of Special Congregational Meeting. November 26, 1945.

¹⁷ From the Minutes of Special Congregational Meeting with Mears Corners. December 10, 1945.

¹⁸ Martin Luther Church. Dedication of Martin Luther Ev. Lutheran Church Booklet. June, 17, 1956.

¹⁹ From the Minutes of the Special Congregational Meeting. April 13, 1947.

²⁰ Ibid.

Preliminary blueprints were presented and discussion ensued. Here is what the secretary records: "The blueprints were made by an architect of a frame building 30'x50' with a concrete basement. The cost of the building will be \$15,000. The committee hopes with the help of church members, they can do the carpenter and electrical work. The foundation and the basement to be done by a contractor."²¹

The blueprints were accepted with the following changes: the chimney be moved inside, a tile or wood floor, and an oil burning furnace. It was suggested that loans be made by the members of Martin Luther Church and Trinity Church and the rest be borrowed from Trinity all at a rate of 2% interest. Throughout the ensuing months, there some of the minor issues concerning the materials to be used on the building were brought up for discussion. It was decided to use cello-siding²² as well as white asbestos shingles.²³

This building was completed in a hurry. "The cornerstone laying ceremony was held on August 3, 1947 and the building was dedicated November 16 of the same year."²⁴ When it came to paying off the debt, a simple lottery system was chosen to determine who would be paid when. The congregation determined to pay of^f the debt with this system in \$100 increments until it could be ^{liquidated} paid-off. When members of Martin Luther were chosen to receive payment, they were given the option of "passing" and allowing Trinity's members to be paid back first.²⁵

²¹ From the Minutes of the Special Congregational Meeting. April 13, 1947.

²² From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. April 21, 1947.

²³ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. July 28, 1947.

²⁴ Martin Luther Church. Dedication of Martin Luther Ev. Lutheran Church Booklet. June, 17, 1956.

²⁵ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. April 19, 1948.

Business as Usual

From the time that the church building was built through the next seven years or so life was pretty much normal for this maturing congregation. They continued to grow in numbers and with that growth, there budget increased. They had consistently followed the recommendations from the Mission Board concerning moving forward on eliminating subsidy. When the Mission Board sent a letter stating that salary's for mission pastors was being raised by \$15, the congregation promptly moved to assume the added amount on Pastor Hartwig's salary.²⁶

Though changes were happening all around them and big things were taking place, the congregation did not forget to thank God for all his blessing to them. The congregation's 5th Anniversary was celebrated Feb 2, 1947 with two services, one in the morning at McKinley School and one in the evening at Trinity Church. A noon dinner was served at Trinity.

During the early years of their existence the congregation worked in close co-operation with the one that helped to get them started, namely, Trinity. Martin Luther's children were allowed to attend the Trinity School while the congregation paid minimal subsidy. And though this subsidy was minimal, they nevertheless raised it as often as they could.

The congregation bought more land so as to build a parsonage. They would build a garage for the property as well. And yet amidst all of this added building and debt they continued to move towards becoming self-supporting. This seems to be a desire that they

²⁶ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. July 15, 1946.

had for quite some time culminating with the acceptance of the council's recommendations in a December 3, 1950 congregational meeting.

“Motion passed to accept two council recommendations.

- 1) That we assume \$40/month on our part. \$20 additional payment to Trinity School and \$20 assumed on our subsidy.
- 2) The council be granted the authority to reduce the subsidy, and make an equal increase in payment towards Trinity School quarterly with the aim of becoming self-supporting by our 10th anniversary or sooner.”²⁷

The growth of this congregation is further seen from the fact that just three years after the building of the first church they began holding two services on Sundays. When this was begun, ~~they~~ communion was celebrated only in the 10:00 service. By this time, they had 221 communicants and 374 souls.²⁸ They bought an electronic organ to accompany there growing worship numbers. They were ready to venture out on their own. On October 15, 1951 the voter's accepted the recommendation of the council to go self-supporting as of December 31, 1951. Shortly after the New Year the pastor's salary was increased to \$2200 per year and by July of that same year to \$2400. They burned the mortgage on November 16, 1952.

A Time to Build

This was a special day, but also seems to have led the congregation to a bit of complacency for a couple of years. This comes out in the Spring of 1954 when Pastor Hartwig received a call to a congregation in East Troy, WI. When the congregation met to discuss the new call Pastor Hartwig express some of his frustrations to the members. The building that was completed in 1947 was to be a temporary structure. Now it had served them for a number of years and they had burned the mortgage on all the buildings.

²⁷ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. December 3, 1950.

²⁸ Westphal, Steve. *Martin Luther Church 50th Anniversary Booklet*, 1991.

They had been debt free for nearly a year and a half, yet nothing was being done. They weren't moving forward with a building a permanent building and this was frustrating. Pastor Hartwig said that the needs in the congregation demanded determination to build a permanent building. Though the feeling amidst the congregation was strong for building one they hadn't made any decisions as yet.

The minutes continued, "After various men had expressed themselves in this direction a motion came from the body to build the church as soon as possible. This motion unanimously passed by the large body of voters present."²⁹ Obviously Pastor Hartwig's comments had some effect on the members. The members called upon him to remain and help them in the newly planned building project. A special meeting would be held to hear a program to collect funds. "The chairman then announced that all the communicants should come to this meeting."³⁰

As the planning continued, Pastor Hartwig received another call this time from Grace in Geneva, Nebraska. The congregation again asked him to return it since they were in the middle of a building program

And what a building program it was going to be! The congregation met on May 18, 1955 to set up the detailed program for the building which still stands as Martin Luther's house of worship. These were their plans:

"Be it resolved that Martin Luther Congregation erect the new church as presented by the Building Committee, the cost of which is not to exceed \$140,000.00.

Be it resolved that the congregation will secure a loan not to exceed \$100,000.00 from the Oshkosh Savings and Loan Association for the erection of the church. The loan is to be a fifteen year loan with 4% simple interest computed monthly on

²⁹ From the Minutes of the Special Congregational Meeting. March 21, 1954.

³⁰ Ibid.

the unpaid balance. A \$100,000.00 loan requires a monthly payment of \$740.00, which includes principle and interest.

Be it resolved that the three Trustees of the Church Council be authorized to legally represent the congregation in contracting for the financing of the building project.

Be it resolved that the Building Committee be given full authority to negotiate all the construction contracts necessary for the completion of the building project.

Be it resolved that the Building Committee be the responsible group to authorize the payment of all bills incurred in the building project.

Be it resolved that the Building Committee appoint from its midst one man to serve as a Clerk of the Works. This man is responsible to the Building Committee for all his decisions and shall be the authority to represent the committee whenever possible.

Be it resolved that Sunday, May 22nd, be declared as Ground Breaking Sunday, the ceremony to begin at 11:15 a.m.³¹

The cornerstone was laid in a special ceremony on September 25, 1955. When the building was completed a dedication ceremony was held on June 17, 1956. At this time the congregation had 398 communicants and 648 souls. This sanctuary proved to be a wonderful blessing not only to those who were members when it was completed but also to those who by the power of the Holy Spirit would be added in the future. God certainly blessed this congregation in the ten years that followed this building project. By 1965 the congregation had 701 communicants and 1,119 souls.

It would not be long before another building project was taken up. This time that of a school. Already in 1957, classes were being held in the building that had been built in 1947 to serve this purpose once the new sanctuary was completed. However, because of the number of students in the congregation and the fact that they entered into an agreement with Grace Lutheran Church, this building soon proved to be too small. It was

what was the agreement?

³¹ From the Minutes of the Congregational Meeting. May 18, 1955.

resolved to add on to the school. Martin Luther would pay for the cost of the additions to the building and further converting of the original building while Grace would pay for the additional teacher that would be needed to staff the school.

On January 31, 1962 Grace indicated by a letter sent to ~~the~~ Martin Luther that they would be opening their own school in the fall of the year. This led to some scrambling as Martin Luther attempted to fulfill the position of teacher which had been supplied by Grace but would be withdrawn beginning in the fall. After extending a number of calls, Martin Luther called Sydney Smith from Appleton as a one year emergency teacher to teach during the 1962-63 school year.

This was the beginning of a series of significant changes over the upcoming year. On November 13, 1963, Pastor Hartwig presented two calls that he had received, one from Trinity in Jenera, Ohio, and the other from Zion in South Milwaukee, WI. By November 27 he had accepted the call to Zion, South Milwaukee and the congregation met to find a vacancy pastor.

Reflections on this History

God's grace to the faithful at Martin Luther can be clearly seen in the events that shaped the early history of this congregation. He moved the members of Trinity to branch out and daughter a congregation. He led those members to be active in the community and caused his Gospel to be spread and take root quickly. There are lessons to be learned from the eagerness of the congregation to move forward quickly. They didn't sit back and wait to see what would happen before expressing a desire to build. Had it not been for World War II, the first building may have been up within a year of the congregation's formal organization. The fact of the matter is that founding of this

congregation isn't all that unusual from the way many of the congregations in the WELS have been established over the years. A group of members, seeing a need, becomes a healthy nucleus for a congregation to build on. However, not many congregations are blessed in the same way that Martin Luther was to grow so quickly so early. Even most of the congregations that are started today with a nucleus will take time to grow and develop before being ready to build. Among the factors that may have aided this was that after Pastor Geiger began the work and then moved on, there was a period of stability as Pastor Hartwig served the congregation for the next eighteen years. Neenah as a city continued to grow and all three WELS congregations in the city grew during those years. Many souls have been added to the kingdom of God through their efforts.

This congregation has experienced God's grace from its beginnings. This paper recounts only the first 22 years of God's grace shown toward Martin Luther Church. God has continued to bless it for nearly 59 years. What an amazing God he is that so many should experience his grace through this congregation.

Bibliography

Martin Luther Church. Dedication of Martin Luther Ev. Lutheran Church Booklet.
June, 17, 1956.

Martin Luther Church. 25th Anniversary Booklet. 1966.

Minutes from Selected Congregational Meetings Dated 1941-1963

Stocker, Anita. An Interview conducted April 8, 2000.

Trinity Lutheran Church. 100th Anniversary Booklet. 1969. p.6.

Westphal, Steve. *Martin Luther Church 50th Anniversary Booklet*, 1991.