

NINETY YEARS OF GRACE:

A HISTORY OF ST. PAUL'S EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH

OF STEVENSVILLE, MICHIGAN

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1

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Even in our advanced technological age, in which modern medical discoveries have lengthened men's lifespans beyond the biblical "threescore years and ten", ninety years is still a long time in the opinion of many people. The ninetieth anniversary of a Christian congregation is, therefore, a time for grateful reflection on blessings received from the hand of the Lord of the Church.

The purpose of this paper is to undertake such a grateful reflection by tracing the history of the congregation from its establishment ninety years ago to the present, and then offer some brief thoughts on its future.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Stevensville, Michigan was organized on February 24, 1899 by a group of Lutheran Christians. Most of them previously had been members of Trinity Lutheran Church in St. Joseph (Downtown St. Joseph is approximately eight miles from the village of Stevensville).<sup>1</sup> According to congregational records of the time, this step was taken primarily because the members living in and around Stevensville were interested in having a church and a Christian Day School closer to their homes. Pastor August Behrendt, then pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, Benton Harbor, agreed to serve the newly established congregation until it could obtain its own resident pastor.<sup>2</sup>

The congregation began services with 59 members. The first service was held on March 5, 1899 in the building which at that time was known as Schneck's Hall. The site is presently the parking lot for the NBD F&M Bank of Stevensville (located immediately west of the present church/school site). Services were conducted in this building for several months. After

this, the congregation held services in the Methodist Church's building until its own structure was dedicated.<sup>3</sup>

The fledgling congregation purchased one acre of land in the heart of the village from Mr. Friedrich Schneck. The purchase included a house which served as the first parsonage. The records of those early years are not conclusive, but elderly members of the congregation have estimated the cost of the first church as approximately \$1,700 (a considerable sum in 1899, especially for recent immigrants from Germany). The cornerstone was laid on July 25, 1899. The construction was completed in the early part of September. (This first edifice served the congregation until 1971. It was demolished in May 1971 to make room for the new church.)

The congregation immediately extended a call for a pastor. After several calls were returned, Pastor Theodore Seifert of St. Peter, Minnesota accepted the congregation's call and was installed as the first resident pastor. Pastor Seifert's installation took place on the same day as the church dedication, September 17, 1899.<sup>4</sup>

From its earliest beginnings, St. Paul's congregation showed an interest in Christian education. They decided immediately to take steps for the construction of a Christian Day School for the education of the children, not only in all secular subjects, but also and especially for training in God's Word. At a congregational meeting in October, 1899, the congregation adopted a resolution calling for the construction of a school. Mr. August Ott was put in charge of the building operations, which began immediately. The members of the congregation pitched in to help with the construction, and in this way costs were kept down. The first school's dimensions were: 40' long, 24' wide and 12' high. It was finished by the end of the year and immediately put into use. A second room was added in

1912. (This two-room schoolhouse served the congregation until 1960, when it was torn down to make room for the present school building.)

In the summer of 1902 the congregation decided to construct a parsonage. According to the minutes the cost for this was not to exceed \$1,000. The parsonage was located between the church and school. It was used until the new parsonage was built in 1968, and was later torn down to help make room for the present church building.<sup>5</sup>

In 1907, the first change of pastors took place. Pastor H.C. Westphal of St. Paul, Minnesota accepted the call and was installed near the close of the year. During Pastor Westphal's pastorate (1910), St. Paul's joined the Southeast Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Synod. (Previously the congregation had been a member of the old Michigan Synod.) The congregation was in the SEW District until 1934, when it joined the Michigan District of the WELS.

Pastor Westphal remained with the congregation until spring of 1911. He was succeeded by Pastor H.H. Heidel of Northfield, Michigan. Pastor Heidel was installed in the summer of 1911. During his pastorate (1915) a Wick's pipe organ was installed. The cost was \$1,500. This organ remained in use until 1955, when it was completely rebuilt and electrified. The console was also moved to the balcony of the church. This organ is still serving the congregation today. It was originally purchased by asking all members of the congregation to give 1 1/2 times their yearly contribution to the church to help pay for it.<sup>6</sup>

Pastor Heidel resigned from his call in the summer of 1919. He was succeeded by Pastor Wm. Essig of Sawyer Michigan, who was installed in February of 1920. Pastor Essig served the congregation for more than 23 years (until the summer of 1943). During his pastorate extensive

renovations were carried on in the church and school. In 1925 the congregation also built a teacherage on Kimmel Street (southwest of the church.) This teacherage served as the residence for the male teachers and their families until 1960. It was sold in 1962 when the congregation purchased additional property on St. Joseph Avenue.

During this time the congregation also introduced English services. The first mention in the minutes of an English service is found on July 4, 1920. The voters' meeting held on that date agreed that one English service per month should be initiated. More English services were, of course, added later to meet the growing demand for them. The congregation's transition from German to English was very gradual.<sup>7</sup>

The discussions on this "language question" enlivened many a congregational meeting during that period. Later, in an effort to satisfy everyone concerned, one German and one English service were conducted every Sunday. This practice continued until 1957, when the congregation added a second English service because of lack of space in the old church, as well as growth in the congregation's membership.

Pastor Essig resigned in the spring of 1943. The congregation called Pastor Harold Zink, who accepted the call and was installed on July 25, 1943. Pastor Zink served St. Paul's for thirty-three years.

During this time both the congregation and the Christian Day School experienced considerable growth. In 1946 St. Paul's became the first church in the entire Wisconsin Synod to purchase a school bus to transport children to the school. (Mr. Emil Rach, the grandfather of this author's wife, was the bus driver.) During these years the congregation purchased additional property: two acres east of the school (1949); the Harvey Pallas property (1957); the Wm. Ott property (1960); and 3 1/2 acres along

Hickory Creek (1963). The congregation presently owns property amounting to about 7 1/2 acres.

During these years the congregation also undertook several building programs. In 1950 a full basement was put under the old church, and a two room school was added to the rear of the old school. Later on, when the present school building was constructed (1961), these two rooms were incorporated into the new building.

Larger enrollments necessitated the construction of a new school. In the spring of 1958 the congregation decided to hire an architect to draw up plans. The firm of Van Dongen and Raymer of Benton Harbor was chosen. By a nearly unanimous vote the voters decided to build an eight room school with an auditorium-gymnasium. In December 1959 the voters decided that the overcrowded conditions of the old school building indicated that construction should begin as soon as possible. This set aside a previous resolution, which had stated that no building operations were to begin until \$75,000 in cash was on hand.

In the spring of 1960, again by a nearly unanimous vote, the congregation accepted the plans drawn up by the architects. Bids were let out and opened on June 28, 1960. These were much higher than the congregation had anticipated, amounting to nearly \$270,000. The congregation held a meeting on the evening of the same day. The bids were discussed, but no action was taken. A week later (July 5), another congregational meeting was held, at which the voters agreed unanimously to authorize going ahead with the construction, despite the higher cost. Ground-breaking ceremonies took place on the afternoon of July 10. Actual building operations began on July 18. The general contractor for the project was Taylor Construction Company of South Bend, Indiana. The

chairman of the congregation's building committee was Mr. Donald DeFord. Although the contractor had estimated originally that the work could be completed in less than a year, it turned out to require more than 18 months.<sup>9</sup> The building's total floor space measures 23,000 square feet.

The new school building was dedicated on Sunday, February 25, 1962. Three festival services were held to mark the occasion. The preacher for the morning service was Pastor Robert Zink, son of Pastor Harold Zink. (Pastor R. Zink presently serves St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church of Muskego Wisconsin. He also serves the WELS as its Second Vice-President). The preacher for the afternoon service was Rev. Wm. Krueger, a member of the Michigan District Board of Education. A post-dedication service was held the following Tuesday evening. The preacher was Pastor Leonard Newman of Tawas City, Michigan.

In 1966, the congregation decided to use the help of vicars because of the increasing growth in the congregation and the resulting increase in the work load. Three vicars served the congregation: Errol Carlson (1966-1967); Percy Damrow (1967-1968); and Arnold Ruddat (1968-1969).<sup>10</sup> In the spring of 1969 the congregation decided that instead of calling vicars, its needs would be better served by calling an associate pastor.

Pastor Herbert C. Kuske was installed in May 1970. He was of great help to the congregation in the building of the new church, since he had previously been involved in building churches at two of his former congregations.<sup>11</sup>

The first step toward the construction of a new church building was taken at the annual meeting on December 1, 1968. The congregation instructed the Planning Board to present plans and a report on the financial feasibility of building a new church. The Planning Board



consisted of George Reschke, Chairman; Donald DeFord, Phillip Falak, Fred Jung Jr., Leland Nicol, Harvey Pallas, Gene Preston and Kenneth Walski.<sup>11</sup>

Detailed plans for the new church were presented to the congregation at a special meeting held on December 13, 1970. At this meeting Pastor Kuske showed the congregation a scale model of the proposed new building.

Estimated cost of the project was estimated to be below \$225,000. The congregation decided to consider this more fully at another special meeting to be held in January of 1971. At this meeting, held on January 17, the voters agreed by a vote of 61 to 8 to build a new church, with the cost to be no more than \$225,000. Mr. Robert Rogien of Eau Claire, Michigan, was chosen to be the contractor.

At this meeting it was also decided to have a Building Committee which would now take charge of the building of the new church, with the Planning Board serving in an advisory capacity.

The last service in the old church was held on April 19. This was, of course, a bittersweet occasion for the congregation. There was joy and excitement over the prospect of constructing a new and larger house of worship that would serve the needs of the congregation into the future, but there was also sadness at bidding farewell to a worship edifice that had been the congregation's church home for 72 years. The sadness of the day was heightened by the funeral of Mrs. Edwin Geipel, a faithful member of the congregation.<sup>12</sup>

Ground breaking ceremonies for the new church were held on April 25, immediately following the German service. Work on the new church began on May 10. The cornerstone for the new church was laid on June 13. The cornerstone of the old church, built in 1899, was also placed into the new church at the same time. The Lord of the Church blessed the work with

extraordinarily good weather and preventing any serious accidents from befalling the workers.<sup>13</sup> The congregation was also blessed by having the project come in under budget. The total cost of the construction was \$220,000. The many hours of volunteer labor provided by members of the congregation contributed to keeping down the expense.

Pastor Zink retired in February of 1976. St. Paul's called Pastor James Korthals to serve with Pastor Kuske. In 1980, Pastor Korthals accepted a call to Montrose, Michigan. The congregation called Pastor Thomas Haar, who remained at Stevensville until December of 1983. Shortly thereafter, Pastor Kuske also accepted a call to Abita Springs, Louisiana. He preached his farewell sermon at St. Paul's on January 22, 1984.

The congregation was thus faced with the need to fill two vacancies. In 1984 the congregation called Pastor Gerald C. Schroer of Saginaw, Michigan and Pastor Robert H. Meiselwitz of Stetsonville, Wisconsin. Both are still serving the congregation presently.

In 1987 a member of St. Paul's Board of Elders presented a concern that not all 1987 graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary had been assigned. He was disturbed that "men trained to be pastors in the Lord's Church were out pumping gas." The congregation began to consider the possibility of extending a one-year call to an unmarried, unassigned Seminary graduate.

The congregation agreed to extend a one-year call, with the stipulation that funds for the third man's salary be provided from voluntary pledges from the congregation's membership, rather than from the General Fund. Some 53 member families agreed to make monthly contributions towards salary support for a third pastor, following which the request for a one-year assignment was laid before the Assignment Committee.

Pastor D. Michael Zahn received the assignment and was ordained and installed in August of 1987. Recently the congregation formed a committee to study options connected with the "Third Pastor Program." The options include: terminating the third pastor program entirely; making Pastor Zahn's call permanent (a decision which would involve the Assignment Committee); or calling another man for one year after Pastor Zahn's year ends. As of the date of this writing, the congregation has not yet made a final decision on the question.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the past 90 years, God has blessed St. Paul's congregation with growth both spiritually and numerically. The congregation numbers 1,365 souls (1,090 communicants). The day school enrollment is 112.

The congregation has also undertaken a novel program to bring increased spiritual growth among the members of the congregation. With the coming of Pastor Zahn, the pastoral duties were "shuffled" somewhat, so that Pastor Schroer could devote his time primarily to work with inactive members of the congregation. The congregation is working to remind all members of the congregation of the privileges, blessings and responsibilities that are theirs as members of a Christian congregation. A recent series of home meetings, "Ministers and Managers: Confronted and Committed" brought the entire membership a reminder of their place in the Kingdom.

The present Christian Day School faculty consists of: Mr. Charles Buege, Principal and 8th grade teacher; Mr. David Degner, 6th and 7th grades; Mr. Daniel Schiessl, 1/2 of the 4th grade and the 5th grade; Mrs. Mary Rabbers, 3rd grade and the other 1/2 of the 4th grade; and Mrs. Michelle Lindemann, 1st and 2nd grade; and Mrs. Joyce Rydecki, Kindergarten and Preschool.

God has richly blessed St. Paul's congregation in the past 90 years. God continues to bless the congregation daily and weekly with his inspired, inerrant Word in its full truth and purity. We offer the fervent prayer that God will continue to provide the congregation with the spiritual and numerical growth which he has granted since 1899.

St. Paul's has consistently shown a willingness to lay hold of God's promises and to "strike out in faith." Over the years the members have been willing to make sacrifices of time, talent and treasure to promote the Gospel ministry in their midst and on a broader scale. This willingness to be innovative has been touched on in this paper: the willingness to undertake building programs; the purchase of the first school bus in the WELS; the participation in the vicarship program, followed by the addition of a second pastor; the recent addition of a third pastor; and the commitment to reminding the inactive members of their need for the Means of Grace.

This writer joins the members of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, both in praising God for 90 years of wonderful blessings, and in prayer to the Lord of the Church that these blessings would continue and steadily increase. St. Paul's is, in a sense, a portrait of our entire WELS in microcosm: the congregation has experienced the slow and sometimes difficult transition <sup>from</sup> a predominantly German to a predominantly English congregation. It has experienced the outgrowing of older facilities; and it has expanded its pastoral staff and faculty to serve the needs of its people.

In all this, of course, the human beings who have been involved in this history deserve no credit for the successes experienced in the past 90 years. Nor will they deserve any credit for the successes that God may yet

deign to grant. The staff and membership of St. Paul's congregation would be the first to say, as indeed they have said in all of their anniversary and dedication booklets, "In recording the history of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Stevensville, Michigan, we have but one aim in view, that the name of the Lord our God be magnified. *'Not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory, for Thy mercy and Thy truth's sake. Psalm 115,1.*

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Stevensville Centennial Booklet*. Stevensville, MI: Stevensville Centennial Committee, 1984, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Dedication Services, St. Paul's Lutheran School and Church Activities Building*. Stevensville, MI: St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church. February 18, 1962, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Stevensville Centennial Booklet, loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Dedication Services*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Dedication booklet*. Stevensville, MI: St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church. October 17, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Update to the "3rd Pastor" question: The congregation resolved in May that the third pastor program would continue "if sufficient funds are made available by pledges from the membership of the congregation." As of Sunday, May 8, the fund was still \$377.00 short of the necessary funds.

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