

## ***Bethel Lutheran Church History***

### **Purpose for being**

God is with us all the time. God promises in our baptism that we are children of God by faith in Christ. Then, why have a building called a church? A building is for the gathering of the Church. The Church is God's people gathered to worship and praise Him and study God's Word and receiving the sacraments. When a congregation is formed they first meet in a small group to help each other strengthen their beliefs and organize things for studying the Lord's word and teaching it to our children. After a while we realize we all have our own God given talents for earning a living so we hire a trained Christian educator/ theologian/ pastor. Soon, as the congregation grows, a sanctuary is constructed adjacent to the educational building. Members find that they have more in common with certain members than others and social groups are formed, but primary is the Christian education which applies to all.

Usually when the congregation becomes very large, folks forget that they come to worship to bolster their faith rather than giving time and money for various activities. If a congregation has no children to train and educate in the Christian faith your efforts are for naught.

Bethel's motto is "Make Jesus Known". This includes passing out food, providing housing and shelter to those in need, etc., but teaching is paramount.

### **Bethel's Beginning in the Mahoning Valley**

Lutheran immigrants to the United States followed the same path as all immigrants. They settled in small communities, opened schools, churches, businesses and built homes. Those from Norway, Sweden,

Finland, Germany, Austria, etc., joined together to support their Christian faith as taught by Martin Luther by building churches for worship, Universities to educate their children, and established Seminaries to have educated pastors and theologians.

Lutherans of each nationality joined with similar churches across the United States and called these organizations Synods. As expected there were Norwegian, Swedish, German, Finnish, etc., synods with regional affiliation. By circa 1967 there was a Wisconsin Synod, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), American Lutheran Church (ALC), and Lutheran Church of America (LCA) accounting for about 97% of all Lutherans in the United States. Theologically these varied from extremely conservative to very liberal, but all kept the basic beliefs as professed by Martin Luther. In 1988 the LCA and ALC merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) and exists today. LCMS almost joined but at the last moment backed out due to theological interpretations.

### **Origins of Bethel as a Swedish Lutheran Church**

The early history of Bethel Lutheran Church is linked with the history of the early Swedish settlers in Youngstown. The first settlers of which there is any record came to Haselton, now a part of Youngstown, in 1875. They were immigrants from Smaland, Halland, Skane and other provinces of Sweden. They were representative of thousands of Swedish immigrants who came to the United States and Canada during the 1870's and 1880's because of the abrupt growth of population in a very poor

country. During the year 1882 alone, more than 50,000 Swedes emigrated to "Amerikat."

The origins of the religious work among these Lutheran Swedes and a few other Scandinavians are rather vague, but from a report of a meeting of the New York Conference of the Augustana Synod in March 1883 we learn that a seminary student by the name of J.S. Carlson was called "to work during the summer months in Cleveland, Akron, and Youngstown, Ohio." Later, other students and pastors were called from time to time to continue this missionary work, one of whom was Dr. Gustaf A. Nelsenius.

After serving on a missionary basis from time to time for over a year, Dr. Nelsenius was instrumental in effecting the formal organization of Bethel Lutheran Church on March 2, 1889. The organization meeting was held in the home of Mr. & Mrs. Nils Anderson at 1880 Cherry Street.

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Pastor Esbjorn was the first ordained pastor from Sweden to come to the United States. He arrived in 1849 and traveled among the Swedish settlements offering spiritual comfort and help to a scattered flock. He established the Augustana Church of Andover, Illinois in 1850. This church is considered to be the "Mother Church" of the old Augustana Synod, and was the first organized congregation of Swedish Lutherans in the Midwest. Pastor Esbjorn led this, and other Swedish congregations, into the Synod of Northern Illinois for greater support until the founding of the Augustana Synod in 1860. In the months following Bethel's organization, plans were made, and funds raised, for the purchase of a lot and the erection of a church building at 1851 Wilson Ave. The building was completed in 1890 at a total cost of \$3,000, and was dedicated in connection with a meeting of the Jamestown District of the New York Conference on July 26-27, 1890.

During the first year worship services were conducted by Dr. Nelsenius' students P. S. Miller, and P. A. Haegert. Student P. A. Haegert was in charge of the congregation when the first church was completed. Later in the year, student C. E. Olson conducted services. These early spiritual leaders also conducted worship services in New Castle and Bessemer, Pa. The first permanent pastor to serve the congregation was Rev. H. O. Hemming, who served from June 27, 1892 until late in 1893. Bethany congregation in Akron joined Bethel

in extending a call to Rev. Hemming.

On December 2, 1893 Bethel decided to unite with New Castle and Bessemer to form one pastorate. This relationship continued for several years until Bethel embarked on a new building and expansion program.

Other pastors who served the congregation were Rev. A. G. Olson, 1894-1897; Rev. Edward Stark, 1900-1904; Rev. Axel C. Anderson, 1905-1906; Rev. J. A. Johansson, 1907-1912.

In 1900 a lot at 20 Haseltine Ave. was purchased for a parsonage. The parsonage was built in 1901, and cost \$1,984. Pastor Edward Stark was the first pastor to occupy the parsonage.

During the years as the congregation grew, the complexion of Haseltown changed from a residential area to an industrial district. Many of the members moved into other areas, especially the south side of Youngstown. In 1912, during the pastorate of Rev. J. A. Johansson, the congregation sold the church on Wilson Avenue to St. Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church for \$2,000. The parsonage had been sold earlier in 1912 for \$2,615. The congregation then bought a lot on Ridge Avenue for \$2,200. Plans were formed for a new church, and the cornerstone was laid in October 1912.

Dr. H. Beck, president of the New York Conference, conducted the ceremony, assisted by pastors of the Cleveland District. The church was not completed until 1915, but services were conducted in the basement from May 18, 1913 until the completion.

Pastor Johansson resigned August 10, 1912, shortly before the cornerstone was laid for the new church, and the congregation was without a full time pastor until Rev. Emil Westlund, newly ordained, assumed the duty

on July 6, 1913.

The first service was held in the new Ridge Avenue Church on May 30, 1915. The service of dedication was conducted on June 6 by Dr. Julius Lincoln, Vice President of the New York Conference.

A new parsonage at 22 E. Chalmers Avenue was bought in 1917 for \$7,000. On Thanksgiving Day of 1923 the mortgage on the Ridge Avenue church was burned.

A pipe organ, built by A. J. Schantz Sons & Co., of Orrville, Ohio, was installed in the church and dedicated on July 5, 1925 by Dr. Felix V. Hanson, President of the New York Conference.

As the years passed, Bethel Lutheran Church grew and rose to a position of esteem among the other Lutheran parishes in the Mahoning Valley. Services were conducted in the Swedish language from the time of Bethel's organization for many years until changing conditions required the ever increasing, and finally, exclusive, use of English for all activities. English was first used in 1908, and the last service using the Swedish language was the 9:00 AM service on October 7, 1945. As these changes took place, it further became apparent that the original name of the congregation was no longer in strict keeping with the position the church occupied in the community. Therefore, the name was changed to Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1925.

1939 was the Golden Anniversary of the congregation, and many special activities were held that year to celebrate the occasion. An attractive 50th Anniversary book was prepared and distributed to the congregation as part of the celebration that year.

The traditional 6:00 AM Julotta service on

Christmas morning was last held in 1945. It was replaced in 1946 by the midnight service on Christmas Eve.

In 1952 a new parsonage was completed at 177 Wolcott Drive in Boardman at a cost of \$19,000. This figure cannot be stated as its value, however, because considerable labor and material were furnished at little or no cost.

Changing conditions of the neighborhood around the Ridge Ave sanctuary and the relocation of its members, who moved to the Boardman area when the interstate highway I680 was constructed through the depressed areas of Youngstown, caused the congregation to decide to move its location for the second time in its history. In 1955 the congregation selected the present lot on Crestview Drive in Boardman, and the plans for building were formulated. The cornerstone of our present educational unit was laid on November 27, 1955. During the same year, the old church was sold to the Church of God in Christ for \$40,000. Ten of Bethel's members paid \$2,000 to facilitate the sale.

While the new educational unit of the building was being constructed, the congregation held worship services across the street in the West Boulevard Elementary School. The educational unit was completed in time for the first service to be held in Fellowship Hall on April 14, 1957, Palm Sunday. The building was dedicated on October 6, 1957 by Dr. Thorsten A. Gustafson, president of the New York Conference.

In July of 1957 Pastor Emil Westlund suffered a broken hip in a fall in Mill Creek Park. This incapacitated him for considerable time, and eventually necessitated his retirement on August 3, 1958.

Pastor Westlund had served Bethel faithfully and diligently for 45 years, and this was the only call he had served in his pastorate.

Pastor Westlund was honored at the 1963 convention of the Ohio Synod on the completion of 50 years in the Holy Ministry.

In the late 1950s due to the beginning of land purchases for the interstate highway, I680, through the south side of downtown Youngstown there was a major migration of families to the suburbs, namely, Boardman, Poland, and Canfield. The LCA encouraged their congregations to move to the suburbs where their parishioners were now living. However the ALC synod told their intercity congregations to stay and serve their local communities. Then the ALC hierarchy told the members that the churches were an island and the members should go to churches in their new neighborhoods. As a result, many of the intercity church memberships ceased to exist. The churches were sold or given to minority congregations. Woodland Lutheran was one of these churches. Its members joined Martin Luther, Bethel Lutheran, Zion Lutheran, Good Hope Lutheran, etc. This was in the period circa 1963. St. Paul on the north side of Youngstown, disbanded and its members also joined suburban churches. Later members who previously attended Lutheran churches in Campbell, Struthers, etc., started attending suburban churches in their new neighborhoods. Much later, April 2000, Honterus Lutheran on Glenwood Ave., near Fosterville, finally sold their sanctuary and officially merged with Bethel Lutheran Church.

### **Bethel becomes a Lutheran “Melting Pot” of various ethnic origins**

Pastor Charles J. Lundquist accepted a call from Bethel on August 19, 1958 and assumed his duties at Bethel on November 3, 1958.

On January 1, 1963, after several years of planning and preparation, the Augustana Lutheran Church merged with the United Lutheran Church in America, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church to form the Lutheran Church in America. At that time Bethel also became detached from the former New York Conference, and was attached to the new Ohio Synod of the LCA. Since a new constitution and articles of incorporation were necessary, the congregation took advantage of the moment to change its official name from Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church to Bethel Lutheran Church, thereby making the official name of the congregation the same as the name most popularly used.

By the end of 1962 the mortgage on the educational unit had been reduced to a token amount, so plans were made to proceed to build the sanctuary, thereby completing our new church home. Ground was broken on May 5, 1963, and the cornerstone was laid September 15, 1963.

The new, and current, church was completed in February of 1964, and the first service, the service of dedication, and the seventy-fifth anniversary of Bethel Lutheran Church were all celebrated at once on March 1, 1964. The 11:00 AM service was a Service of Thanksgiving. The Rev. Dr. Herbert W. Veler, President of the Ohio Synod delivered the sermon, Pastor John Anderson served as liturgist, and Pastor John Heller was the lector. At 4:00 PM the Service of Dedication was held, and the Rite of Dedication was presided over by The Rev. Dr. Herbert W. Veler. The Rev. Dr. Thorsten A. Gustafson, director of the Commission on Stewardship of the L.C.A., and former President of the former New York

Conference of the former Augustana Lutheran Church, delivered the sermon. In 1967 the Church Council recommended to the congregation that an assistant pastor be called to relieve the heavy work load being carried by the Pastor. After considerable searching, the Rev. D. Gary Schreckengost accepted the call as Assistant pastor and began working on September 1, 1968.

At the congregational meeting in 1969 the congregation was presented the opportunity to purchase the Schantz pipe organ from the old Bethel church on Ridge Avenue. The old pipe organ needed to be rebuilt, and the total cost of the purchase and rebuilding was estimated at about \$30,000. The congregation approved the purchase, which was subsequently paid for through a single generous gift from a member of the congregation.

At the same meeting the congregation also approved a social ministry plan which took effect on March 17, 1970 when the congregation borrowed \$27,000 to give to Steel Valley Homes, Samaritan House, FISH, Lutheran Services, and Meals on Wheels.

The rebuilding of the Schantz pipe organ, and the installation of it in the church was completed early in 1971. On Sunday, February 21, 1971 the organ was dedicated at the 11:00 AM service, and an organ recital was given at 8:00 PM by Professor Richard Wegner, A.G.O., Director of Music of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Baltimore, Maryland. Pastor Gary Schreckengost submitted his resignation from his position as Assistant Pastor effective September 1, 1972. One year later, on September 15, 1973, The Rev. Clinton D. Anderson began serving as Assistant Pastor. He served in that position until March 19, 1975 when he resigned to

accept a call from another church.

The Bethel Endowment Fund was established in 1974 to support, strengthen, and undergrid Bethel's financial position, present and future, and to contribute to and support Christian projects and outreach beyond the scope and responsibility of Bethel's regular church offerings, using tax free income earned by the fund.

At the annual meeting of 1975 the congregation approved borrowing \$10,000 to present to Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Home as an extension of the congregation's benevolence program.

The Bethel Bible Series, a two year comprehensive Bible survey, was initiated in January of 1976.

In 1978 Bethel received \$100,000 from an anonymous benefactor in thanksgiving for the effect the Christian teaching at Bethel had made on certain individuals.

In his report to the congregation at the annual meeting on November 26, 1978, the Pastor reviewed the variety of Christian learning opportunities being provided at Bethel, and noted the program of Christian education was continuing to grow in numbers and in impact within the congregation.

The Lutheran Book of Worship, or the "green book", made its appearance at Bethel in January of 1979. It presented a new form of liturgy along with new styles of musical settings, some new hymns, and alterations to some old hymns. 1979 also marked the 90th anniversary of Bethel. During this year, and continuing through 1980, the congregation felt the impact of the closing of the old Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. and other steel mills in the area. Inflation all over the country was increasing at a galloping pace. Some members of the

congregation were transferred to other parts of the country because of the closing of the local steel plants and some members were forced to take early retirement. These factors placed considerable disruptive pressures on the congregation as a whole and on the individual members of the congregation. An unusually large turnover in staff of the congregation occurred in 1980 also, but through it all, Bethel remained strong and active in proclaiming the Gospel of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

"The Elderberries" is what they are called, and a lively group of senior citizens of the congregation is who they are. They began meeting on a monthly basis in February of 1981 for lunch and programs. An average of more than 30 people had been participating from the inception of "The Elderberries."

An event of historic proportions took place on October 2, 1983 when the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther was observed at a joint worship and celebration service of Lutherans and Roman Catholics in St. Columba Cathedral in Youngstown, with Bishop James Malone presiding of the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown and Bishop Kenneth Sauer of the Ohio Synod of the Lutheran Church in America preaching. Bethel Lutheran Church played an important role in developing this event, and was well represented when it took place.

Video equipment came into use in the ministry of Bethel in 1983 with the acquisition of a video camera, monitor, and video cassette recorder, and participation in the Pan-Lutheran Video Project. A computer was added in 1984 to the list of modern equipment for the use of the office staff in service to the congregation.

In 1984 Bethel's Endowment Fund

engaged in a new dimension of support for the church-at-large with direct giving to international efforts in Liberia, Tanzania, Japan, Asia, Latin America, and India.

The Stephen Ministry was begun at Bethel in 1986 after the Pastor and one lay member of the congregation were appropriately trained. They, in turn, trained other members of the congregation to implement the ministry within the congregation and the community. Stephen Ministry provides an expanded caring ministry to those who are hospitalized, shut in, bereaved, or burdened with a variety of other problems. The Stephen ministry program was expanded during 1987 with training of a second layperson.

Also in 1986 the congregation inaugurated the program of early reception of Holy Communion. Baptized children now received Holy Communion when they reached the fifth grade in school, rather than waiting until their confirmation training was completed.

During 1987 emphasis was placed on the completion of the merger of the Lutheran Church in America with the American Lutheran Church and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The LCA would end its 25 year existence on December 31, 1987, and the ELCA would begin its existence on January 1, 1988. Under the new organization, the women of the church formed a new organization, Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (WELCA). Under the previous organization the Lutheran women were organized under the Lutheran Church Women. Prior still to this, circa 1920s through the 1940s, women were organized under the Ladies Aid Society.

Looking ahead to 1989 when Bethel Lutheran Church would be 100 years old, a Centennial Anniversary Committee was formed in 1987 to plan special events for the celebration of the centennial year beginning on the first Sunday of Advent in 1988.

During 1988 the Centennial Anniversary Committee began working in earnest to have everything in order for the beginning of the centennial year. The theme established to set the tone for the centennial year was "Blessed To Be A Blessing." In this theme we have the foundation for all that we do - both in remembering that which has brought us to this point in our history as well as the mandate for our activities as a congregation in the future. In short, we have received many blessings to bring us to this 100th anniversary; we must extend that blessing to all with whom we come in contact so that the blessing we have received will radiate outward in all directions like rippling waves.

Also in 1988 Bethel began functioning as an integral part of the Northeastern Ohio Synod of the ELCA. We celebrated the 30th anniversary of Pastor Lundquist's service as pastor of Bethel along with his 60th birthday with a service of thanksgiving followed by a dinner in Fellowship Hall on November 6, 1988. Pastor Bernard Philabaum of Midland, Michigan, (formerly Pastor at Good Hope Lutheran, Southern Blvd, Youngstown), a long-time friend of Bethel and Pastor Lundquist, delivered the sermon on this day and also served as Master of Ceremonies at the dinner.

### **Bethel expands its building, but employment in the Mahoning Valley decreases**

In 1991 Pastor Chuck retired and Bethel extended a call to Pastor Paul Burgeson of

Fairborn, OH. Pastor Paul grew up on Youngstown's Southside, graduating from South High School. His parents were members of St. Luke Lutheran Church (LCA) near Martin Luther Lutheran Church (ALC). Pastor Paul was installed as senior pastor at Bethel in 1991.

In the period 1991 and following Bell Choirs/Drama Group & Cantatas, Boy Scouts, and a softball team began to be developed. Pastor Chuck's retirement was 13 January 1991. Pastor Paul was installed as the senior Pastor, 9 June 1991. The quilt group, now in its 23rd year (2014), was started.

The catechism program was revised using the Rich Melheim strategy in 1995. In 1997 a basement, five classrooms, two bathrooms, an outside drive-up canopy and a new storage area were built. Pastor's office was moved creating an enlarged narthex. Also, a second Stephen's Ministry was developed for counseling persons in distress. Extensive planning to visit shut-ins on a regular basis, plus assigning Stephen's ministers to counsel and carry communion was begun in 1999.

On February 27, 2000 the Bethel congregation approved the merger with Honterus Lutheran church. They joined us Palm Sunday 2000, with the official state-of-Ohio nonprofit corporation established August 10, 2000. Honterus brought \$320,929.26 to the general fund, which was used for the rear parking lot, and new sanctuary carpet installed, plus a new sound system.

In 2001 \$100K was donated to fund hiring an Associate Pastor for five years, Pastor Bret Rizzo was hired as Youth Pastor. Pastor Paul retired April 30, 2003, and Pastor Bret was installed as the Senior Pastor, September 7, 2003. In 2005 Pastor Paul was hired as Director of Visitation, assisting Pastor Rizzo.

A new Yamaha grand piano was purchased

September 24, 2007 and on December 22, 2007 the Saturday evening praise service, which started the previous June, was cancelled. The first annual Car Show was held in 2007.

The Endowment Fund paid the seminary tuition for its member, Jon Weaver, who was enrolled at the Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus Ohio, next to Capital University. Jon was ordained September 10, 2011, and accepted a call as Associate Pastor at Lord of Life Lutheran Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. One of the purposes of the Endowment Fund is to encourage Christian education. They regularly give scholarship stipends to member children who seek a higher education, i.e., beyond high school.

The Catechism Cluster with other Lutheran churches in the area and a joint vacation Bible School with several other Christian churches in the neighborhood, was started in 2011. Also, in 2011 Bethel's Constitution and By Laws were rewritten to take the complete control of Council from the Pastor to the elected President, Vice-president, Secretary, and Council Committee Chairpersons.

Pastor Bret received and accepted a call to Hosanna Lutheran Church, Pataskala, Ohio (just east of Columbus, Ohio). His farewell dinner was held on April 22, 2012. Pastor Richard Kidd from San Antonio, Texas, accepted our call August 1, 2013, and was installed as the new Senior Pastor on September 22, 2013, by the presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton who was the Northeastern Ohio Synod Bishop.

### **Future expectations for Bethel Lutheran Church**

The ethnic distribution in the United States has changed considerably in the past thirty years. Of these the ones with Lutheran background now include Hispanic, African and Asian people. The northern European Lutherans

which settled in the Mahoning Valley back in the 1800 and 1900s raised their children who have now gone on to find work and raise their families in other parts of the United States. The Lutheran Church has had missionary efforts in New Guinea and Africa for decades (fifty to sixty years). Many of these people have immigrated to the United States and we will see

them as new members and as Pastors. In addition as the local population shifts to southern Mahoning County and into Columbiana County, we could see Bethel expanding its ministry to these areas. We must continue to “Make Jesus Known”. Thanks be to God.