

A HISTORY OF ZION EV. LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF COLUMBUS, WI

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

James A. Mattek  
Senior - Church History  
Prof. Fredrich

The "Red Bud City" - Columbus, Wisconsin, is a strikingly beautiful town at this time of the year. Not only do its century-old houses shine in the spring sun, there are also the red-budded crab trees that shoot out their blossoms all through the town. Columbus is a small town of about 4,000. It lay about 20 miles north-east of Madison, at a crossroad of four major state highways.

Columbus is strong in German heritage. It was a number of such settlers who in the 1850's requested a pastor from our Synod, which was very young itself at this time. I'm sure that those first members of Zion Lutheran Church couldn't envision the degree to which God would bless their church. From a handful of believers who were thirsty for the Word, the Lord allowed the church <sup>to grow</sup> to more than 1500 souls. J. P. Koehler, in The History of the Wisconsin Synod, wrote about the role that Zion of Columbus played very early in the Synod's history:

Of the fields, that he (Pastor Fachtmann) visited and called Synod's attention to, the territories between Columbus and Watertown, twenty miles east, and Beaver Dam, twenty miles north, is noted.

Pastor Sauer suggested that Beaver Dam and Columbus be made into one parish. At Columbus a number of Lutheran families had settled at the beginning of the fifties and had formed a subcharge of Pastor Sans of Watertown. Then Oswald came, when he had to leave West Bend, but had left again the year before. The Columbus people now appealed to Muehlhaeuser, and he had sent them A. Rueter, a former member of the Ohio Synod from Saginaw, Mich. Muehlhaeuser had met him there on his visit with Schmid in Saginaw and told him about the field in Wisconsin.

Taking charge of Columbus in December 1857, he soon was involved in financial affairs that are not becoming to

a preacher. Besides, charges were raised against him by the western district of the Ohio Synod. Praeses Gast of that body filed no formal protest against him because he didn't think that he had a clear case against Rueter; but he voiced a warning. Muehlhaeuser then recommended him to Maple Grove, west of Manitowoc. Koehler installed Rueter upon Muehlhaeuser's warrant, but soon Columbus filed charges; Muehlhaeuser in conjunction with a committee suspended the man at Maple Grove, and the 1860 Fond du Lac synod expelled him, with varying charges of sentiment that met with Koehler's sharp rebuke.<sup>1</sup>

Pastor Rueter served the Columbus congregation from 1855 to 1858. The preceding quote would indicate that that this church had rocking beginning with the outing of its first pastor. Rueter nevertheless was replaced by Hans P. Duborg in 1859. This was the year that Columbus was added to the membership role of the Synod. Koehler documented this transition:

"Rueter's place at Columbus was taken in 1859 by Hans P. Duborg, a Norwegian candidate, under Muehlhaeuser's direction, followed by his ordination at the Racine synod. Duborg served the Lutherans of Columbus and vicinity, beyond Beaver Dam."<sup>2</sup> Pastor Duborg didn't stay long in Columbus. In 1860, it seems that he moved to Whitewater and Palmyra, as pastor of Norwegian congregations. Pastor L. Braun came to Columbus that year and served until 1864. In 1866, a small group of pastors came to Wisconsin, three of whom were missionaries of the German societies. One of these was Albert Liefeld, a Prussian, who had already served four year among the Zulus. He had been trained in Hermannsburg and then ordained by the Hanover consistorium.<sup>3</sup> He served Columbus from 1866-1868.

It was during these early years that the members of Zion worshiped at their church on Birdsey Street. The building was small and modest. It wouldn't be long before it was outgrown and they would relocate on Ludington Street, about eight blocks away. Both of these structures remain standing to this day, serving as residences.

The next decade brought three different pastors to Zion. Pastor Karl Oppen came in 1869 and served until 1876. Pastor Henry Vogel served five years from 1876 to 1881. Pastor A. F. Ziegler stayed from 1881 to 1884. It was during these years ~~years~~ that Zion church made its most recent location move. On November 3, 1878, the new 40'x70' church was dedicated. The cost was \$5,200.00. It was topped by a 125' tower which housed a new bell. Mr Arnold Weihert gleaned the interesting history of this bell from the early records:

Upon February 2, 1873, Kaiser Wilhelm, Emperor of Germany made a presentation of a six-pounder French cannon and 4 similar pieces of French artillery to this congregation for the purpose of having them cast into a bell for the church. These particular cannon were weapons captured by the German Army from the French during the Franco-Prussian War in the struggle for the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. They bore the engraved insignia of France upon their barrels. The cannon which were presented by Kaiser Wilhelm in 1873 did not arrive in this country until 1876 and then, strangely enough, they arrived on July 4, 1876, the 100th anniversary of America's independence. Later that year they arrived in Columbus on the train. The gift was neglected until the month of April, 1878 when the five cannon were sent to the Henry Mcshane Company in Baltimore, Maryland to be cast into a bell by a German master of the art, Mr. George Paulus Schmidt, who according to the letter from the Mcshane Company to the then Pastor Vogel, had 50 years of experience in the making of bells, both in native Germany and in the United States. A little of the best East Indian tin was added to this metal to produce sonorosity and volume of sound.

In May of 1878 the bell arrived in Columbus and it weighed 1600 pounds. Upon its surface it bore the Latin inscription: "Vivos Voco, Mortuos Plango, Fulgura Frango", which is to say: "I call the living, I mourn the dead, I break the lightning!" Underneath, in the German language, it reads: "Das Metal Dieser Glocke wurd vom Kaiser Wilhelm der Evangelische Lutherische Zion's Gemeinde zu Columbus geschenkt. A.D. 1878", which translates to: "The metal for this bell was presented by Kaiser Wilhelm to the Zion Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Columbus, A.D. 1878".

The late H. O. Ihlenfeldt, who was a teacher at Zion from 1929 to 1946, wrote many years later about the bell:

Today, a hundred years later, it still rings proudly from high up in the 125 foot tall steeple as if to fulfill the the Bible passage referring to the "Beating of swords into plowshares"; for this metal which when in the form of cannononce spit flame and smoke and sent men to their deaths, now, cast into a bell, rings joyously from the belfrey calling men to worship their God, reminding them of Life and Peace instead of War and Death.

In 1884, Pastor O.H. Koch came to Columbus. He would become the pastor who would serve Columbus longer than any other, 36 years, or until 1920. It was with Pastor Koch's guidance that Zion soon started its Christian Day School in 1885. The first major school building was located at 437 W. Mill St. It is a two story structure which is still standing about two blocks from the church, which is also on Mill Street. That school house, with four available classrooms, became inadequate in the 50's and was sold to one of Zion's members. It has been remodeled and for several years served as rented housing for the vicars.

In 1880, the prominent crucifix above the altar was carved and sent to Zion by Christof Boelte, and wood carver in Rostock, Germany, as a gift to the congregation. His brothers were charter members of the congregation.

In 1887, the membership at Zion increased to the extent that the congregation was prompted to enlarge its church. A 40'

by 50' addition was decided upon and built onto the north end of the original building. Included in the addition was a new chancel and a sacristy. A new pipe organ was installed. Funds for the cost of the organ were gathered by the young people of Zion. The confirmation class of 1887 presented a new marble baptismal font, which is still in service. On the third Sunday of Advent the congregation assembled to dedicate its enlarged house of worship.

In 1893, the interior and the exterior of the church were redecorated, including the steeple. Three years later, On April 13, 1896, the steeple was struck by lightning. When the necessary repairs were made the steeple was surmounted by a large gilded cross which can be seen for miles as one approaches the city. The original gold-leafed cross was later replaced by a stainless steel cross.

In 1901, electric lights were installed. Funds for this project were supplied by Zion's Ladies Aid. Three years later, in 1904, two furnaces were placed in the basement to replace the stoves in the church. Removal of the stoves made room for approximately fifty additional seats.

1907 was a year of great activity. Preparations for the up-coming 50th anniversary in 1908 were begun. The church received a new roof. A cement sidewalk around the church was laid. The interior was redecorated. A Milwaukee artist was hired to paint two angel murels on either side of the chancel, facing the congregation. The 22 art glass windows were also installed as a part of the renovation project. Funds for the art glass

windows came from special contributions by the renovation committee, the Young People, the Ladies Aid, and eight individual families.

A number of minor changes occurred from 1914 to 1919. Water and sewer facilities were installed. The rebuilding of the organ was undertaken. New light fixtures were supplied in the church by the Ladies Aid. These fixtures are still in use today.

1920 was an important year in the history of Zion. Only the very old members still remember Pastor Koch's farewell sermon which was delivered on October 31. A number of older members recalled to me with fondness how Pastor Koch used to preach firey sermons, (a little on the long side). They recalled the strict discipline that he used during his confirmation classes. One of these people, Ervin Sennhenn, told me how thankful he was for Pastor Koch. He claimed that it was because of Pastor Koch that he (age:84) was still able to recite the principal parts of Christian doctrine in both German and English. It was traditional for Pastor Koch to stand at the front door of church on confirmation Sunday and to greet each confirmand with a hearty hand-shake and a solemn exhortation: "Be thou faithful unto death and thou shalt receive a crown of life." (In German)

Evidently there was a smooth transition in leadership when Pastor Koch retired. His son-in-law, Pastor William Nommensen, had served with him for two years, since 1919. This Pastor would remain in Columbus for 29 years.

From 1927 to 1928 many things were planned and accomplished. A new and modern organ was acquired and placed in its present position. Originally the organ was located in the balcony. The sacristy was converted into an organ chamber for the pipes. The present sacristy was arranged. The pulpit was moved to its present location. The church windows were repaired. A furnace was replaced. The roof was covered with lifetime asbestos shingles. A new exit was built on the east side. The angel murals were relocated to opposite sidewalls as they are seen today. A new lecturn, Bible, altar paraments, and an outdoor bulletin board were added with special gifts from members. On Mission Festival Day, Sept. 16, 1928, the renovation, the new organ, and the 50th anniversary of the building of the church were observed and celebrated in special worship services.

In 1941, the need for larger and more adequate meeting facilities for the societies became more and more evident. Some functions had to be curtailed because of space limitation. The heating system needed to be replaced and a modern forced air furnace was decided upon. Since the location of the heat-plant required a major change in the basement, it was decided to remodel the entire basement. Plans were then made to arrange not only a furnace room, but to include a spacious kitchen, a large dining and meeting room, and a coat room. The Ladies Aid, the Men's Club, the Junior and Senior Leagues, and Zion Choir all assisted in funding and soliciting for this extensive project. On May 4, 1941, the new church parlors were dedicated.

In 1947, the interior of the church again received attention.



The altar was moved back against the north wall. A public address system was installed as were earphones for members with hearing loss. The next year, Pastor Nommenson retired, having served Zion for many years. That year Pastor F. E. Blume accepted the call to Columbus. Many middle-aged members have good memories of Pastor Blume. People often said of him: "He was one of us." They also remember that his sermons were interesting, some of them even being printed in the local newspaper. Pastor Blume was known among his parishoners as an avid sportsman. It has been related to me that the pastor would take his vacation in November, during deer hunting season. Before sunrise on the opening day of the season, Pastor Blume and the other hunters from the congregation would meet at church in their red uniforms for a short worship service. This custom later became known as the "blessing of the guns." However, no guns were allowed inside the church. In 1952, Pastor Blume's health failed and he accepted a call out of Columbus. He later became a professor at our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

In 1952, Pastor Walter Wagner, accepted the call to Columbus. It was during his early years in Columbus that the relocation of the school took place. The principal at that time was Mr. Arnold J. Lober, who still serves that school as teacher today. A large section of property was purchased on the far east side of town at the end of Fuller Street. The school had eight classrooms, a kitchen, and a gymnasium.

In 1958, the centennial presented another opportunity for something special in recognition of God's great blessings to the members of Zion. The preparations included another redeco-

orating of the church interior. The walls were redecorated, the pews refinished, and the carpeting was replaced with new red carpeting.

Pastor Wegner left Zion in 1961, having served there for nine years. Pastor Waldemar Gieschen replaced him that same year and would remain until 1966. While Pastor Wegner utilized the Seminary vicar program, Pastor Gieschen preferred otherwise. However, faltering health made a vicar a necessity in 1965. It might be noted that in the early 60's the Protestant controversy in the Wisconsin Synod surfaced once again. Pastor Gieschen was one of three pastors who represented the Western Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Synod in their dealing with this issue.<sup>4</sup>

In 1966, Pastor Gerhart F. Cares left the parish in Cleveland, WI and accepted the call to Columbus. He is still there. The decade of the 70's marks the years when the recent extensive remodeling was made. Lights were added inside the church along with lights on the outside to illumine the church and steeple at night. More suitable restrooms were installed in the basement. In 1978, a goal of \$100,000.00 was set for extensive remodeling projects at school. This involved replacing the roof, and putting new entrances in to conserve energy. In 1980, many shut-ins began coming to church because they could make use of the newly installed chair-lift.

In the spring of that same year, Pastor Cares suffered a heart attack while preaching a sermon. He has recovered after a period of recuperation. The vicar agreed to stay an extra

year to help out. That year it was decided that Zion could use a second pastor. In the spring of 1981, Paul Tulberg was assigned to Columbus.

In recent months it was learned that a member has left her entire estate to Zion. The amount is more than \$300,000.00. It will be interesting to see what new project will be planned. When one thinks of the congregation in Columbus with its age and size, you can't help realizing that it has been more than projects that has allowed it the success it knows. It has been God's grace in Jesus and the working of the Holy Ghost in thousands of people throughout the last several generations. May God continue to bless Zion in that way.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Koehler, J.P., The History of the Wisconsin Synod, Sentinal Publishing Company, St. Cloud, Mn, 1970, p.53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p.62.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p.111.

<sup>4</sup>Albrecht, Martin, Faith - Life, Conference Report: Manitowoc District, June 30 - July 1, 1962: Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, p.5.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Koehler, J. P., The History of the Wisconsin Synod, Sentinal  
Publishing Company: St. Cloud, Mn, 1970.

Albrecht, Martin, Faith - Life, Conference Report: Manitowoc  
District, June 30, - July 1, 1962; Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, p.5.

I would also like to acknowledge the information made available  
to me by various individuals: H. O. Ihlenfeldt, Arnold Wiehert,  
Ervin Sennhenn, Emil Tetzlaff, Harold Salzwedel, and Pastor  
Cares.