

Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church:
a brief history
Focusing on the First Ten Years

Burlington, Iowa

Senior History 373
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February 14, 1994
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To study the history of a Christian congregation is to study the depths of the riches of the mercy and grace of our great and powerful Lord. Often these attributes are easily seen in history with the advantage of 20/20 hindsight because the troubles of the present cloud our spiritual vision by kicking up the dust of our sinful natures. For some members of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church, Burlington, Iowa, this may have been the case, but for others, the blessings were all too obvious right from the beginning to be obscured by anything short of full blinders. In this light, this account of our Lord's church, Burlington branch, is dedicated to the loving mercy and grace of the God who is in all and through all and over all.

Every congregation has to start somewhere and Our Savior started with a phone call from Dorothy Ball of Donnellson, a small farming community in the southeast corner of Iowa, to Pastor David Rutschow of Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Peoria, Illinois. From that first contact, it was decided that Pastor Rutschow would conduct a communion service for the few Christians gathered in that corner of the Lord's field, with the first actual service being held in August 1974.

Five people attended that first service, including Dorothy Ball and her son and daughter-in-law. In order that this small group would not have to wait for their one opportunity each month to be fed the Word, the Special Ministries Board of the WELS sent taped services for the

group to use. This was a practice that continued in one form or other until the first full-time pastor was installed.

From these humble beginnings it was not too long before the little gathering picked up steam. Two displaced Wisconsin families joined the group in January of 1975. One was the family of a navy man who made their home in the military housing on the grounds of the army ammunition plant in Middletown. The words military housing connote some things that may not be true about this home. The house was a fairly large white two story with large bedrooms and solid wood floors. The reason these details stick out in my mind is that this was the home where I attended my first WELS service in the state of Iowa. Mine was the second family to join the group in January of that year, exactly one year after we moved to Burlington.

At this point the hand of God is so clear as to be almost visible. When my family moved to Burlington from Jefferson, Wisconsin, my parents dropped their membership in the WELS in order to join what they thought would be a conservative Luthern church in Burlington. Instead what they got was a Seminex pastor who made it a regular practice to preach half-truths and whose wife taught adult-bible class at which men were in attendance. After hearing about this small WELS group, my parents gladly returned to the fold and by 1977 the Missouri Synod church was decimated, with much of its membership joining this growing group of worshippers in the WELS.

This was a good time for those involved in the fledgling church. As the group rotated meeting in other families homes, people grew close and became family in the Christian sense of the word. Potlucks followed the monthly communion services, as did games and fellowship. Our church family also grew somewhat familiar with the small mission church of which Rutschow was Pastor. We would all hop in our cars and make the seventy mile journey to Peroria for special events and rejoice with our Illini brothers and sisters in the Lord's mercy.

There are no shortage of anecdotes from those early days. Pastor Rutschow's son Paul provided some of the funniest moments in the church's brief history. One Sunday during the intercessory prayers after the collection, Paul decided to do a backward roll off of the children's rocker in which he was sitting. To this day there is disagreement over who turned redder, Pastor or his wife. Paul and his Chicago Cubs hat, which was filled with his incredible knowledge of every player's statistics of those amazing Cubs, never failed to amuse or amaze our membership. There were also the croquet games played in Hamilton, Illinois, on the incredibly sloped side lawn of the Endel family's home. There was Lynn Phillip's delicious lasagne at the pot lucks. Most of all, there was the love of God reflected among the members of this tightly knit group.

Very soon the group needed an established place to meet so that visitors could find it, and because the group had

outgrown the homes of most of the members. The meeting place that was chosen was the banquet room of Burlington Memorial Auditorium, literally only a few yards from the banks of the Muddy Mississippi in downtown Burlington. While the banquet room provided a roof over our heads it provided little else that was conducive to worship. Often the room was left so dirty that an hour of concentrated clean up was required by the members before church could begin. On one occasion a wild game feed had been held in the room the night before and more than the smell remained as a reminder of the furry friends who had been dinner for the guests. On another occasion a party from the previous night was still ongoing in the adjoining room. Even the most devoted worshipper among us had difficulty paying attention to the liturgy as "Roll out the Barrel" barreled out of the juke box.

The obstacles to meaningful worship in the banquet room were in fact many, and if there was any period in the infant church's history where doubts and frustrations entered the minds of the members, it was now. Even the worst times end up as fond memories now though. As the church grew in numbers, members with special gifts used these gifts to facilitate our worship services. One such member was Barney Hitchcock, a fine Christian man who served as liturgist while the sermons continued to arrive on audio tape. Nothing may be harder for sinful human beings than to concentrate on a twenty minute sermon coming from a horrible

sounding box in the front of a stuffy room, but one Sunday the sermon held everyone's attention. As the sermon went along, the voice got faster and faster, and faster and faster, until it sounded like Alvin of chipmunk fame was the preacher for the day. Apparently the sermon was taped with weak batteries that only got weaker, while the sermon was played back with AC power. Evidence that Satan works overtime trying to disturb the saints.

In August of 1975 the congregation advertised a meeting that would provide the community with information about the doctrine and practice of the WELS. Although there was not much interest shown by the community at this meeting, there was still much to rejoice about that fall for the faithful. Pastor Michael Dietz, a fresh graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, would become the new shepherd of the flock. Pastor Dietz was assigned to Gesthemane, an exploratory group in Davenport, Iowa. Pastor Dietz was a remarkable character, easily recognized by the distinguished looking beard that earned him the nickname "Moses" from his classmates. But where Pastor Dietz really came into his own was on the golf course. While his scores may not have challenged the Hogans or Palmers of the world, his unique putting style, (ninety degree bend at the hip, elbows perpendicular to the body), and unique putter, (curved like an Aborigine boomerang from many "chance" meetings with the ground and various trees), certainly earned him his spot in golfing lore.

In the first part of October the little group sought mission and manpower status from the Minnesota District Mission Board, and by October twelfth, Pastor Dietz was installed as the pastor in charge. The Lord continued to bless the congregation with forward progress in November as the group was recognized with official mission status. Three days after the mail arrived with this good news the congregation met after worship service to pick a new name for this new congregation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The voting narrowed to two main competitors, Good Shepherd, and Our Savior. With a Good Shepherd congregation meeting in Cedar Rapids, the majority opted for Our Savior.

The Lord blesses where he will, and the Lord continued to shower his gifts on Our Savior. Already on November thirtieth the voters got together and approved a constitution and sent it to the District Constitutional Commission. This constitution is somewhat unique in the WELS in that it does not set up a standard church council. Because the church is small and close knit, the congregation decided it could get by, and would do very well, with a system where each board would be answerable directly to the voters assembly. History has shown that this system works well, provided the president of the congregation continues to keep tabs on the various boards.

With a constitution in place the new congregation was all set to call its first full time pastor. This was an

anxious time, filled with wondering how many men would need to be called before one would accept a call to this somewhat remote river city. On December fifth, District Mission Board Chariman, Pastor Petermann, attended the first call meeting. After some mulling over the list, it was decided by those present to extend a call to Pastor Richard Maurice, who was currently serving a congregation, his first, in Fremont, Wisconsin. Many anxious prayers filled the Lord's ears as the people sought the Lord's favor in continuing the growth and success, humanly speaking, that the congregation had been enjoying. Three weeks later, one day before Christmas, Our Savior received an early Christmas present. Besides celebrating the coming of ~~a~~ the babe born in Bethlehem, the congregation celebrated the coming of a new shepherd sent to them by the Holy Spirit. The Maurice family was scheduled to arrive January 23, 1976, and so a mad scramble ensued to find suitable housing for the family. When a location had been chosen and the family moved in, everyone relaxed and enjoyed what would always remain a memorable event in the history of the church in Burlington when Pastor Richard Maurice was installed as Pastor of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Unfortunately, the relaxing did not last too long. Shortly after the Maurices had settled into their new home, conveniently located across the street from an elementary school where the oldest child could attend school, the owners of the rented parsonage announced their intention to

return to Burlington, thus needing to reestablish themselves in their former housing. Again a mad scramble was on to find housing in the area, and location was pretty much wide open because the church had no permanent home. Searching for a house was quite an experience this time because Synod gave the go ahead to purchase a home. On one occasion when a couple of district officials came to help in the search, more than one layman involved became embarrassed when they entered the bathroom of one home to find that the wallpaper contained the images of nude women as its major theme. No one remembers much else about that house to this day.

Finally a site was chosen on the south side of town in a quiet neighborhood where two other member families lived. On April twenty-fourth, Pastor, his wife, three children, collie, Pinto wagon, and 1940's Dodge moved into their new home. On June sixth the parsonage was dedicated to the glory of God and his work, and everyone was encouraged by the attendance of Pastor Dietz and the joy he found in recounting the many blessings of the congregation which had been in existence for such a short period of time. And of course, everyone was also encouraged by the pot-luck dinner that followed the service. Everyone was not encouraged, however, to look back at pictures of the dedication years later and recognize themselves in liesure suits and sporting mega-sideburns.

Things kept moving at a rapid pace for Our Savior. Shortly after the parsonage was dedicated, the congregation

moved from its meeting place in the Memorial Auditorium, aptly named for the many memories the congregation had there, to the basement of a bank on the west edge of town. The conditions for worship there were much more favorable, but it still was not a situation that was conducive to receiving many visitors and expanding outreach.

Again many prayers were answered when on October tenth of that same year several members of the WELS General Board for Home Missions helped the congregation narrow its choices for a permanent site to three empty lots and one used building. Considering the financial situation, the three acre requirement for a new facility would have left meager funds for the actual building. The used church was decided upon.

The site chosen was indeed a good choice. A facility of 1950's vintage, the building itself is not necessarily environmentally friendly (read not well insulated), but it is within two turns of the two major highways that run through Burlington, it is located across the street from a large World War II housing project that practically begs to be evangelized because of its location, and the church is within shouting distance of several large stores, which increases traffic flow past the church building. The building has a large upstairs that God-willing will one day be a Christian Day School (read here LES if that if what is now more politically correct in our circles).

The members spent many hours cleaning the new facility,

and on June 12, 1977, the new building was dedicated. Pasor Rutschow returned to deliver the sermon in which he led the congregation to marvel at the mercy of God and the grace with which he had blessed the congregation to that point. Surely no one could disagree with that.

Over the years the members have done many things to the building itself to make it more livable for a congregation. Lexan plexiglass was placed over all of the windows of this glass, steel, concrete, and wood structure. This project took many hours of donated labor and many thousands of dollars worth of material, but it has allowed the church to be a better steward of our precious natural resources, besides keeping the breezes off the worshippers, as well. When the old boiler finally gave out the church replaced it with three energy efficient units, one of which had to be placed into a specially constructed building in the back of the church. The flat roof has been replaced once and several other sections of the building have received the pitched roof treatment. The bathrooms of the building have been redone, ceilings have been lowered, gallons and gallons of paint have found their way to the walls of the building, carpet has been laid, padded pews purchased, and a cry room has been refurbished. During the energy crunch days of the Carter Administration a small experiment in solar power was tried, but cost was prohibitive and only a handmade unit remains to help heat the front entry way. Materially the congregation has been blessed in countless ways over the

years. In quiet, methodical procession, the Lord has brought gift after gift to this body of believers.

In 1980 the congregation entered upon a venture not dissimilar to that which many congregations face in areas new to the WELS. Because of its distance from any other WELS congregation many members must travel some distance to get to church every Sunday. With a small core of these members being situated in a small town approximately thirty miles northwest of Burlington named Mount Pleasant, the voters of Our Savior gave Pastor Maurice the go ahead to serve this group in Mount Pleasant with the hopes that eventually this would develop into a sister congregation. The group met occasionally in the homes of the members, but usually services were held in a small turn-of-the-century church with narrow old wooden benches and hurricane lamps mounted on the walls. The church was located in the middle of the grounds of what is known as "Old Threshers Reunion." Old Threshers is an organization that collects and stores antiques, annually welcoming back throngs of people to see the old machinery come to life again. For whatever reasons, the Lord did not bless the efforts here with success, and the group quickly rejoined their brothers and sisters back in Burlington.

At this point it seems expedient to include a couple of stories about Pastor Maurice. During his days at the Seminary he and his wife struggled financially, like 98% of the other students. For a treat, he and his wife would go

to the Dairy Queen and split a sundae, or go to a donut shop and split a donut. This taught Pastor good stewardship and frugality, but sometimes his members had to wonder if he carried this to an extreme. Pastor had an affinity for older cars, and when his WWII vintage car gave up the ghost, he needed a replacement. He had heard about a sixties Cadillac in good condition in a town about one hundred miles from Burlington. After deciding to buy the car sight-unseen, Pastor needed a way to pick the car up. Rather than having to drive another car all the way there, and all the way back, wasting precious fuel and someone else's precious time, Pastor decided to ride his **moped** the one hundred miles to his destination. Upon arrival he found, as he hoped he would, that the trunk of his new pride and joy willingly swallowed the Puch and he made his way back home. When questioned about his four hour trip on the top of his glorified bicycle seat, he remarked that it was not too bad except when semis would go by and almost blow him off the road. Fortunately, he did not get blown off the road and the trip went without incident, but to this day we all have to wonder if he will ever walk the same again.

April of 1983 brought some bitter-sweet news to Burlington. Pastor Maurice received and accepted a call to serve a congregation of believers in Neenah, Wisconsin. The members of Our Savior were indeed sad to see him go, but this meant that a new man with different talents was being sent by the Holy Spirit to minister to the congregation's

needs. The new man for the job was Pastor Paul Thierfelder. On June 19th, 1983, Pastor Thierfelder was installed as the new shepherd of the flock after previously serving for a short time in Columbia, Missouri.

During Pastor Thierfelder's tenure, the Lord used his talents to grow the congregation numerically so that by the time of the tenth anniversary celebration in 1985, Our Savior boasted 92 communicants and 113 souls, a marked increase over the thirty souls and twenty-one communicants of November 1975. This is in spite of the fact that Our Savior had been dealt some serious blows to its membership by way of transfers and job relocations over the years. Several prominent families have come and gone, always leaving a small void in the hearts of the few who have been with the congregation since the beginning.

The tenth anniversary was indeed a joyous occasion for the members of Our Savior. President Carl Mischke was the guest preacher for the November celebration, and everyone thoroughly enjoyed the company of these two Christian people, with remarks made especially about the ease with which Mrs. Mischke carried on genuine conversations with all the members of the congregation.

Once again, as time continued its journey to the present, the Lord saw fit to change ^P Pastors at Our Savior, and in April of 1988, Pastor Thierfelder accepted a call to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to begin an exploratory congregation in a rapidly growing suburb. As he pulled out of Iowa, Pastor

Thierfelder left with two little additions to his family and the prayers of a congregation thankful for his service.

Our Savior was not without a pastor for long. This time the Lord lead Pastor Paul Lindhorst to the banks of the Mississippi straight from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He and his family arrived at the parsonage wide-eyed and fired up to do the Lord's work. By the Lord's blessing, the Lindhorst family has grown the congregation from within, adding three children to the total they brought with them in July 1988. But, time continues to move on, and Pastor Lindhorst has accepted a call to Appleton, Wisconsin, where he will be serving a congregation of 450 souls by March of this year, thus opening up the possibility for a new chapter in the history of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The history of Our Savior Lutheran Church is one that very closely parallels the life of most Christians. There are the good times, the tough times, the sad times, and the times when a person has to wonder where the Lord is because our sinful natures question and fail to trust. But in reflecting on the history of a congregation such as this one, the Lord's mighty right arm and Word of truth can clearly be seen to have carried the day. The Lord continue to keep his flock in Burlington, Iowa.

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