

They Wanted to Hear God's Word:

A History of Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church

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"Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." Acts 2:9-11

When Peter and the others began to speak in the languages of those gathered around them, the people were amazed. But what was most amazing that day was the message that they heard; the message of Christ crucified. Scriptures tell us that many, when they heard it in their own language, were brought to faith by the power of the Word. Jesus Christ, when he ascended into heaven after his resurrection, left behind eleven men and one great command; to share the good news of salvation with the entire world. From the Pentecost account we understand that Jesus wants his message to be heard. Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church located on 2015 East Fernwood Avenue in Milwaukee, Wisconsin began its history as a small group of people who just wanted to hear the Word of God.

But in Milwaukee, it wasn't always easy for some to hear the Word of God. Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the late 1800's had a predominately German heritage. German missionaries and the German immigrants that they served had established many German churches throughout the city. Milwaukee is also often considered to be the home of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The WELS has very strong German roots. In the early days of the WELS nearly all preaching, worship, and instruction was done in German. This only made sense since the early WELS congregations were comprised mostly of German speaking people. The exclusive use of the German language by many Wisconsin Synod churches limited their ability to serve the non-German speaking people in Milwaukee. The Wisconsin Synod had

recognized this problem and decided to remedy the problem. Knowing that English was becoming the universal language they tried to encourage the churches of the synod to begin using English in worship and education. Aware that the switch from German to English could be a long process the synod made use of its mission board to establish city missions.

One of those city missions was opened, on December 24, 1916, in the South Shore Park area of Milwaukee. Earlier the Southeastern Wisconsin Synod Mission Board had reviewed the area to see if there were souls needing to hear about their Savior. "It was felt that there ought to be a Lutheran Church of this Synod which had regular English services. Formerly St. Lucas Lutheran Church did not have regular services on all Sunday in English."¹ The mission board's review of the area showed that the Wisconsin Synod had barriers because of its strong German heritage. "At that time, St. Lucas Evangelical Lutheran Church was the nearest Wisconsin Synod church. However, by constitutional mandate, St. Lucas was presenting the Gospel message and teaching only in the German language."² Pastor Raymond Huth cited that another reason for the synod establishing a mission in the area was that there were other Lutheran synods working in that area, showing that there were souls wanting to hear God's Word. The mission board then brought their findings to the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States at the 1916 Synod Convention and the synod voted to approve an English speaking mission in the South Shore Park area.

¹ Raymond Huth, Pastor, *A Brief History of Messiah Ev. Lutheran Congregation of Milwaukee, Wis.*, 1942. Draft for a worship bulletin. Found in the Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church file, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Archives. Hereafter cited as Huth, Draft.

² *Diamond Jubilee: Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Milwaukee: Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1992), 3. Hereafter cited as Messiah, Diamond.

Before the end of that same year the mission board had located and leased a small plot of bare ground from a Mr. Froemming. By December 1916, the mission board had erected a portable chapel on that land. The location of the mission was at the corner of Meredith and Delaware Avenues in South Shore Park. The Synod appropriately named the mission, Delaware Avenue English Lutheran Church.

On January 7, 1917, two weeks after the mission was dedicated, Pastor Emil Schultz took charge of the new mission. Because Pastor Schultz served at three other missions in the Milwaukee area, students from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary often conducted the English services at the mission. The seminary was at the time located at 60th and Lloyd Streets in Wauwatosa. The life of the mission was brief to say the least. On July 5, 1917, the small mission of just five communicant members was organized into a congregation. Those present were Pastor Shultz, Herbert Kock, Henry Nimmer, and Henry Rossow. The name they gave to this new congregation was Messiah English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Milwaukee.³

The original mission chapel was dedicated, December 24, 1916. It was a portable chapel that had been erected by the synod's mission board. This first building remained on the property and was used by Messiah until 1922, at which time it was dismantled and rebuilt in Mukwonago, Wisconsin to be used once more as a chapel for a new mission field. The construction of the chapel was wood frame it was twenty feet wide and forty feet in length. The wood frame was covered on the exterior with siding but on the interior there was neither insulation nor wall sheathing. The total cost of the chapel was one thousand forty dollars. Because it was built on borrowed land there were no

³ Messiah, Diamond, pg. 3

utilities supplied. It didn't have electricity, water, sewer (toilet facilities), or gas, which made worship less than ideal.

Pastor Huth recalls the chapel in his writing, "The portable chapel was very unsatisfactory because it was entirely unfinished. It was extremely hot in the summer and bitter cold in the winter."⁴ Electricity and lights were added soon after it was occupied by, "some friendly ladies of the mission."⁵ A small wood stove supplied heat for the chapel and members took turns supplying the wood.

In spite of the hardships and discomforts of their first house of worship the congregation grew. After Easter, in 1918 the mission board called Pastor Raymond Huth to serve at Messiah and at St. Timothy, a sister mission in Wauwatosa. Huth had been serving at St. Paul's, another Synod mission congregation in Palmyra, Wisconsin. In an effort to support the Synod the mission members voted to pay one hundred fifty dollars a year toward the Synod subsidized salary for their pastor. Pastor Huth continued serving the two mission congregations until August 24, 1920, when he began to serve at Messiah full time. In 1920 when the English Conference chose to meet at Messiah the congregation decided to update the chapel with new furnishings. They had a new pulpit and altar built. They also donated a new crucifix and candlesticks, as well as new hymnbooks and 36 new chairs. The plain wooden chapel was looking more and more like house of worship for the growing congregation.

In 1920 Messiah was confronted with two problems. The small English-speaking congregation was outgrowing their little chapel. And the owner of the land was selling

⁴Huth, Draft

⁵Messiah, Diamond, pg. 4

the property that it sat on. They were given the first option to buy the property but they quickly discovered that city ordinances wouldn't allow Messiah to build a larger building on the property and it wouldn't even allow them to build a more permanent building on the property. So the members of Messiah were forced to begin a search for a new place to hear God's Word.

The second home for Messiah was located at the corner of Kinnickinnic and Fernwood Avenues in the Town of Lake, which was annexed in 1954 into the city of Milwaukee.⁶ Two lots for the property were purchased on August 21, 1921, and a third lot on January 7, 1922. The new church was built on those lots and dedicated on May 21, 1922. Edward Heine, then president of the congregation and local homebuilder, designed and built the new church using a modified house plan. The new Church was a wood frame building set on a block wall basement. The nave was twenty six feet wide by fifty feet in length and had an attached twelve foot by fifteen foot narthex. At the rear of the church was a small balcony and the basement contained a fellowship hall. The total cost for the property and church was five thousand eight hundred thirteen dollars.⁷ Pastor Huth wrote, concerning the amount, "The congregation was compelled by circumstances without outside help to shoulder a large burden. Of course the Synod paid the missionary's salary for a time. However the few bur⁸ courageous members of the parish found a way to finance (paying high interest) both for the lots and also for the building of a modest church."⁹

⁶ John Gurda, *A Stately Landmark From Water the Wars*, JSOnline, 1999. Available from <http://www.jsonline.com/news/editorials/0307gurda>. Accessed 8 December 2005.

⁷ Huth, Draft.

⁸ (bur) possible typing error.

⁹ Huth, Draft.

The congregation at Messiah struggled but they continued to grow. And growth meant change. The church was updated and improved throughout the years. The Ladies Guild bought new pews in 1924. On March 29, 1925 a newly built parsonage next to the church was dedicated. In August of 1927 Messiah became self-supporting and by 1928 it was necessary to enlarge the balcony due to a growing congregation. That same year the original reed organ from the Delaware Mission was replaced with a larger pipe organ purchased from St. Mary's Hospital.

It was in the building on Kinnickinnic Avenue that Messiah celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The service was held on October 4, 1942. On the back of the anniversary service bulletin Pastor Huth wrote, "Whatsoever blessings the members of Messiah congregation have enjoyed, were the gifts of the Triune God to whom be all honor and glory. May we his children in Christ Jesus ever continue to win souls for the growth of his kingdom of grace."¹⁰ Pastor Huth's message probably describes best the people of Messiah. For twenty-five years they had heard God's message in a language they could understand. Both the shepherd and his flock understood that all they had was a blessing of God. They understood that others needed to hear God's message. So Messiah continued to grow. Twenty-five years later Messiah had grown from the original five communicant members into a congregation of three hundred twenty.¹¹

Once again growth meant change for Messiah. By 1949 the congregation at Kinnickinnic Avenue was beginning to see a need for a newer and larger facility. The Town of Lake notified the congregation that they would not approve the continued use of the building without some updating. Repairs and updates were made to the building

¹⁰ Raymond Huth, *A Brief History of Messiah Ev. Lutheran Congregation of Wis.*, 1942. Worship bulletin, Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI. Found in church files. Hereafter cited as Huth, Worship.

¹¹ Huth, Worship.

but Messiah began to look to the future. On May 25, 1955, a congregational meeting was held to discuss the direction for the future. Once again they were faced with extensive repairs and needed to decide how best to proceed. Three options were discussed. One was to make the necessary repairs, the second was to rebuild on the existing property and the third was to build at a new location. The consensus was to repair, expand or replace the church on the existing property. In February 1956, "Messiah Builds for Christ" a two-year fundraising drive, was begun to raise forty thousand dollars for the renovation and expansion of the existing worship facility and for improvements to the basement fellowship hall.

In June 1958, the people of Messiah were informed that a property located on E. Fernwood and S. Dayfield Avenue was for sale. It was decided July 1 1958 to try and purchase the property. On September 2, 1958 the two lots were purchased and in 1959 a third lot to the east was purchased as well. On January 28, 1962 Messiah's third worship facility was dedicated. The new building on Fernwood was block construction with a stone and brick veneer and no basement. The dimensions of the building are recorded as seventy-seven feet wide by one hundred fourteen feet in length. The nave was approximately thirty feet wide by seventy-five feet long. The organ and choir loft is to the side of the nave and at the back is a fellowship hall that opens in to the nave for worship overflow. The total cost for land and buildings together was over one hundred fifty five thousand dollars.¹²

Members of Messiah and the neighborhood will long remember the day that the Fernwood church was dedicated. The day had been set for Sunday, January 28 1962. The service began with a short service in the old church located on Kinnickinnic Avenue

¹² Messiah, Diamond, pg. 12

and Pastor Huth followed by council members carrying the sacramental vessels led the congregation in procession walking the two blocks to their new church home. Because a significant amount of snow had fallen prior to the service, the council had to clear two blocks of snow. Congregational president, Carl Klitzke, said that it as that it was really something to see. They walked two by two between the huge snow piles, in a line people that stretched all the way from one church to the other.¹³ The members of Messiah have walked that way from the first days of their existence. As faithful pastors led them with the Word and Sacraments they walked side by side into the future.

Pastor Huth who began serving as a missionary to Messiah on April 22, 1918 faithfully led Messiah for forty-nine years. Pastor Huth retired after celebrating fiftieth year in the ministry. He preached his farewell sermon at Messiah on June 25, 1967.

On July 14, 1968, seminary graduate, Vaughn Vogel was ordain and installed as pastor to Messiah becoming the second in its history. Pastor Vogel served faithfully and led Messiah until accepting a call to Our Saviors Lutheran Church in Zion, Illinois. His farewell sermon was preached on October 31, 1976.

A call was extended and accepted by Pastor James Phillips of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hillrose, Colorado. Pastor Phillips was installed at Messiah on January 16, 1977. Pastor Phillips has been leading the congregation of Messiah as a faithful shepherd since his installation.¹⁴

¹³ Carl Klitzke, interview on history of Messiah, 2005. (see note on page 12)

¹⁴ Messiah, Diamond, pg. 17

Education has always been important to the pastors and people of Messiah. The first record of a Sunday School program at Messiah is a photo of the thirty three children gathered around their teacher, Miss Eleanor Olson, in front of the Delaware Avenue mission chapel. The photo is dated approximately 1918.¹⁵ By 1928 the enrollment number had risen to 287 students. In February 1927 Pastor Huth had invited the Synod Mission Board to Messiah to see about establishing a Christian Day School. In regard to that meeting, Pastor Huth stated, "No satisfactory solution was found." Not wanting to hinder their children Christian education some members were sending their children to neighboring Wisconsin Synod Day Schools. In 1940, Messiah voted to support these families with tuition subsidies. Under Pastor Vogel's leadership Messiah continued to encourage families toward Christian education. By the end of his call at Messiah had called their own teacher to serve at St. Lucas Christian School. The passion of Pastor Phillips for youth was a blessing to Messiah. Under the leadership of Pastor Phillips the number of children enrolled in Christian Day Schools continued to rise. By 1979 their enrollment numbers prompted St. Lucas to suggest that Messiah and Resurrection Lutheran on Howard Avenue, explore the feasibility of operating their own school. In 1983 a vacant school building owned by the city was located and a lease agreement worked out. The building was renovated and on September 9, 1984 the school was dedicated. The school was named Risen Christ Christian Day School, "Risen" for Resurrection church and "Christ" for Messiah church. The school was in operation from 1984 until 1988 when it was closed.¹⁶

¹⁵ Photo, Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church files

¹⁶ Messiah, Diamond, pg. 21

On August 1, 1986, Resurrection withdrew from the agreement. Messiah continued to operate the school but mounting financial burdens forced them to close the school in 1988 with all teaching calls being terminated in August of that year. "A sad chapter in the history of Christian Education of the Messiah congregation."¹⁷

The closing of Risen Christ Lutheran Christian Day School and subsequent problems are pointed to as the cause of the declining in membership at Messiah. First, the closing caused some division and blaming within the congregation of Messiah. Some of those who were upset in the way the school was vigorously promoted and then suddenly closed simply left Messiah. But a second bigger problem was the families who were sending to send their children to alternate Christian Day schools after the closing. In the past Messiah had subsidized the tuition of children attending Christian Day schools. After the closing, Messiah returned to that policy and provided subsidies, but the financial burdens caused by the school start-up and closing forced the council to eliminate the subsidies to reduce the debt. Without subsidies, some members chose to transfer to congregations, which supported the Christian school their children were attending. In hindsight the loss of supporting members was costlier than the subsidies and the council voted to resume subsidizing tuition but at a lower amount.¹⁸

Peter preached the Word of God in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and scripture tells us that, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." In 2004 numbers at Messiah were recorded as 110 communicants. As Messiah moves ahead into the twenty-first century it looks somewhat like that mission congregation of 1918. Those that remain are those

¹⁷ Messiah, Diamond, pg. 17

¹⁸ James Phillips, interview on declining membership, 2004 and 2005. (see note page 12)

that still want to hear God's word. Those that remain are those that want to share that message of salvation with others. This desire is evident in their actions. In 2003 the members of Messiah called a part time seminarian to help them work on evangelism and outreach. In August of 2004 Messiah called a vicar to assist them for one more year in evangelism. They chose to incur more debt so others might hear the Word of God. May God bless their effort to increase the numbers in the church of Christ, the Messiah.

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Note

Interviews done in 2005 with Carl Klitzke and James Phillips were informal in nature; conversations concerning the history of Messiah Evangelical Lutheran Church. The comments cited in this paper are the recollections of this author. Prior to his death in 2005, Carl Klitzke had attended Messiah church at all three locations being the congregation's oldest member. James Phillips has been the pastor at Messiah for the past twenty-three years.