

TRINITY EVANGELICAL
LUTHERAN CHURCH
JENERA, OHIO

Senior Church History
May 8, 1992
Prof. Westerhaus
Mark Panning

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
4451 W. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

The founding fathers of what is now Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jenera, Ohio first lived in the hills of Odenwald in Hesse, Germany. They held membership in the Reichenbach parish which served Reichenbach and several other nearby villages. The Reichenbach church had been built already in 1526. Under the auspices of Philip of Hesse, a well-known friend of the Reformation, Martin Luther's teachings were introduced into the church and Reichenbach became a Lutheran town.

In 1831 some members of the Reichenbach parish decided to leave their homeland and travel to the new world. They were trying to escape the oppressive taxation, manditory military service and poor economic conditions which existed in Germany at the time. Traveling to America seemed like an easy solution, but they would soon learn that the journey would be fraught with danger.

In September of 1831 these soon-to-be German immigrants boarded the "Famous Dove" and began their journey to a new life. The trip was a pleasant one until a terrific storm blew in just off the American coastline. The "Famous Dove" was broken to pieces on a coral reef just off the Carolina coast, but by the grace of God no lives were lost. That day the passangers made a vow that they would celebrate the 17th day of September "unto the third and fourth generations" as a lasting reminder of God's gracious protection. The third and fourth generations may have come and gone, but "Shipwreck Sunday" is still celebrated by many Ohio churches, including

Trinity Lutheran. Area pastors traditionally preach about Paul spending a night and a day in the open sea, or about certain false teachers who have made shipwreck of their faith.

Although the passengers survived the accident, what few possessions they had brought did not. Most of their supplies had been lost at sea. For about three years the settlers remained in Carolina, earning money to purchase the needed materials for the journey inland. It was not until 1834 that the first german settlers arrived in what is now Hancock County Ohio, the cite of present-day Jenera.

Once in Ohio the settlers busied themselves establishing their new homesteads. Northwestern Ohio is excellent farmland. According to Great Lakes experts, northwestern Ohio was formerly a huge floodplain called "The Black Swamp" which was submerged under the waters of a much larger Lake Erie. Early inhabitants had to drain the land, but their efforts were rewarded with fields that were very flat and exceedingly fertile. Farming remains a primary occupation in northwestern Ohio. The majority of today's Trinity members are involved in agriculture.

Because of its great productiveness, northwestern Ohio was a relatively easy place to live, even when starting from scratch. One elderly member of Trinity recalls sitting on his Grandfather's knee when he was a very small child. It was Thanksgiving Day and they were gathering with their extended family for the traditional meal. As he sat with his Grandfather, grandma came and asked grandpa to "please go

out and shoot two [wild] turkeys for the meal. But make sure they're small ones. Those big turkeys get so dry." Apparently, food was not terribly difficult to acquire.

The village of Jenera was not founded until 1883, almost 50 years after the first settlers arrived. It was named after a prominent physician, Dr. Jenner, who lived in that area. The town grew up where and when it did primarily because in 1883 a railroad was also being built through that place. Jenera became one of the more thriving towns in the area. Older Trinity members recall a time when "people would come from miles around," or when "you could see a horse on Main Street at any time of the day." But those days are long gone. Jenera has ceased to be a leading town. In fact its population today numbers less than 300. Absolutely no business of any kind takes place in Jenera anymore, with the exception of the co-op grain elevator and one very small convenience food store. Villagers must go to nearby towns even to buy food or gas.

Although the village was not founded until 1883, the settlers' congregation was organized much earlier. For the first several years after they arrived in 1834, the settlers were without a pastor or a building. They worshiped in their homes by reading written sermons and prayers and by joining together in hymns.

The first pastor, a Lutheran whose name I do not know, appeared on the scene in 1839, apparently of his own accord. He served for about a year and then moved on. During the

next three years the group was served mostly by Lutheran circuit riders, but also by one Reformed minister. As we will see, Reformed theology would continue to plague the congregation for the next 40 years.

In 1843 the church was officially founded and a full time pastor aquired. The congregation took the name German Evangelical Lutheran Zion Church. On October 22, 1843, J.G. Burger, a Lutheran pastor, preached his first sermon. His service to the congregation lasted until 1846.

For the next several years itinerant pastors and circuit riders came and went. Apparently this was quite a turbulent period in the congregation's history. Some members remember hearing stories about woefully inadequate preachers, or about doctrinal controversies being settled by fistfight and the like. None of these reports can be documented, however.

1850 was an important year in Trinity Lutheran's history. After three years of traveling preachers, Pastor F. Schamber accepted the call to serve the church. Although he stayed for less than two years, he was instrumental in the building of the congregation's first house of worship, a wooden frame structure located about a mile and a half south of present-day Jenera. It was completed in 1852 shortly after Pastor Schamber left. The building is no longer standing.

From 1852 until 1885 a period of doctrinal controversy existed within the congregation. In 1852 a small group of Reformed were accepted as members under the condition that all pastors and all books must be of the Lutheran confession.

Nevertheless a unionistic attitude prevailed and the name of the congregation was changed to German United Lutheran and Reformed Church of Van Buren Township.

Because the Reformed minority continued to hold a strong influence, a dispute eventually arose and separate services were begun for Lutheran and Reformed groups. In 1853 some of the Reformed members broke from the congregation and formed the German Evangelical Lutheran and German Reformed Congregation of St. Paul. A. Michaelis was called to minister to the newly separated group. St. Paul's congregation still exists as a member of the ELCA.

From 1852-1875 what remained of the original congregation was served by Pastors Betzler, Spiess, Konetzky and Beach. These years seem to have been relatively free of strife.

In 1875 the congregation called a certain Pastor Behrens. Under his direction a number of Reformed worshipers were again accepted into membership. The name of the church was again changed, this time to German United Lutheran Reformed Church. But the church constitution still required that the pastor and all books used remain Lutheran in confession. The congregation soon decided that this unionistic arrangement was intolerable and Pastor Behrens was compelled to leave.

Things began to turn around in 1883. Pastor A.J. Jansen was called, and under his guidance the congregation reorganized and changed its name to German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church, which name it still holds today. 1883 was also the year in which Jenera was founded along the newly built rail-

road. Some far-sighted church members purchased a parcel of land in the new village and built a parsonage there. They also began to make plans to move the church into Jenera at a later time.

In 1885 Andrew Beyer arrived as Trinity's new pastor. His leadership was especially significant in solidifying the struggling congregation. One reason for this was his relatively lengthy pastorate. Unlike those who preceded him, Pastor Beyer remained for a considerable span, from 1885 until his retirement in 1894. During these years Pastor Beyer staunchly defended Lutheran doctrine against the Reformed errors held by some segments of his congregation. He educated the people in the truth of the gospel, and after his time of service the Reformed error was never again a serious problem for the congregation. A number of Trinity members still survive who were baptized by Pastor Beyer.

A most significant happening during Pastor Beyer's years was the building of the new church. A lot was purchased on North Main Street in Jenera in 1889 and work was immediately begun on a new church. The building was made of brick with a steeple 190 feet high. It cost a grand total of 11,000 dollars. It was dedicated in December on the last Sunday in Advent, 1889. This building, along with a later addition, is still in use today.

If Pastor Beyer was significant in turning things around for Trinity, then Pastor John Gauss must be credited with taking the congregation and moving it ahead. Pastor Gauss

did not follow Pastor Beyer immediately. Pastor E.K. Schmidt served for three years in between Pastor Beyer and Pastor Gauss. Humanly speaking, however, Pastor Schmidt's years were relatively uneventful.

Pastor Gauss was born in the Black Forest Region of Germany in 1874. After coming to America at the age of 15, he worked hard to pay for his own theological training. In 1895, at the rather modest age of 21, he was ordained into the holy ministry. His years with Trinity began two years later when he was installed as pastor on August 22, 1897. He served Trinity faithfully for over 50 years.

I have never spoken with anyone who met Pastor Gauss but did not like him. Outwardly he could be a rather stern man, and yet no one ever doubted his deep love for Christ or his love for God's people. One Trinity member illustrated Pastor Gauss' style of leadership by pointing to the way he introduced The Lutheran Hymnal in 1941. Pastor Gauss simply announced that there would be a special service that afternoon in order to go over the new liturgies. Everyone was expected to attend, and most everyone did, because Pastor Gauss had said so. When the special service arrived, pastor said, "This is the way we will worship from now on." And that is what they did, all objections notwithstanding. His members respected him not only for his sincerity and love, but also for his firm and certain leadership.

One of the most distinctive marks of Pastor Gauss' ministry would have to be Trinity's new synodical affiliations.

Up until this time Trinity had no attachment to any religious society. In 1911 the Trinity voters assembly unanimously decided to join the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Michigan, a member of the Synodical Conference. In 1915 Pastor Gauss was elected president of the Michigan Synod. But his presidency was short-lived, for in 1919 the synod merged with others into the new Wisconsin Synod that we know today. At that time, the old Michigan Synod became the Michigan district of the Wisconsin Synod, and Pastor Gauss was elected chairman of the General Mission Board. He was also voted into the Michigan district presidency for a number of years.

Pastor Gauss' years were also marked by growth in many different ways. In 1897, just after Pastor Gauss arrived, Trinity daughtered a congregation in nearby Orange Township. Services were conducted at St. John's every other Sunday afternoon. Most of St. John's members were former members of Trinity who lived quite a distance away from Jenera. Unfortunately, the growth was minimal at best, and in 1917 St. John's rejoined Trinity congregation.

Also under Pastor Gauss two successful daughter congregations were founded. On October 19, 1943 Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church in Findlay Ohio held its first service as a mission congregation. It had a nucleus of 45 former Trinity members. This congregation has grown to nearly 300 members and is in the process of building a new and larger church building.

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church was also a mission effort of Trinity. It is located in Kenton, Ohio, about 25

miles southeast of Jenera. It was founded on February^{br} 13, 1952. This was a few years after Pastor Gauss had died, but plans were already in the making while he was still alive. Today, Grace has a weekly attendance of about 40 members. More information about Trinity's daughter congregations can be found in a Senior Church History paper written by former Trinity vicar Michael Riley, 1990.

Under Pastor Gauss' direction, the German language was gradually discontinued in the church. Apparently he saw ~~rather~~ clearly from rather early on that English was the language of the future. So he resolved to lead his people forward. We have already mentioned Pastor Gauss' handling of the new english hymnal in 1941. Several other facts deserve notice.

German had been used exclusively at Trinity until the year 1919, when English was introduced in the Sunday School. In addition to this, one english worship service was held every month, but german services were still the norm.

In 1935 Pastor Gauss translated Trinity's constitution into English. It was accepted, though not unanimously, by the voters in 1936.

By 1952, shortly after Pastor Gauss has died, the situation had been reversed. English had become the norm. In that year voters decided that english services would be held every Sunday. In addition to these, german services were also held on the third Sunday of the month, as well as on the fifth Sunday if there was one. This arrangement lasted until 1960, when German was discontinued entirely.

The church's property also grew during Gauss' years. Already in 1900 a new parsonage was built next to the church, replacing the first parsonage built 17 years earlier. The second parsonage is still in use today.

The church building also grew during this time. In 1923 at the annual voters meeting it was unanimously decided to enlarge the present structure. A transept style edifice was designed to match the church's german gothic architecture. Building began on May 7, 1923 and the new cornerstone was laid on July 15. Most of the labor was donated, as well as the windows and some other decorations. A new statue of Christ for the altar was presented by Northwestern Publishing House, and a new pipe organ was somehow donated out of the youth group treasury. This new addition was dedicated on July 6, 1924.

Perhaps the accomplishment which would give Pastor Gauss the most pride would be the establishment of a Christian day school. The idea certainly had been around long before Pastor Gauss had ever arrived. In fact, J.G. Burger, Trinity's first pastor, had begun a parochial school in December of 1843. But in Trinity's earlier, more turbulent years the school had never survived for long, although it was reopened several times. Even Pastor Beyer, whose ministry was a turning point in Trinity's history, started a school in 1885, but for some reason it did not last until his retirement in 1894.

In 1941 , at Pastor Gauss' encouragement, the voters resolved to build a school. World War II, however was just

getting into full swing, and building restrictions made it impossible to go forward with their plans at that time. In the fall of 1948 a proposal was accepted that the Christian day school be opened for all eight grades in the church basement. Wayne Weichman was sent by the synod assignment committee to be the first teacher at Trinity Lutheran School.

Mr. Weichman and all the members of Trinity must have been pleased and also more than a little shocked when 72 children showed up to register the first day. Pastor Gauss' assistant, Pastor Voss, volunteered to help with the teaching duties, and did so for the next 12 years. During those 12 years Trinity Lutheran School's faculty grew to five full time teachers.

Pastor Gauss died before he ever saw his dream of a Christian day school set in brick and mortar. But the foundation he laid led to the building of Trinity's present facility. In the spring of 1952, the first school building was completed and dedicated for the Lord's service. In 1960, a teacherage was built across the street from the school, and it was dedicated on December 4. An addition of one extra classroom and a principal's office was built and later dedicated on October 13, 1968. On May 15, 1983 groundbreaking services were held for yet another addition to the school, including two more classrooms and a gymnasium. It was dedicated later that same year.

Trinity school has now grown to around 130 children. About 20 of these are members of Immanuel in Findlay. In

the future it is possible that an additional teacher will be called, which Immanuel would pay for in lieu of tuition. As it is now, the entire Immanuel congregation has taken it upon themselves to pay for their children's tuition out of current funds.

Pastor Gauss died on the last day of 1949 after a brief illness, but his memory is still alive and well. For more than half a century he had guided Trinity congregation through some very difficult decisions. He had also faithfully served the church at large in his various synodical positions. During his years as pastor, Trinity grew from 49 voting members (some records say 47) to 153 voting members, 401 communicants and 551 baptized souls.

On February 10, 1946 Pastor Walter Voss had been installed as an assistant pastor to Pastor Gauss. After Pastor Gauss' death, Pastor Voss assumed full responsibility for the congregation. His ministry lasted until early in 1960 when he accepted a call to serve New Salem congregation in Sebawaing, Michigan. He is perhaps best remembered for his help in establishing Trinity school.

Pastor A. Maaske of Immanuel in Findlay served as the vacancy pastor until Pastor Martin Bradtke was installed on August 28, 1960. It was during Pastor Bradtke's service that the new teacherage was built. He also agreed to begin a Ladies Aid. The first meeting was held on October 22, 1962, with 36 charter members attending. Pastor Bradtke left Trinity in 1963 in order to serve St. John's in Allegan, MI and Peace in

Otsego, MI.

During the vacancy Trinity was served by Reverend Albert W. Bauman. He had been received into the WELS by colloquy in 1952 and was a communicant member of Trinity from that time on. Pastor Bauman served until Pastor Don Laude was installed in June of 1964. During his pastorate a new balcony was added to the church which would seat about 60 to 65 people. This took place in 1966. In 1973, on the morning of March 24, smoke was seen coming from the church. The new balcony area was burning. Fortunately firemen were able to control the fire. The damage was minimal and quickly repaired.

Pastor Laude was called to serve in Kansas in the spring of 1978. Pastor Karl Fuhlbrigge of Immanuel served the vacancy. Pastor Edward Pinchoff was installed as Trinity's new pastor on September 17, 1978. During his ministry Trinity adopted the NIV for use in public worship and in the school. The King James had been used since 1919. Pastor Pinchoff served Trinity for only two years before he was called away in May of 1980 to Paradise Valley Lutheran Church in Phoenix, Arizona.

Pastor Hans Schultz of Chesaning Michigan served as vacancy pastor until November of 1980. At that time Pastor Robert J. Gurgel assumed the office of Trinity's pastor. During his years the third addition to the school was added, including the two classrooms and the gym. Pastor Gurgel served Trinity faithfully until 1989, when he accepted a call to St. Lucas, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Since that time Trinity had been served by Pastor Alois Schmitzer III, a 1981 graduate of Wisconsin

Lutheran Seminary and formerly the pastor at Trinity in Bangor, Michigan.

In 1983 Trinity celebrated 140 years of God's grace. There is much to be thankful for. Ever since the "Famous Dove" crash landed its crew on the shores of Carolina, God has been watching over his little flock and adding to it. He has preserved them from the errors of their early unionism and protected them through all their later trials. For almost a century and a half Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church has been a beacon of the gospel truth. God grant that it may remain so for many years to come.