

"The Racial Transition of
Emmaus Lutheran Church
of Chicago Illinois"

Church History
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April 30, 1991

The purpose of this paper is to give as many historical facts as possible concerning the racial transition of Emmaus Lutheran Church. At present Emmaus congregation is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod or ELS. The congregation has its church building situated at 5440 West Gladys Street in Chicago, Illinois.

Emmaus was originally organized on the Monday after Easter in 1888. Its first pastor was Rev. Martin H. Fuelling. Pastor Fuelling served the congregation until 1940. The congregation was at that time a member of the Missouri Synod. During his ministry, Pastor Fuelling baptized 2303 people, confirmed 1400 children, married 890 couples and buried 2263 individuals. At that time the community around the church building was mostly German. The original building was on the corner of California Avenue and Walnut Street in Chicago.

The congregation grew by leaps and bounds in the years between 1888 and 1940. It was a large German speaking white congregation.

Then in 1940 things began to change. Pastor Fuelling retired and Pastor Walter Roschke became the new pastor. The congregation was on the decline in 1940. The Germans had moved further West in the city and non-German, non-Lutheran people moved into the Emmaus neighborhood. The school they had started was closed. The worship services in the German language were discontinued. The church property was sold for \$25,000.00 to the Holy Temple Church

of God in Christ. Because of a neighbor's lawsuit, the congregation could not build on the new property. So for about three and one half years the congregation worshiped in "The Gold Dome" of Garfield Park and in the parish house of Christ Church. On Ash Wednesday in 1948 the congregation worshiped for the first time in its present building at 5440 West Gladys Street.

In 1951 Pastor Roschke accepted a call to a church in Lindenwood, Illinois. In November of 1951 God gave Emmaus the kind of pastor He knew they would need for the transition to an all black parish. "On November 4, 1951 Missionary Carl Rusch of Nigeria was installed as pastor of Emmaus. By the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Emmaus in 1963 the exodus to the suburbs and elsewhere had not yet ended. Several times 20% to 25% of the communicant membership were transferred during one year. The congregation's survival during those years can be attributed to God's blessing upon the efforts to evangelize the community."¹ Pastor Rusch described the situation of Emmaus this way: "The blacks had surrounded the old church at Walnut and California, so they sold it and moved West. Then 'dem niggers' followed the congregation West, and the situation was repeated. Only this time their membership was too disorganized to risk moving again. And where would they move to? How many prayed about this problem only our Lord knows, but, to their astonishment, their first call was accepted. Worse, he would be free to come in a few weeks or less! They bestirred themselves, and prepared for the unexpected. He came, with little moving expense! He was installed in a Sunday

afternoon service, poorly attended except by their invisible thoughts. God stepped in and pulled Emmaus through two decades of Rusch's ministry. But that African was so unpredictable! The first years and thereafter he canvassed the community, and by God's pure grace, new members joined, some stray Lutherans, and many lost sheep; the church records contain the names of the non-Germans."²

God through His Word and through the ministry of Pastor Rusch changed the attitudes of the members of Emmaus. The Spirit of God broke down the racial prejudices, and moved the members to reach out to the people in the community. Because I grew up in Chicago, I know what a racially divided city it is. An all white church in a neighborhood which has turned into an all black one has two choices. It can slowly fade out of existence or reach out to the black people around it, which is exactly what Jesus tells us to do. Mr. Clarence Watrous and Mr. Donald Pierce were members at Emmaus during its racial transitory years. Both men recall that a great deal of effort was spent on canvassing the neighborhood around the church. This was done before Vacation Bible School and also to build up the Sunday School. Both men told how in 1971 the church was half white and half black. The white members continued to leave though because they were afraid to go into the neighborhood. However the white members before leaving, welcomed the blacks and worked with them as Christian brothers and sisters. The Lord truly had broken down the wall of prejudice which had stopped the white members from reaching out to blacks. Pastor Rusch makes this point also. "The 'Inner City' from the lake to south Austin, and

several miles north and south of Madison Avenue, is heavily populated, but they are 'not our kind'. The present membership of Emmaus at one time was not our kind, but by God's glorious grace, they now are!"³

During Pastor Rusch's ministry at Emmaus more and more white members left. However it was not because of the new black members.

The congregation on November 11th of 1962 by a vote of 27 to 7 withdrew from the Missouri Synod. This was done because Missouri was becoming unorthodox in its teachings and practices. That day in November the President of the District was in attendance along with the First Vice President and several other District officials. Pastor Rusch fills in these details: "When our Chairman called the meeting to order he announced that this was a special meeting, called to discuss and act on two questions. With perfect aplomb he proceeded, acknowledging the requests for the floor from only our members. After the announced business was cared for, he asked the Pastor loci to close with a prayer and the benediction, which I joyously did. Then the terse announcement, 'The meeting, having taken care of the two items announced, is therefore closed.'

"Alas, the four or five District officials, esp. the aggressive President, had to return home without a chance to address the congr. Of course, he proceeded to speak to the local officers, but he and the five briefcases remained silenced. Guests included folks from Trinity, Oak Park, and from other congr. of MO who were interested in Emmaus. Nickel was fuming in his frustration. Imagine, that

small cong., with Pastor of no repute, pulled out of ~~Mighty~~ MO."4
Seven more members left because of the split from the Missouri Synod.

The organization of the Lutheran Church of the Reformation was then held at Emmaus, in which Emmaus was a member until 1986 when they joined the ELS. In the years between 1972 and 1986 the congregation became, for all practical purposes, entirely black. Another big reason for whites leaving Emmaus was schooling. Emmaus no longer had a school. The members desiring a Christian education for their children went to WELS churches or else where. The pastors during these years continued reaching out to the people in the neighborhood, through canvassing and the church by God's grace was sustained.

In 1986 Emmaus joined into membership in the ELS. They called and received the Rev. Carl Wosje who was installed on April 27, 1986. Pastor Wosje is the current pastor of Emmaus. Emmaus is the only all black congregation in the ELS. Pastor Rusch put it this way. "Consider the members of Emmaus that are now Lutheran, from George and Eloise Lawson to the many that have become Lutheran in Emmaus, all Black! WELS and ^ELS were lily white, esp. ELS, until Emmaus entered the Synod."5

Truly the Lord has used Emmaus in the ways He saw fit. By His grace this formerly all white German speaking congregation is reaching out with that same Gospel. While everything about the congregation may have changed since it began one hundred and three years ago, the sweet Gospel message it confesses and proclaims has

not. By God's grace it never will. The Gospel works, it is bound by nothing, not even skin color.

In closing I will include some sidelights on the ministry at Emmaus as related by Pastor Rusch:

"One summer evening, about nine p.m. I was returning home from canvassing. A group of four black youths was standing under a streetlight. When I noticed them in the distance I discreetly crossed to the other side of the street. As I approached they began to jeer and act unfriendly. But I shouted back, 'Hi, fellows' etc. and crossed back to their side of the street. As I came closer and talked more, one of them said, 'Oh, it's the preacher man.' I was most cordially welcomed. Other black folks, hiding behind their padlocked doors, would say to me, 'You should not be out making calls.' Such gracious, concerned folks I appreciated, but I would reply, 'I'm doing the Lord's work, seeking His lost sheep. If He is unable or unwilling to protect me and bless my efforts I may as well quit.' Never was I interfered with. Emmaus Church is still there, a Lutheran light, loved by the blacks who know its teachings and concern for lost souls. But His command is still clear: 'You go into the... That My house may be full.' Life in South Austin was noisy, dusty, and yet fruitful."⁶

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4. Watrous, Clearance. Personal Interview January 1991.
5. Wosje, Carl Pastor. Personal Interview January 1991.

END NOTES

1. Highlights of One Hundred Years of God's Grace. Bulletin insert in the 100th Anniversary Bulletin of Emmaus Lutheran Church. April 17, 1988.
2. Pastor Carl Rusch Person letter 12. January 1991.
3. IBID
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