

# History of Bethlehem Lutheran Church

1872 to 2009



*Bethlehem Lutheran Church  
Circa 2009*

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## THE TOWN THAT STARTED WITH A CHURCH



Looking back over the history books of our congregation, known now as Bethlehem Lutheran Church, I found that the "Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation" was organized on July 10, 1872, at the farm home of Ole P. Steen of rural Rock County Minnesota. The residing pastor was Rev. E. Olson and 57 members, of these, 14 were eligible as voting members. Rev. E. Olson was called as minister, and was promised \$25.00 for one year, and was to conduct three services during that year. He traveled a lot of the territory, seeking Norwegian groups here and there, conducting services for them and attending to their other ministerial needs for them.

The following year, 1873, Rev. O. O. Sando, a graduate of Concordia Seminary of St. Louis, MO., became pastor for this congregation, with a salary set at \$150.00. This was only 1/3 of the total salary he was to receive per year from the other congregations. Some of our pioneer family names are: G.T. Rovang family, Jacob Kvale family, Gudbrand Kvale family, K. H. Hoyme family, Bernt Rossum family, A. J. Rogness family, C.E. Halls family, Sundem families, Thompson families, Pederson families, Amund Herreid family, Nells Jacobson and the Colby families, among others.

In 1878 Rev. Christian Neseth was called, and Pastor Sando went to Baltic S.D. where he served as lifelong minister for them. Rev. Neseth's first service was September 22, 1878. As there was no parsonage as yet, he made his home at the Nells Jacobson home. He only served 3 years when he accepted a call to be a professor at Luther College in Decorah, IA. Rev. A. Turmo accepted the call when Rev. Neseth left. With the congregation being quite scattered, and no parsonage, a house was bought in Laverne for him to live in and services were held alternately in Laverne and Martin township. The congregation divided and those who lived at Laverne formed what is at this time known as Laverne Congregation.

Besides the \$150.00 per year for salary, the pastor was to receive offerings on the 3 festival days, and a little extra for other ministerial duties, and feed for his team of horses. Remember, there were no cars, or decent roads at this time, so a pastor had to have a good team and a light buggy to get around his area.

October 11, 1881, the name changed from "Rock River" congregation to "Immanuel" Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, with services being held at the homes of members as there still was no church.

The summer of 1884, saw the beginning of a church being built. It was almost complete by the fall, when a cyclone storm demolished it and killed 1 carpenter.

The year 1885 saw the church being rebuilt, on the SW corner of the SE qtr of Section 21, Martin Township, given to the congregation from E. Herreid and they also bought another acre for the church. At a cost of \$8.00, the only provision was that lot should be fenced in. It was the highest point in the township, also it was 5 years before the village of Hills came to be. The parsonage wasn't built until 17 years later, in 1902.



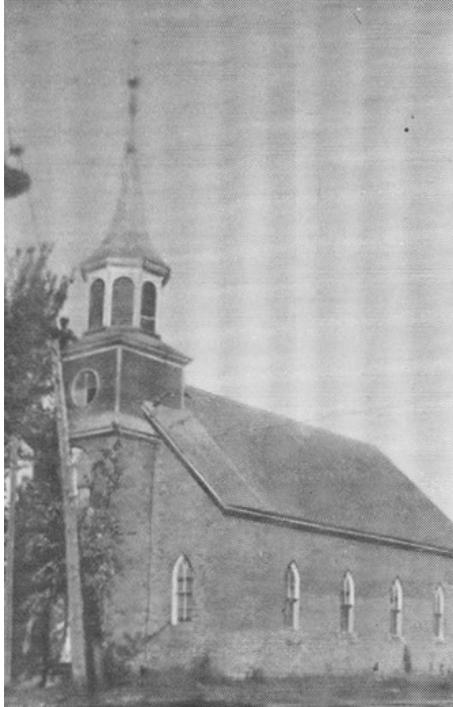
*Old Bethlehem Parsonage Built in 1902*

Rev. Turmo accepted a call to Newman Grove, NB in February, 1894. So a young minister from Ohio by the name of Rev. J.H. Lunde was installed in September 1894. His charge consisted of 5 congregations: The Luverne Congregation, The Trinity Congregation, northwest Luverne, The Beaver Creek (now known as Palisades Congregation,) The Immanuel Congregation in Hills, and a small congregation northeast of Luverne called Battle Plain. Rev. Lunde's parsonage was still in Luverne.

With only 1 service a month, the congregation felt they would like to have more services. It was 1901 before arrangements could be made to further their want of more services. At that time Beaver Creek and Immanuel formed a separate charge, recalling Rev. Lunde and his installation was July 20, 1902. By November 1902, Pastor Lunde and his family were able to move into the new parsonage that was built for them in Hills. Rev. Lunde served both Immanuel and Beaver Creek until the fall of 1913, when he took a call from Hartland, MN.

The 2 congregations, Beaver Creek, and Immanuel, called Rev. Theo Rodsater from Brandon, SD who accepted the call and served here for 34 years, he continued to serve the congregation after his resignation until a new pastor came.

The Norwegian Synod Church, the United Church and the Hagues Synod were 3 of the largest Norwegian church organizations in 1917. They merged into 1 organization with the name "Norwegian Lutheran Church of America".



*"The Brick Church"*

After this, 2 local congregations, the Immanuel Church belonging to the Norwegian Synod, and the Rock Congregation, (Brick Church) belonging to the United Church, merged on December 8, 1919, and formed the congregation under the name of Bethlehem Lutheran, Hills, MN It called Rev. Rodsater to serve as it's pastor which he did until 1947. The former Immanuel congregation severed its connection with the Beaver Creek congregation.

Norwegian was the language used exclusively up to 1910 -1912 and then it was used only occasionally. Also, early on, after organizing, a parochial school was added. A teacher was hired during the spring and summer months so as not to interfere with the public school. Classes were held either in the school or a home for the required term, in one district, then moved on to the next, as there were three to four districts to

cover within the congregation. Rev. Rodsator was known to line the kids up in church on Sundays and walk back and forth asking questions to determine whether they knew their lessons or not, there were tense moments for the youngsters, knowing the whole congregation was listening and watching how well or poorly they were prepared.

Sunday school was then introduced as a great way of teaching religion to the youngsters.

Ladies Aid Society was the first social organization to form for the betterment of the church. Membership, activities, and its popularity steadily increased, and it was considered the most essential branch of our church. Meeting 2 times a month, with a program, lunch and a nominal fee, the money raised was used for missions and other charity work, as well as helping out the church budget.

There was also a men's organization, called Lutheran Brotherhood, which was active for many years but at this time is dormant. Luther League an organization for the young people is active. Also the Dorcas Society, for girls, did a lot of good work, but is also not active anymore.

Flowerfield Cemetery, located 2 miles east of Hills, is taken care of by members of the former Rock congregation. Another cemetery is located on church grounds and the members of the former Immanuel congregation take care of this one. Each cemetery has its own association to take care of its grounds.

The church choirs were large and good from 1900 to 1935, at which time it became inactive, with a new pastor coming in 1947, the hopes are to have a choir again.

Rev. Rodsater lived in Hills, upon resigning in 1947 and he and his wife are buried in Bethlehem cemetery as is Rev. and Mrs. Lunde.

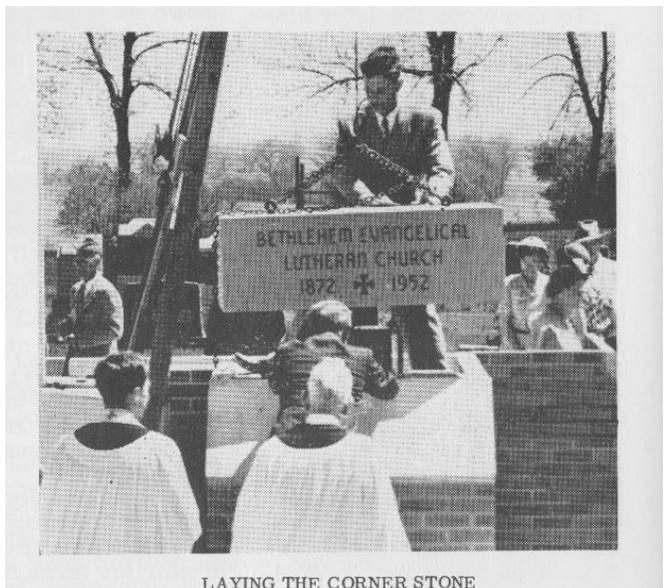
Rev. Thompson accepted the call in 1947 when the Rodsaters resigned, and is credited for his work in seeing the completion of the new church in August of 1953. In 1954 Rev. Thompson accepted another call from Parkland, Washington. Interim pastors served the congregation for 5-6 months, until O.G. Salvesson accepted the call in September, 1954. Gilbert Tuff donated new pews to the church during this time. Rev. Salvesson left to serve as Chaplain-Administrator for a retirement home in ND left at the end of the year in 1961.

The year 1961 saw Bethlehem Church and other churches in the ELC merge with the churches of the ALC and the UELC. The new synod is known as the American Lutheran Church. In 1963 another merger took place when the newly organized ALC merged with the Lutheran Free Church, combined they have a membership of 2,600,000 people.

Pastor Merlin Melby, who was serving as pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church, served our congregation



*"Laying the Roof"*



LAYING THE CORNER STONE



TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH

until June of 1968 when Rev. Kent Johnson of Augustana College, in Sioux Falls, SD, served as our interim pastor for 3 months.

Trinity and Bethlehem called Rev. Alden Swensen, who had been serving in Chicago, to come serve both congregations. He was installed on September 4, 1968. Also in the summer of 1968, Paul and Bertha Thompson bought the former Carl Ruud home, (across the street from the church) and donated it to the Bethlehem Church Congregation to use as a parsonage. Pastor Swensen was the first pastor to live in the new parsonage. Bethlehem and Trinity merge in June, 1969, but it took until September of 1969 to consolidate to 2 churches. Work began on the new chapel in Bethlehem, sometime after the merger. With the altar, pews, organ, and the stained glass windows all coming from Trinity Church and placed within the chapel. Alfred Bakk donated his time and did most of the work to make the chapel complete. Dedication was on November 1, 1970. The chapel is dedicated to "The Glory of God" and to the pastors who served the Trinity Congregation.



*Bethlehem Lutheran Parsonage*  
Circa 1968



*Trinity Chapel*  
Circa 1970

Rev. Swenson served until December 1971, when he received and accepted a call to a congregation in Omaha, NB. that brought Rev. Paul Hougen to accept our call, he was from Newark, IL., and was installed on February 6, 1972. He left in 1978 and Pastor Lowell Berg came to serve. Pastor Berg stayed here at Bethlehem until December of 2007. He went to serve as short term pastor in Clara City, MN before he retired.

In 1987 the furnace in the church malfunctioned and caused quite a bit of smoke damage, it took both volunteer and professional help to clean and fix up the church.

Big improvements in the church include an elevator that was installed in 1991 that helped to make the basement more accessible. New church doors were added in 1996 and a new roof was also put on the church in 2001. Computers and electronics have also helped to make a lot of changes available within the church.

In 1997 Bethlehem Lutheran Church celebrated its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with a meal, and a church service.

As of today, June 2009, we have had an interim pastor, Pastor Mary Dodgson since February of 2008, and she will stay until a call can be made for another pastor to come and serve us again. There still is no large choir, though a small one does sing for the holidays, the Ladies Aid Society, is now the BLCW or Bethlehem Lutheran Church Women, is still hard at work within the church. Luther League is also still going, Sunday School is run Sunday mornings during the school year. Vacation Bible School, is still a part of the church and is still a popular week for kids to come and learn more about God, and have fun.

Our mission statement is the Bethlehem Lutheran Church is a place where Christ is born in our hearts. We worship Him as our Savior and King and are sent forth to serve Him in word and deed.

I have gathered information on the history of the church from books written in the past. Excerpts were taken from author Gullick Opheim. Gullick also used information written by his father and CJ Nash to compile the history of the church.

We hope you enjoy the book, and feel free to add more history that we couldn't find available and to make notes along the way.

God Bless,

Lori Rentschler, Editor  
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