

A History of Gethsemane Lutheran Church

In the late 1940s, there was no Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in Northern Franklin County. A group of people, mainly members of Zion Lutheran Church on South High Street in Columbus, living in the northern parts of the city and its suburbs, determined to start one. So it came to be that ten adults founded Worthington Lutheran Church on February 12, 1948. They met for worship in the basement of Bill and Ruth Mackenson's home, 55 West Lincoln Avenue. Zion's pastor, Rev. Otto Stolzenburg, conducted the first service. He and Rev. Werling continued weekly evening services. During the following summer, the first VBS was held with an attendance of 39 children and later, the first organ was purchased for \$75.

The next year, 1949, the Rev. John W. Constable was called as the first resident pastor; he also served as the campus pastor for OSU. That year, the congregation became a member of the Ohio District of the Missouri Synod (LC-MS). The first church building was designed for \$25,000 and built at 35 East Stanton Avenue. Groundbreaking was held April 1, 1951 with cornerstone laying June 24th and the opening service December 9th. The official dedication of the sanctuary was held February 10, 1952.

When the church started, the area was part of Sharon Township and the Worthington School District, hence the name. However, during 1951, Columbus annexed as far north as Sharon Square taking the Columbus School District with it. As a result, the church found itself in Columbus and changed its name to Gethsemane. In 1954, the Rev. George Robbert became pastor and in 1955 the Parsonage was built.

A rapidly growing congregation welcomed Rev. Edward Rauff as its next pastor in 1956. Two years later, a second service became necessary. November 1960 saw the groundbreaking for the Trinity Hall educational wing and kitchen; dedication was held in March 1961.

1962 brought Rev. D. Marshall Begley. Sunday School enrolled over 170 children. The music program for which the congregation became well known called its first professional Minister of Music, Ron Kenreich, in 1964.

Continuing change and growth brought Rev. Enno Gahl in 1967, and in May 1968, the new sanctuary began with groundbreaking followed by its dedication in May 1969. Midweek classes for grades 3 through 6 were begun. Sometime during this period some of our members and other Lutherans living in and north of Upper Arlington founded Atonement Lutheran Church on Francisco Road east of Reed Road.

On June 23, 1974, the voters assembly called Gerald Miller, president of the graduating class of what had been Concordia Seminary in St. Louis to be Assistant Pastor. District President Arthur Ziegler authorized the ordination of Rev. Miller, but in the meantime, Synod President Preus and other national leaders determined that recent graduates required certification. A growing controversy between synodical leaders and seminary professors led by seminary President Dr. John Tietjen had by this time led to his suspension and a large portion of the seminary breaking away to become the Seminary in Exile, Seminex for short. As a result, synod officials refused to recognize all uncertified graduates of Seminex of which Pastor Miller was one. They imposed requirements for certification that were unacceptable to many of the graduates.

The particulars of this controversy filtered down to Gethsemane. Thus began a nearly 3 year series of events, study and deep soul searching by the congregation, Board of Elders and the Synodical Affairs Committee. Notification was received in August 1976, that the Synod's Commission on Constitutional Matters stated that "a congregation calling a pastor not properly endorsed by the synod forfeits its synodical membership". On November 21, 1976, voters removed references to the LC-MS from its constitution but refrained from formally leaving. This culminated on April 3, 1977, when the voters assembly voted 71-24 (75%) to leave the Missouri Synod, then 81-5 (94%) to apply for membership in the English Synod of the American

Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC). It consisted primarily of other congregations which had left the Missouri Synod (LC-MS). However, Gethsemane was the only AELC church in Columbus.

Prior to this, Home Bible Study Groups (now Care Groups) were established, the youth had developed formal groups, various womens groups were formed and a new organ was dedicated in January 1975. Subsequently, in 1980, the congregation began Play and Learn Christian Day Care Center, a full-time facility.

Rev. Fredrick Wiese accepted Gethsemane's Call in 1983. Still growing, the congregation called Sister Betsy Williams, Deaconess (now pastor in Cincinnati) for Christian Education and Youth Ministry. Some other activities added were: a large puppet ministry, volunteer led nursing home services, quiltmaking for Lutheran World Relief and electing the 1st woman congregational president. 1985 saw the accomplishment of extensive renovations to the education facility followed in 1987, with the renovation of the parsonage to add an infant-toddler program for Play and Learn.

In 1988, the AELC merged with the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC) to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) of which Gethsemane was a charter congregation.

Rev. Karen Asmus-Alsnauer joined the staff as Associate Pastor in 1992. Also starting that year was Heidi Stover, an Associate in Ministry, Christian Education and Youth. 1994 witnessed the demolition of the original sanctuary building, replaced by the current Great Hall, upstairs kitchen (the original is used by Play and Learn), library, atrium and classrooms. Groundbreaking was in June 1994, with dedication in September 1995.

A year long 50th Anniversary Celebration was observed during 1998, with worship sermons by Southern Ohio District Bishop Holloway, Trinity Seminary President Dr. Anderson, former pastors, former members who had entered the ministry and other special guests. The year also saw many other activities and a seven presentation Concert Series. Two years later, the Bunn-Minnick pipe organ was upgraded to its current state and dedicated October 15, 2000.

With the retirement of Pastor Wiese, Pastor Asmus-Alsnauer was called as Administrative Pastor in 2003. In 2004, the congregation acquired (for future expansion) the property to the west fronting High Street and entered into a long term lease for income in the interim. A contemporary service was added; however with changes in membership several years later following the losses of a choir director and minister of music, the congregation has reverted to a single service blending contemporary and traditional elements. These latter years have seen more involvement with our nearby community neighbors, with Southeast Ohio Ministries and volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, Thrivent and New Orleans recovery efforts. Youth are active with local synod and national youth gatherings. The congregation remains known for its musical offerings with choirs, bells and orchestra instrument presentations. The most recent development has been the institution of a monthly Swahili Service in conjunction with Ascension Lutheran for the many Tanzanian members and friends.

The congregation has fostered the growth of professional church workers with frequent Ministry in Context (MIC) students and with interns serving as Vicars assigned to us for practical training, encouragement and development. Over the years five of our members and our deaconess have entered the ministry.

In summary, our history shows development of a rich variety of resources in worship, music and education. Many new members have mentioned our welcoming friendliness. We are attempting to use these gifts to extend our charge to grow in faith and serve others as messengers of God's grace through Jesus, our Redeemer.