

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN FAIRPORT

It was on August 7, 1921, that 95 people, including a Sunday school group of 20, held Fairport's first Lutheran service in the Town Hall with Pastor W.G. Hoffmann presiding. At a business meeting held the same month in the Grange Hall, Henry Schumacher, A.W. Fett, and Fred Schoolmaster were selected as trustees, Fred Schmidt was elected secretary, and James Peck was elected treasurer. A constitution was adopted by the congregation and the name Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church of Fairport, New York, was chosen as the official name. The church is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America Synod. In September, a resolution was passed instructing the Mission Committee of the Buffalo Synod to call the Rev. H.D. Schultz as pastor.



Bethlehem Lutheran 1960's

The next several years were busy ones for the new congregation. The early months of 1922 saw the first annual congregational meeting where the first elders, Charles Steffen and Charles W. Steubing, were selected, and E.F. Bandhold and Fred Schoolmaster were chosen as Deacons. Pastor Schultz was installed and the congregation incorporated. It was also decided to purchase the Jacobson property on West Church Street for \$1150.00 as the site for the proposed church building. In February, the congregation selected a building committee whose members were E.F. Bandhold, Charles Steffen, and Charles Steubing. Excavation was begun in May, and on Sunday, August 20, 1922, "a goodly congregation gathered to witness the cornerstone laying ceremonies." During the construction, the congregation held services in the Bown block on South Main Street. The group did not have long to wait, however. A church history notes that "steady progress was made in the erection of the building. The great part of the work was contributed by members. The desire for a temple of worship provided the incentive and a spirit of cooperation made the goal possible." The new building and its furnishings were consecrated "to the service of the Triune God on Sunday, March 11, 1923." Donations included pews from the Ladies Aid Society, windows from individual members and the Sunday school class, a baptismal font from the Rev. and Mrs. Beutler, and a pipe organ from the Concordia Lutheran Church of Rochester. By that time, the congregation had also purchased 40 Perrin Street as a parsonage for Mr. Schultz.

The church continued to grow and prosper, necessitating a remodeling in the early 1930's. As the people worshipped in the basement, a new arched chancel with three art glass windows donated by Karl Stroh was installed, as were a new electric organ and choir loft. The latter were gifts of the Ladies Aid Society. The church was rededicated and reconsecrated upon completion of the new additions and a complete redecoration. In 1937, the church became self-supporting.

The 1940's and 1950's brought steady growth, the establishment of a memorial fund, and the purchase of more property. In 1953, 42 Perrin Street was purchased as a new parsonage, replacing #40. In 1955, the former Brooks property on the corner of West Church and Perrin Streets was purchased for a parish house. Nine of the twelve rooms in the house were remodeled to serve as Sunday school classrooms. Other rooms were used as church offices and meeting rooms.

The church marked its 30th anniversary in 1953 with a gala celebration. A dinner and several services attended by three former pastors marked the occasion. Donations given in honor of the event included a missal stand, a credence table, hymnals, and a new carpet, among others.

Pastor Donald Rehkoph presided at the events that included the welcoming of thirty new parishioners. At that point in its history, the congregation numbered 440 baptized members with an average Sunday attendance of 150 persons. The Sunday school had an average of 85 children each week.

Bethlehem Lutheran has always provided many activities for parishioners in addition to regular Sunday worship. The church instituted a Vacation Bible School in the mid-1950's that was very well attended. Youth groups and men's and women's groups were popular as well. The youth group of around 40 contributed to the church by holding bake sales and suppers. The men's group met regularly for dinner and to hear speakers on current issues. The women's group was concerned with aiding the domestic and foreign missionary work of the church, particularly the support of the Rev. Paul Schultz (the son of the first pastor) who was working in New Guinea. In 1959, the church ordained one of its lifelong members, Richard Hembrock, who joined another church member, Kenneth Sharp, in the ministry.

In the 1960's and 1970's it was evident that the church plant would have to expand to accommodate growth. Under the leadership of the Rev. H.E. Jorgensen, the church consolidated the Perrin Street properties in anticipation of building. Plans were drawn up for a new education and office wing, and in 1970, the former parish house and parsonage were demolished and an addition to the church building was erected on the corner of West Church and Perrin Streets. A gift of \$25,000 from the estate of Charles Stroh greatly enhanced the building fund. The new parish center was dedicated in September, 1971. At that time, the number of baptized members had reached 669 and the budget had increased more than tenfold from the 1930 figure of \$2,470 to the 1971 figure of \$28,360.

In the 1990's, Bethlehem Lutheran had a total congregation of about 800 with an average weekly attendance of about 350. The Rev. Kent Garner, who was pastor from 1977 (when the weekly attendance was about 100) until his retirement in 2008, saw the parish grow to nearly 1,000 members. That growth led to the remodeling of both the sanctuary and the parish center.

The congregation is proud of its excellent music and educational programs and is also very involved in the community. Bethlehem Lutheran was the birthplace of the idea for Advent House, Perinton's hospice, as well as for Sojourner House, a refuge for battered women. The church is a member of the Perinton Clergy-Lay Council and the Fairport Housing Council, which has and continues to be instrumental in the creation of affordable housing for seniors. The church completed an extensive expansion in 2001, which included a 6,000 square foot addition as well as the incorporation of stained glass windows and an altar and communion rail from the original 1921 church. Bethlehem Lutheran is committed to being a village church and to growing and changing with the needs of community while maintaining its roots. David Connor is the current senior pastor.

Bethlehem Lutheran is joined in Perinton by two other Lutheran churches: Risen Christ Lutheran on Moseley Road, which was built in the 1980's, and Prince of Peace Lutheran on Pittsford-Palmyra Road, which was dedicated in 1993. Risen Christ, part of the Missouri Synod, has experienced rapid expansion. The church offers both traditional and contemporary worship services. Pastor Arnold Deknatel notes that the contemporary service, which features a "praise band," video clips, and dramatic presentations, appeals to younger families. Prince of Peace Lutheran, part of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, has been in Perinton since 1988, building a permanent home on Pittsford-Palmyra Road in 1992. The Rev. Adam Horneber, who has been with the church since 1989, describes the church as a mission church with the goal of carrying the Biblical message of God's grace in Christ to those who are without a church. The church places an emphasis on children's programs with, for example, a popular Vacation Bible School program, open to the community. All three Lutheran churches head into the coming decades with a strong commitment to young families and to growth as part of the Perinton community.

