

History of Bethany Lutheran Church, West Hartford

CHURCH HOUSE

The Lutherans who came to the New World, a few years after the first Pilgrims, settled in New York and up the Hudson River. From there the denomination spread westward. Relatively few Scandinavians, who were strongly Lutheran, settled in New England, so that Lutheranism is not heavily represented in this part of the country. The church administration always kept an eye open for new Christian opportunities.

One of these opportunities came in West Hartford, Connecticut in 1943, when the Mission Board of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, made a house-to-house canvass of much of West Hartford and found sufficient interest to establish a Lutheran congregation here.

The Mission Board invited the Reverend Martin C. Duchow, a native of the Pacific Northwest, to come from a pastorate in Albany, New York to launch the West Hartford Church.

A dwelling house and a sizeable piece of property at the corner of South Main Street and the Boulevard, fronting on the latter thoroughfare, was purchased as the site for the projected Lutheran Church of West Hartford. This purchase, at 1655 Boulevard at South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut, was made from Mrs. Mary Geer on June 8, 1944 for \$12,000. Most of the alterations were done by members of the congregation.

With an initial congregation that filled the small church hall to capacity, numbering 98 in attendance, the first service of the newly established Lutheran Church of West Hartford was held on Sunday morning, September 3, 1944.

Dedication Services were held on October 1, 1944, with morning, afternoon, and evening services with a total attendance of 472.

The West Hartford Lutheran Church assumed its new name of Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church on May 6, 1945, by a vote of the entire congregation.

The Congregation was organized on May 21, 1945, a Constitution adopted and Officers elected.

Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church was received into membership of the Missouri Synod at the Atlantic District Convention in Bronxville, New York on June 27, 1945.

BASEMENT CHURCH

January 1948 - More than \$6,000 had been raised for the Building Fund, and a Building Committee was elected.

On January 16, 1949, Reverend Martin C. Duchow indicated that the parish hoped to raise \$20,000. This sum, he explained, would only take care of part of the cost of the new structure. The church planned on building a basement unit first and then adding to this structure in future years. The location of the Basement Church would be directly in back of the Church House. The church had already raised \$10,000 towards the new building. This sum, coupled with the \$20,000 the parish hoped to raise, would take care of the "down payment" on the basement unit. The parish planned on borrowing the rest of the money needed for the new structure. At this time we had 156 communicant members and 106 children enrolled in Sunday School.

The formation of a New England District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod - was approved by the Connecticut Valley Conference on March 14, 1950. The only local Lutheran Churches in the Missouri Synod were Christ Lutheran Church in Hartford, which is now dissolved, and Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church. New England was included with New York and New Jersey as part of the Atlantic District of the Church. It is not known specifically at what time we referred to our church as "Bethany Lutheran Church" rather than "Bethany

Evangelical Lutheran Church" as it was originally named. As we continue with the history of our church we will refer to it as "Bethany Lutheran Church."

DEDICATION OF BASEMENT CHURCH

October 14, 1951 - The Valedictory Service was held in the church-house at 10:00 a.m. and was opened with the congregation singing "The Lord Hath Helped Me Hitherto". A Service of Dedication followed where the members of the congregation followed Pastor Duchow and members of the Building Committee to the new Basement Church. The key to the new edifice was turned over to Pastor Duchow by the Building Committee and the church officers carried the Cross, the Bible and the Communion vessels across the threshold into the church.

An afternoon service was scheduled at 3:30 p.m. with the Reverend Karl Graesser, speaker - Pastor, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Providence, Rhode Island - First Vice-President, Atlantic District of The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod.

An evening service, which began at 7:30 p.m. had as its speaker the Reverend John A. Kavasch, Pastor, Calvary Lutheran Church, Verona, New Jersey. The total attendance at all services was 928. The Basement Church was built at a cost of \$37,000, plus furnishings and nearly 2,000 hours of free labor by members of the church. Bethany Lutheran Church had 200 communicant members and 110 pupils enrolled in Sunday School.

SUPERSTRUCTURE

May 17, 1956 - Twenty canvassers made pledges of \$33,000 among themselves, setting the campaign well on its way to a minimum goal of \$75,000. Pledges were sought from parishioners in the following week for a three-year period. It was estimated that the entire project would cost \$150,000.

February - December 1957 - During construction of the superstructure, services were held at Sedgwick School in West Hartford, Connecticut. These months were filled with joy and anticipation as members watched their church building become reality. The late 1950s and early 1960s were the periods of greatest growth in membership.

May 26, 1957 - The Dedication of the Cornerstone of the New Church and Parish House was held in a special ceremony at 3:00 p.m. The Reverend Martin C. Duchow conducted the service, and the Reverend George J. Meyer, Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Bristol, Connecticut participated in the ceremony.

DEDICATION OF NEW CHURCH BUILDING AND PARISH HOUSE

December 15, 1957 - With the prayer "Let us enter this Thy House with Thy Blessing, through Jesus Christ", Pastor Duchow led his congregation to the front steps of the new Bethany Lutheran Church. The dedication saw the fruition of the sermon "Christ Builds His Church" which Pastor Duchow gave at the first service of the congregation on Sunday, September 3, 1944. We looked forward to this day with great anticipation, and we were very grateful to the Lord for His divine guidance and blessing.

The Processional Hymn for both services was "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty". Prior to delivering his sermon, the congregation sang "The Dedication Hymn" composed by the Reverend Martin C. Duchow in 1951.

More than 500 people crowded into the 350-seat sanctuary for afternoon services which were held at 3:30 p.m. Bethany's 22-voice choir joined in the service.

The Reverend Victor G. Albers, Executive Secretary of Missions, Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, delivered the sermon.

The cost of the construction, excluding the church basement, with all the furnishings was about \$260,000.

In 1957 our congregation consisted of 320 communicant members, 205 pupils enrolled in Sunday School and 40 children on the cradle roll, for a baptized membership of 565.

TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

September 21, 1969 - Three services were held to commemorate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the founding of Bethany Lutheran Church.

There were two services in the morning, and the Reverend Martin C. Duchow who served the congregation since its inception, preached at both on the theme: "A Time for Rejoicing".

During the afternoon service held at 4:00 p.m., the Reverend Arlin A. Maas, from Immanuel Church, Whitestone, New York - also Vice President of the Atlantic District, preached. (Pastor Maas was the father of Joan Anton, wife of our then unknown future Pastor, and now our current Pastor, the Reverend Carl J. Anton.)

At the time of this anniversary there were 500 communicant members, with a Sunday School enrollment of 200. Over the 25-year span the church had received over 1,100 people into communicant membership, but every year there was a sizeable turnover in membership.

RETIREMENT OF THE REVEREND MARTIN C. DUCHOW

The founder of our congregation, The Reverend Martin C. Duchow, retired on June 30, 1974, having served as our Pastor for 30 years.

The Reverend Martin C. Duchow entered his Heavenly Home on January 7, 1993, when he was 86 years old.

INSTALLATION OF THE REVEREND NORBERT A. FIRNHABER

November 24, 1974 -The Reverend Elmer F. Dreyer, Christ Lutheran Church, Hartford, Connecticut, installed the Reverend Norbert A. Firnhaber as Pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church. A reception was held after the service for Pastor Firnhaber, his wife Geanie, and their daughter Pascha who was 2 ½ years old.

Pastor Firnhaber organized a Newsletter for our church which was issued for the first time on December 29, 1974. This Newsletter contained Sermon Themes with text for the following month which would be helpful to the choir to match music to the Theme.

May 6, 1979 - The Voters Assembly reached the decision to purchase the 108 Meadowbrook property which is adjacent to the Parking Lot. The lot is 50' x 150' and accordingly enlarges our property surrounding the church. The house is now being used as the residence of our Assistant Pastor, the Reverend Robert J. Mikulastik, his wife Mari, and their daughter Dawn.

THE REVEREND NORBERT A. FIRNHABER ACCEPTED A CALL TO CAMPUS MINISTRY AT SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

November 24, 1974 - June 8, 1980

June 8, 1980 - In his farewell message to Bethany, Pastor Firnhaber thanked God that He had given him five and one-half years to step into Bethany's pulpit and share the best news any of us will ever hear - God's Word.

INSTALLATION OF THE REVEREND CARL J. ANTON

February 22, 1981 - The Reverend Carl J. Anton was installed as Pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church by the Reverend Martin Dienst - President of the New England District. The Reverend Daniel Fiehler - Vice President, of the New England District delivered the sermon. The Liturgist was the Reverend Martin C. Duchow - Pastor Emeritus, Bethany Lutheran Church. The "Hymn On The Christian Ministry", composed by the Reverend Martin C. Duchow, was sung as part of the Installation Service. A reception for Pastor Anton and his wife Joan followed the service.

FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

September 30, 1984 - Three services of Joy and Celebration were held to commemorate the Fortieth Anniversary of Bethany Lutheran Church. The Reverend Martin C. Duchow participated in all three services and delivered his sermon entitled "Our Thanks to God for His Blessings of Forty Years".

At the 4:00 p.m. Special 40th Anniversary Service the Reverend Gordon E. Johnston, former member of Bethany, serving a parish in Schenectady, New York, delivered the sermon. The Reverend Carl J. Anton and the Reverend Norbert A. Firnhaber were Liturgists.

INSTALLATION OF THE REVEREND ROBERT J. MIKULASTIK, ASSISTANT PASTOR

June 29, 1986 - The Reverend Robert J. Mikulastik was installed as Assistant Pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church by The Reverend David P. Mulder, President of the New England District. The Reverend Carl J. Anton delivered the sermon. A reception for Pastor Mikulastik, his wife, Mari, and their daughter, Dawn, followed the service.

GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY - BEHOLD A BRANCH IS GROWING

September 10, 1989 - On this day, the congregation of Bethany Lutheran Church closed a special service - one week after the 45th anniversary of its founding - and then gathered on the front lawn of the church for a ground-breaking ceremony for its planned renovation and expansion of facilities.

DEDICATION OF RENOVATED SANCTUARY

March 25, 1990 - The Reverend Carl J. Anton opened our service "Brothers and sisters, we have come together to dedicate this renovated Sanctuary for the worship of Almighty God and for the building up of the body of Christ. Let it continue to be a place for the gathering of the people of God; a place for proclaiming the Gospel through Word and Sacrament; and a place for bringing life and hope to us and to this community."

Renovations included a new altar, new carpeting including the side aisles, communion rail lowered to floor level, organ and choir moved from altar area to the loft.

DEDICATION OF NEW AND RENOVATED FACILITIES

November 4, 1990 - We were privileged to dedicate our beautiful new and renovated facilities at a special service conducted at 4:00 p.m. Prior to Prayers of Dedication, representative items were brought forward indicating uses of new facilities. The new Church Bell, which was also dedicated, tolled as each item was dedicated.

Bethany was made accessible to all through the installation of an elevator. Our educational, service and meeting facilities were expanded and improved making Bethany warm and inviting.

On December 31, 1990, our congregation consisted of 591 Confirmed Members. The actual expense of our new church addition at the close of the year was \$886,711.

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH

- September 4, 1994 - A special service was held at 9:00 a.m. followed by a Fellowship Hour.
- October 30, 1944 - Reformation Day - A highlight of God's rich blessings of the Gospel, focusing on Confirmation and First Communion.
- December 4, 1994 - Remembering the Dedication of our Sanctuary and Education Wing - December 1957
- February 26, 1995 - Children's Day - as we celebrated our children and involve them in our Worship.
- April 30, 1995 - A special service to recognize Charter Members and the official Organization of our Congregation.