

Glimpses

of
St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Ivan Quandt

The first two issues (June and July, 1997) of these "Glimpses" into the history of St. John Lutheran Church told of the difficult beginnings of the congregation. Founded in July of 1848, it was November before their first pastor arrived, the Rev. G. Schaller. Already in 1850, this pastor left and was replaced by Pastor Hoyer in 1851. Under this pastor's leadership, a Christian school was founded and the congregation erected its first church building on Carpenter Street in Philadelphia.

The years of Pastor Hoyer's ministry were evidently ones of noticeable success. With missionary efforts focused especially on South Philadelphia, the size of the congregation grew. By 1858, records show that voting membership (adult males only) had grown to over forty.

His work with the members of St. John ended abruptly in 1858, however, because of his poor health. A lung ailment compelled him to return to Germany to seek health care. He found the desired restoration of his health in Germany, but he was not to return again to America. Evidently, Pastor Hoyer decided he would not return to St. John even before traveling to Germany, because the members immediately began the process of calling a new pastor.

This time the search for a pastor was a short one. On July 11, 1858, the same year as Pastor Hoyer's departure, the Rev. William Sommer of Herford County, Maryland, was installed as the third pastor of St. John. We know little about the progress of the congregation during his years of ministry, but we do know that it lasted only about three years. Like his predecessor, Pastor Sommer was forced by poor health, an aggravated throat ailment, to end his ministry in Philadelphia and seek medical assistance in Germany. Unlike Pastor Hoyer however, he intended to return to St. John. During his absence, the congregation extended a call to a vicar to temporarily



Pastor H. Hoyer
1850 - 1858



Pastor William Sommer
1858 - 1861



Pastor Stephan Keyl
1861 - 1868

serve them. After two years in Germany, Pastor Sommer unfortunately realized that he would be unable to return to America and resigned his pastorate.

In 1861, then, while the Civil War raged on battlefields not greatly distant from Philadelphia, St. John Lutheran Church began its search for a vicar. The members were successful in locating candidate of theology Stephan Keyl, who had studied in Leipzig, Germany, and in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1863, when Pastor Sommer's resignation was received, the congregation installed candidate Keyl as its fourth pastor.

During the ministry of Pastor Keyl, the growth of membership continued. Past histories of St. John depict him as a strong conservative in theology. Minutes of congregational meetings from those years show some debate about Lutheran principles. The growth in membership was in spite of the resignation of some members who took offense at his doctrinal stands.

For seven years, Pastor Keyl worked strenuously with St. John's members, but in 1868 his health failed. In September of that year, the congregation found it necessary to accept his resignation. It is quite likely that these were frustrating times for faithful members. Three pastors in succession were forced to resign because of poor health. Pastor Keyl recovered from his illness without leaving America and later became a missionary in New York. Meanwhile, however, the people of St. John's congregation were left with the third vacancy in a time period of approximately ten years.

We know that God works in mysterious ways. This vacancy may have been viewed as a very negative time in 1868, but it was to usher in an unparalleled era in the history of St. John and a man who would become a legend. This is the story to be found in the next issue of Glimpses.



Missionary Stephan Keyl
Preaching at St. John's
50th Anniversary



St. John's Church 1874

St. John 150 Years!

