

# Glimpses

of  
St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Ivan Quandt

We have seen, in the first 4 issues of this yearlong series of glimpses into the history of St. John Lutheran Church, that the congregation has had good times and bad times. While God has blessed the church and its members throughout its history, the first 20 years were difficult ones. Four different pastors served during that brief time because none stayed very long. The next 36 years were generally regarded as good years under the leadership of the Reverend Olaf Schroeder. Membership in the congregation grew to such an extent that the church building constructed on Carpenter Street in Philadelphia in 1852 could no longer house the worship services. In 1872, a new and larger building was erected on Wharton Street. Pastor Schroeder served St. John for 36 years until he was laid to rest in 1905. In this issue, we will see the return of "bad times" - the rapid turnover of pastors as well as other serious difficulties.

Already during Pastor Schroeder's final years, as he was suffering from poor health, membership had begun to decline. Many families in Southwark and the surrounding areas of South Philadelphia moved to newer parts of Philadelphia and its suburbs. As

membership decreased, St. John Lutheran School closed shortly before the turn of the century. However, the problem of urban flight was to persist for a long time.

Finding a replacement for Pastor Schroeder was not an easy task. Several calls were extended to pastors throughout the synod, but all were declined and returned. It was 1906 before a call was finally accepted by Pastor A. H. Winter of Norwich, Connecticut. Upon his arrival, he learned just how difficult it is to succeed such a beloved figure as Pastor Schroeder.

A number of events marked Pastor Winter's term at St. John. Unfortunately, one of them was the continued exodus of members. The neighborhood in which the church was located was undergoing an ethnic change. Jewish settlers were gradually replacing the predominantly German population. For this and other reasons, some families moved too far away to maintain their membership. To add to the problem, some type of internal strife in the congregation drove away a number of its prominent members.

A second event, perhaps in response to the decreasing membership, was the initiation of worship



Pastor A. Winter

services in the English language. For many years that followed, services were held in German and in English. About the same time, St. John began the use of contribution envelopes, a device that is still in use.

A final event of Pastor Winter's term was establishment of a sister congregation. In 1908, a group of St. John members living in West Philadelphia was released to organize a congregation. A new church was established that served Lutherans in West Philadelphia until it moved in 1946. Since that year it has been known as Calvary Lutheran Church of Haverford.

An early St. John historian reports that the time that followed was one of struggling existence and anxiety. As members continued to leave, it was generally believed that the future for the congregation was hopeless, especially if it remained on Wharton Street. At the height of this stressful time, in 1910, Pastor Winter accepted a call to serve as an immigrant missionary for the Philadelphia area and left St. John.

We do not know with what difficulty the congregation found replacement pastor. The histories only show that the Rev. Theodor Gesswein of Missouri was installed on Sunday, October 22, 1911. We also know little of his work at St. John. After a little more than 2 years, Pas-

tor Gesswein resigned from his position at St. John for health and other reasons.

He was succeeded in January of 1914 by Pastor Otto Ungemach of New York City. At first, it seemed that the arrival of Pastor Ungemach was the beginning of new life at St. John. For over 40 years, the congregation had paid "ground rent" for the land on which the church building stood. Now, the congregation raised the \$6,000 necessary to buy the land outright. But the on-going decline in membership continued to plague St. John. Many of those who remained believed drastic steps were necessary.



Pastor T. Gesswein



Pastor O. Ungemach



Altar Cross of Old St. Johns  
(Now on the Baptismal Altar)

## St. John 150 Years!