

Glimpses

of
St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Ivan Quandt

This is the sixth in a series of glimpses at the road traveled by St. John Lutheran Church during its first 150 years. The earlier issues in this series have revealed some of the bumps and blessings on that road. In the most recent issue, we saw that the years after the death of Pastor Olaf Schroeder were especially difficult. Pastor Winter arrived in 1906, followed by Pastor Gesswein in 1911 followed by Pastor Ungemach in 1914. While there were a number of problems during these years, including the rapid turnover of pastors, the greatest one was "declining membership," as more and more families moved out of the neighborhood.



Pastor O. Ungemach

Finally, the problem of decreasing membership became so bad that a decision was made to sell the church building on Wharton Street, move to West Philadelphia, and continue the work of the congregation as an all-English mission. The several historians who chronicled these years of St. John have evidently felt some embarrassment about this attempt - the date of the move and the exact location of the mission have not been mentioned. It is likely that the move occurred around 1917.

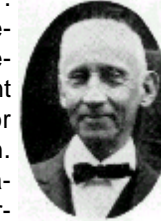
The attempt to sell the building was not successful. The United States had recently entered into the three-year old war in Europe, World War I, and property sales fell apart. At the same time, within months of the move to West Philadelphia, members of St. John came to see the move as a grave mistake. Fortunately, they were able to return to their familiar church home.

The experience with the attempt to move seems to have sparked a new resolve among the people of St. John to remain on Wharton Street and to keep the congregation alive. During the war years, some families gave up sons to the military and the congregation shared

Pastor Ungemach with the war effort by granting him permission to become a chaplain at Fort Dix. Pastor Ungemach stayed at St. John through the war, but in the spring of 1921 submitted his resignation. He preached his farewell sermon on Easter of that year.

The outlook of St. John Church at this point was still not very optimistic. There was doubt in many minds about the value of the effort to call a replacement pastor, in spite of the recent resolve to stay on Wharton Street. Some mem-

bers felt it was time to close the church. The doubt was reinforced when the first several calls to potential replacement pastors were declined. St. John historians give much credit for the survival of the church at this time to Pastor F. Weidmann, Sr. He was a retired pastor who had been recruited to serve as assistant during the time Pastor Ungemach was a chaplain. He stayed on through the vacancy and offered the encouragement and assistance to the membership that it took for St. John to continue the effort to call a new pastor.



Pastor F.C. Weidmann

In May of 1921, a divine call was issued to the Rev. Walter G. Schwehn. He accepted the call and was installed as pastor of St. John Lutheran Church on July 24, 1921. This was the beginning of a new era in the history of the church. Under the leadership of Pastor Schwehn, and that of his successor, a large number of pro-



Pastor Walter G. Schwehn

grams were initiated and specialized groups were organized that ended much of the worry among its members, and best of all, reversed the declining membership.

The new, positive direction of the congregation began already that fall, only months after Pastor Schwehn's arrival, with a renewed determination to maintain the church building on Wharton Street and to extensively renovate it. By the time the congregation celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1923, the house of worship had been "placed in first class condition," according to the history written for that occasion.

In the next issue of these Glimpses, we will see how this pastor and the next succeeded in turning the congregation around. The road through the second seventy-five years has had as many bumps and blessings as the first seventy-five.

Early Choir and Music

The first choir of our congregation was organized in December 1859.

During the first few years the various teachers of the congregation served as organists and choir leaders, but in the year 1865, Mr. Theodor F. Miller, a member of the congregation, assumed these duties. Mr. Miller served in this capacity without any compensation for a period of fifty years, playing at all chief services. Mr. Miller, in collaboration with William Noelsch also published for many years the "Euphonia Collection of Select Anthems."

In 1893 Carl G. C. Dieter, Sr. became assistant organist and choirmaster, assuming the role of "regular" organist and choir director in 1913. He continued to serve at least through 1938. It was also common during this period to have instrumental accompaniment. Mr. Fred C. Braun, at one time a member of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, Mr. Carl Dieter, Jr., and Mr. Edward Mill frequently accompanied the congregational singing with their violins.



The Choir of 1923