

# Glimpses

of  
St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Ivan Quandt

During the one hundred fiftieth-anniversary year of St. John Lutheran Church, these "Glimpses" monthly issues are reviewing the history of the congregation. The first 6 issues reviewed the first 75 years. In the last issue, we saw how St. John's ninth pastor, the Rev. Walter G. Schwehn accepted the congregation's call and was installed on July 24, 1921. Under his leadership, an era began that turned around the progressive problem of declining membership and added new zest to the life of the congregation. The church building, which had actually been abandoned briefly, was repaired and renovated in time for the seventy fifth anniversary in 1923.



Pastor Walter G. Schwehn

During Pastor Schwehn's years in Philadelphia, a number of important changes were initiated. Some of them were directly aimed at reversing the declining membership. The immediate neighborhood was surveyed and canvassed. A bus was purchased to bring distant children, and sometimes their parents, to St. Johns. Some of the changes improved the way the congregation operated. The workspace was expanded with the purchase of the house next door and its conversion to a "parish house". A "Parish Worker" was engaged and part time assistants were hired to aid the pastor.

Two of the changes were even more important than the others.

The first was the establishment of the Church Advancement Committee. This organization had several responsibilities, but among them was the investigation into the possibility of establishing new congregations in the greater Philadelphia area. The change that had the greatest long-term effect, however, came about because a new district was organized within the Missouri Synod. It was under Pastor Schwehn that the St. John congregation transferred its membership into the English District.

There followed, according to the history written for the one hundredth anniversary, "a period of almost unequalled missionary aggressiveness in the parish." But this period was not very old when Pastor Schwehn left in 1927. None of the histories report the circumstances surrounding this pastor's departure nor do they report with what difficulty the next pastor was located.

We do know that also in 1927, the Rev. Edgar Behrens (age 27) accepted the call from St. John and was installed as its tenth pastor. He came to Philadelphia from the wilderness of Saskatchewan, Canada, where he had served 4 parishes simultaneously, his first assignment upon graduating from the seminary in St. Louis. He was to serve the second longest term in the history of the congregation, a total of

20 years.

Pastor Behrens' talents and ambitions blended well with the programs already under way. The Church Advancement Committee moved its mission from *investigating* the establishment of new congregations to that of planning for them. One of the reasons this planning came about may have been Pastor Behrens' active role in the Philadelphia circuit of the English District.

An article about Pastor Behrens appearing in the Lutheran Witness sometime in the 1940's, gives a long list of district and synodical services that he provided. Among them were chairman of the Eastern conference, member of Ministerial Education committee, secretary of the Amalgamation committee, and dean of Eastern Dis-



Pastor Edgar Behrens

trict's Walther League camp. However, the district role that gave him detailed views of the need for additional Lutheran congregations in the Philadelphia area was that of Philadelphia circuit "Visitor". Through his many contacts with other congregations, he learned of Lutherans who had no church home.

Through careful planning with the Mission Board of the English District and its own church advancement committee, St. John's congregation was able to sponsor the establishment of five new congregations, some of them during the "Great Depression" years. But this is the story for the next issue of Glimpses. We will see how St. John became the true "Mother Church" for the Philadelphia area.



St John's Sunday School Bus 1926

### Early Sunday School & Christian Education

Christian education was always a priority at St. Johns. Even before they had a worship place of their own, our founders established a Christian Day School. Enrollment reached 104 students with two teachers by 1870. Students of the time were also expected to attend "Christenlehre" every Sunday afternoon. Eventually due to migration away from the neighborhood, the day school closed around 1900. A Sunday School was started and conducted along side "Christenlehre" until after a few years only the German-English Sunday School was offered. By 1923 the Sunday School was altogether English speaking. The distance that members were now living away from the church resulted in small Sunday School attendance. As a remedy the Sunday School rented a hall on Broad Street. However after a two year trial it was found that it tended to keep the children "out of touch" with their Church. Two outreach programs then proved to be successful under the guidance of Pastor Schwehn. First, a house to house canvass was conducted throughout the immediate neighborhood for unchurched children. Secondly, a Mertz White-Way bus was purchased and bus service was instituted to bring the scattered Sunday School children to and from church. There remain today faithful Christians who remember attending St. John via the old bus!

St. John 150 Years!