

FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF LORAIN
HOUSE OF PRAYER - HOUSE OF SERVICE
THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS: 1903-2003

First Lutheran Church was born of a flood. In 1889, when Johnstown, Pennsylvania was inundated and the steel mills destroyed, Lorain, Ohio was selected as the site for rebuilding: easy access to water transportation, iron, and coal. Among the transplanted steel-worker families were several loyal, devout Lutherans, determined to establish a Lutheran church in their new home. Organized in 1889 as a mission of the Joint Synod of Ohio, the charter members were five, four women and one man. They met in a small frame school building at the corner of Woodlawn and Dexter Streets, later Reid Avenue and 21st Street. There, they conducted services in both English and German.

The tiny congregation immediately faced disappointment and discouragement. Within three years, five pastors came -- and left; members drifted away. A Missionary Society was organized in 1900 to keep the faithful few together. Then in 1903, a summer supply pastor from Wittenberg University (C. C. Laughbaum) reorganized the mission, and on September 21, the congregation met in the KOTM Hall on Broadway and adopted the Constitution and By-Laws of the General Synod, thereby becoming the First English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lorain. The name announced their decision to be an English language, English service church. That same month, the Ladies' Aid Society was organized to help the sick and needy and to assist in financial matters. In October, the Reverend N. J. Hadley accepted the pastorate and served for nine years. For three and a half of them, services were held in the GAR and RA Halls on Broadway. By 1907, the new church was able to purchase the present site (Washington Avenue and Sixth Street) for \$7,000. In addition it soon acquired a one room school house (\$500), moved it to the new site, and re-configured it for worship by building a platform across one end and erecting an imitation archway and columns, a congregational do-it-yourself project. Soon, the chapel, as it came to be known, had an organ, purchased by funds raised in large part by the Missionary Society. This instrument served the church, first in the sanctuary and later in the Sunday School Department, until it was demolished by the 1924 tornado.

Builders' Society (organized in 1914), worked diligently to raise funds. Although the church was able to complete a parsonage in 1918, the church's coffers were bare. Several members mortgaged their homes to raise needed cash; and in the early '20's, Pastor William Rilling painted water colors and made taffy to sell for the benefit of the church.

Hard times or not, the church was growing; the chapel could no longer accommodate the congregation. It was time to build on the Washington Street site. In 1924, architect George C. Baum of Philadelphia was chosen to design the church and a local firm, Graupner and Ule, to build it. Ground was broken and construction began. Then on Saturday, June 28th, the tornado which leveled much of downtown Lorain seriously damaged the new building. Less crippled than many neighboring churches, First Lutheran immediately opened its kitchen as an emergency soup kitchen, offering food and comfort to tornado victims. Loans and gifts from generous friends and neighbors as well as the Synod enabled the church to make repairs and continue building. Finally on November 30, First Lutheran of Lorain was dedicated as a house of prayer and service. Also dedicated was a new Moeller organ, much needed in a church sharing in the rich musical heritage of the Lutheran church. On September 23rd, 1928, four years after the tornado and one before the beginning of the Great Depression, the church celebrated its first quarter century with a service of thanksgiving and rededication.

Soon, however, the national crisis deepened. As the church struggled to fulfill its mission, members and friends of the congregation met at the church seeking comfort and help in solving their problems. To assist members with transportation, the church purchased a car battery and loaned it to whoever could drive the most people to church on a particular day. During these years, two programs for young persons were started: a senior Luther League and a Junior League for children under twelve. Called the "Light Brigade," it focused on studying the Bible and practicing Christian precepts.

As the Depression lifted during the '30's, the congregation sought to renew itself, and guided by Pastor Herbert Veler, an extensive study of the congregation was completed; a new church constitution developed; membership grew to over 550; a men's organization was founded; redecoration and landscaping projects were completed; a Christmas Eve candlelight service was initiated and several new service programs were begun, at least one of which reached well beyond Lorain County.

For several years during a Harvest Home Festival, the congregation filled barrels with apples, potatoes, root vegetables and canned goods, most prepared by the women of the congregation, and delivered them to the Osterlen Home (then an

orphanage) in Springfield, Ohio. On at least one occasion, gifts displayed in the chancel were so bountiful that they impeded the progress of Sunday services.

With the outbreak of World War II, new activities and programs sprang up. Church women knitted and sewed for the Red Cross; groups gathered in the church office to pack and mail boxes to servicemen -- and to send them letters from home. At home, new Sunday School classes were organized for high school young people; the flower fund was started; a young married couples club was formed and on Thanksgiving Eve in 1944, the church mortgage was burned -- almost exactly twenty years to the day after the dedication of the church.

The new decade was one of growth. A program of home visitation was initiated; Luther League was rekindled. Two new organizations, the Men's League and the Mary-Martha Missionary Society were formed (1948). As part of the evangelism program, on the first Sunday of each month, the morning services were broadcast to the community [(1940 - ?)]. 1949 also saw the renovation and rededication of the social and educational rooms.

Under the leadership of Pastor Harry Snyder, the 1950's were especially productive at First Lutheran Church, in terms of both membership and projects undertaken. Membership reached its pinnacle: 1173 baptized members: 744 confirmed and 600 communing. In 1952, the Order of St. John Acolytes was established; a program of internships for Hamma Divinity School was instituted; and the memorial lights and chimes were installed. In the following year, 1953, Boy Scout Troop #311 was organized. Open to both Lutherans and boys from other churches, it was a highly successful venture. Among the service projects were collecting "death trap" refrigerators and planting evergreens at Roe Lake Park. Also during 1953, the church celebrated its 50th anniversary; a second service (8 am) was begun; and property next to the church was purchased for a parish house -- adding much needed space for Sunday School classes and youth activities.

Although the completion of the parish house in early 1954 provided some needed space for programs and activities, it was inadequate for the growing congregation. The church needed to decide whether to move or to expand the present facility.

In 1959, a member of the congregation offered a five-acre lot on Oberlin Avenue and West 39th Street, but the congregation decided to remain at the Washington Street location and to continue its downtown ministry and acquired the remaining two buildings adjacent to the property which were razed to provide space for expansion. Using the slogan "The Future is Bright," (1960), First Lutheran set out

to strengthen its program and to expand its plant to meet the growing needs of the congregation and community, especially those of its music program and church school. The first phase was to finance building a new Christian Education Building. Ground was broken in 1961, and two years later, on March 3, 1963, the new \$180,000 Christian Education Building was dedicated. Finally, the church had the facilities it needed to carry its mission throughout the Lorain community.

In 1961, David Boe accepted the position of organist and choir director, assuming responsibility for four choirs of over ninety members, for providing music for all services, and for carrying on the rich musical tradition at First Lutheran, one including recitals, cantatas by combined church choirs, and appearances by visiting musicians. Within a short time, it was apparent that the organ, in continuous use since 1924, could no longer be repaired and had to be replaced. Convinced by Pastor Robert Boettger (currently Pastor Emeritus) that a new organ could be financed and built, the congregation set about making plans. So, in the spring of 1967, a contract calling for an encased mechanical-action organ of 28 stops was signed with organ builder John Brombaugh. Underwritten in large part by Mrs. Thelma Schumann in memory of her parents, the Charles A. And Laura V. Melin Memorial Organ was dedicated on June 21, 1970.

David Boe, organist at First Lutheran Church and Professor of Organ at the Oberlin College Conservatory, was deeply involved in the planning, building, and installing of the new organ. He has written: "At the time of its design and installation, this instrument represented a significant departure from the mechanical action organs, most of them from European makers, which were being built and imported in the late sixties and seventies. As the design was being developed, John Brombaugh became increasingly eager to capture the beauty of sound that he had experienced in historic instruments. As his respect for the old masters grew, so did his resolve to understand the intricacies of their techniques. He gave considerable thought to the acoustical qualities of the casework, using solid wood for the case because of the non-resonant qualities of plywood. The old builders had hammered their pipe metal, and eager to learn what hammering would do for sound, Brombaugh gave detailed instructions for hammering the Great Octave 2'.

4

Aware that much the sound of early organs lay in the resilient quality of their winds systems, Brombaugh (simultaneously with Fisk) developed the first modern wind system, using large wedge bellows and no steadying devices.

"Of course, using historic techniques would mean little if the musical result were not significant. The instrument has a beautiful and compelling voice, well-suited to the organ literature, liturgy, and hymns and chorales of the Lutheran tradition. It

inspires and leads the congregation in song and complements beautifully the singing of the choirs. The organ is also a work of visual beauty. The carving of the keyboard nosings and the gold-leafing throughout were the work of Herman Gruenke who designed and executed the pipe shades which are symbolic of the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost with the Tongues of Fire and the Dove of Peace.

“The builders’ plaque on the rear of the main casework states: In a world filled with man-made strife, hatred and ugliness, all of us connected with the making of this instrument hope that it will edify those who see and hear it and point their hearts and minds once again back to the Source of our salvation, and all Goodness and Beauty. And in any event, All Glory be to God Alone!”

For many years after its installation, scholars and organists from all parts of the world visited First Lutheran Church to hear and examine the organ.

Soon the new organ would be heard in a new sanctuary: phase two of the 1960 “The Future is Bright “ plan was activated in 1973 and the project of remodeling the sanctuary revived. In 1975 the actual renovation began, a somewhat more modest enlargement and reconfiguration than originally planned. A free-standing altar was installed; the rear balcony was removed so that, in accordance with newer practice, the organ could be moved to the back of the church; the pews were reset in the now-familiar angle formation. For many months, Sunday services were held in the United Methodist Church, ushers transporting bulletins and hymnals back and forth each Sunday. The first service in the new sanctuary was held on Easter Sunday in 1976 and the festival service of dedication on October 10.

The renewal program encompassed much more than bricks and mortar, and throughout the ‘60’s and ‘70’s the congregation sought to fulfill other goals: to pay off back benevolence -- “a spiritual and moral must;” to re-energize the congregation through increased committee activities and audit evaluations and to develop a community project.

5

In 1964 when Black churches were burned in Mississippi, the congregation donated the money set aside for Christmas decorations to help rebuild a church. Troubled by the large number of children hampered in school by weak reading skills, the church established an after-school tutoring program. The program was successful; in 1978 forty seven children were being helped by forty-five volunteers.

As part of a “Decisions II” program adopted in March, 1971, the congregation raised additional funds for benevolence and reserved fifty cents of every dollar raised for a new community service project and, after determining a pressing need

in the community, began a Meals on Wheels program in February, 1973. During the first year of operation, it delivered two meals daily to 12 to 19 clients at any given time. Now in its thirtieth year of operation, it serves around sixty clients each day. A paid staff of two prepare the meals and manage the program; volunteers make all deliveries to the homes.

On January 31, 1973, representatives from four Lorain Lutheran churches -- Lord of Life; Our Savior; Good Shepherd; and First -- met together to discuss forming a "joint parish" which would afford opportunities of getting to know each other and of sharing experiences and goals. From this and subsequent meetings came the Lorain Cooperative Lutheran Ministry (LCLM). During the following three years, this ministry established a blood bank, assuring a ready supply for members of the four congregations; created "Food for Folks," a program of collecting and distributing food to the needy during the holidays and later, in cooperation with CYO (Catholic Youth Organization), throughout the year; shared Bible study; combined catechism classes and held joint Lenten services. In addition, it sponsored a basketball team and organized several youth programs for social service and recreation. In 1975, a senior taxi service was developed as a cooperative effort among the member Lutheran churches. Twice a week, fifteen churchmen drove restricted persons or any person sixty years or older to medical appointments and to shopping. The Cooperative Ministry also hosted the Reverend Nanhiro Kiyoshige, a Japanese minister seeking experience and involvement in American Lutheranism. When the LCLM Council disbanded in 1978, the name, Lorain Cooperative Lutheran Ministry, was retained; pastors continued to meet together, and the blood bank was continued, but was supported separately by the member congregations.

At First Lutheran, the congregation undertook an evangelism program to spread the gospel throughout the city, in 1973 joining with other churches and denominations to distribute Bibles throughout the area via the Key '73 program. It also assisted in forming a new AARP chapter which continued to meet at First Lutheran for many years.

6

In 1979, the church began supporting a missionary in Argentina and sponsored a Laotian refugee family, helping to resettle Ounsavay Souramasing, his wife Phaysy, and infant daughter, Ounvilayvanh, whom the congregation affectionately called Lilly, all recently arrived from Laos. The congregation rented a house for them on West 6th Street and found employment for Ounsavay at the Stephans Painten Corporation of Lorain. Many members of the congregation donated funds for the project, helped furnish the apartment, and provided transportation for the family. In the spring of 1980, the family moved to Brighton, Minnesota to be close to relatives who had settled there. In 1967, when the Headstart Program began in Lorain County, First Lutheran Church provided space for several classes. Later (1981), it again opened its doors when the expanding program needed classroom

space.

The final decades of the twentieth century were busy ones. In 1980, the Senior Pastor, Charles Springer, resigned to take a call in Dayton, Ohio. During the search process, the call committee and the church council decided to interview candidates who would be interested in forming a co-pastorate with Pastor Madsen, then Associate Pastor. But Synodical officials were not convinced that a co-pastorate would work, and without the call committee's knowledge, continued to approach candidates about filling a senior pastor position. Pastor Linwood H. Chamberlain, Jr. who was serving a congregation in Mansfield, Ohio was one of the candidates. At his interview and in private conversation with Pastor Madsen, it became clear to both pastors they had the same ideas about team ministry and that the Holy Spirit was leading them in that direction. Pastor Chamberlain received the call and began work in July, 1981. Currently in its twenty-second year, the co-pastorate, the first in Ohio, early on became known in the Synod as an example of how team ministry can work.

In 1981, the congregation began a new outreach program, organizing and hosting a city-wide summer Day Camp for children. Seventy to ninety percent of the participants in the Vacation Bible School program which the congregation has supported for several years had been children from First Lutheran. The Day Camp program was specifically created to reach out into the community with the goal of reversing these proportions. The goal was achieved, and for twelve years 80 - 90% of the children, 1st through 6th graders, were enrolled from the community. All day for two weeks the campers met together. Meals were provided; crafts were taught; lessons were learned. Unique to this Day Camp were the bus trips and field activities in the Lorain and Cleveland areas. Trips to the zoo, metro-parks and museums complemented lessons about Noah, history, and creation. A trip to a submarine docked on Lake Erie led to discussion about working together. Movies at the Palace provided much to talk about. One summer, transporting the hundred campers required two busses!

7

A side benefit, quite unplanned, was the interest several youth took in other church activities; they joined the youth group, became leaders and then adult members of the congregation. Neighborhood youth began to know the building as their church, instead of that church on the corner attended by strangers, and started to look after its well-being. Teens, once suspicious of people they didn't know, began to call out a welcome "Hi, how are you doing" to members coming and going in the church parking lot.

In 1982, LEAF (Love Emergency Aid Fund), a street ministry administered by the pastors, was started. In 1983, the Ellen Farley fund was created from funds willed to the church by the long-time active member. The congregation concluded that

the best use of this large sum was to provide for future ministries, not just the present. And so it was invested with the understanding that the interest would be used annually for as long as the congregation existed. To ensure that each member felt a part of this process, it was decided that all members attending the annual meeting would have a vote in determining the use of interest accumulated during the year. To be sure that the interest would not be used only for First Lutheran Church, it was divided among three categories: for a benevolent project not under the auspices of First Lutheran; for a benevolent project administered by the church; and any project that benefitted the congregation. This process continued for fifteen years until a more structured one was established.

The Lorain County Lutheran/Presbyterian Cooperative was started in 1984 to address the needs of the many unemployed in Lorain, people who had recently lost jobs because of lay-offs in the Lorain steel and shipbuilding industries. Large quantities of government surplus food were available, but local agencies lacked the resources to make the best use of them. Bishop Kenneth Saur called together the Lutheran congregations who made a commitment to begin mass distribution from each church. Before long they were joined by the an Episcopal congregation, Presbyterian congregations and then by the Disciples of Christ and one Roman Catholic congregation. Since then, food has been distributed from four churches and five-high rises once each month for nineteen years.

In 1986, the Cooperative Ministry determined that, next to food, the greatest need in the county was medical care for the uninsured.

8

Doctors and clergy from Lutheran congregations in Lorain County organized the Lorain County Free Clinic to meet this need, providing free, comprehensive medical care from three locations: Christ Lutheran in Lorain (the central location) and two satellites: Allen Memorial Medical Center in Oberlin and the City Health Department in Elyria. Regular clinics are offered in certain medical areas such as obstetrics/gynecology and diabetes; free medications are provided; dental care is available through an arrangement with Lorain County Community College; and when necessary, patients are referred to specialists. In its seventeen years, the Free Clinic has provided excellent medical care for thousands whose needs would otherwise not be met.

After the merger of synods into the Evangelical church of America, the concept of offering weekly communion became a focus of Synod discussion, and, led by

Luther's comments about regular communion, First Lutheran Church initiated a year-long study of the congregation's need of frequent communion. It determined that monthly communion did not meet the needs of those not present at services during which the sacrament was offered and of those feeling a special need for the sacrament on a particular Sunday. Therefore, in 1987, the congregational council voted to begin offering communion weekly at all Sunday services. At first, not all parishioners partook of the sacrament each week. Today, however, a comment frequently heard is: "I was at a church on vacation and they didn't have communion. I felt like something was missing. Like I had gone to only part of a Sunday worship service."

Also in the late eighties, the church made a concerted effort to reach more youth in the congregation, and every August for ten years held a free Christian Rock Concert in the church parking lot. Bands were secured from all parts of the country to invite youth to examine the role of Christ in their lives. Only twice did the police respond to calls about the loud noise! By the beginning of the 90's, a county-wide volleyball tournament was added to the concert. Teams from Lutheran and many other churches, some as far away as East Cleveland, competed on the parking lot courts and laughed together while enjoying free hot dogs and ice cream. Friendships were formed and everyone realized that faith was larger than any one congregation.

In 1990, the congregation began a three-stage program called "First in the '90's." A new heating system that included air-conditioning was purchased for the sanctuary, and an elevette was added to make the entire building accessible to the physically challenged.

9

The sanctuary was renovated: cracks in walls and ceiling, a returning legacy of the 1924 tornado, were repaired; stained glass was reinforced; and new paint refreshed the room. Outside, the roof was replaced; the cross at the corner of Washington Avenue and Sixth Street was erected, [**Pastor Jimmy thinks this may have been earlier**] and the landscaping renewed. Later, the parking lot was nearly doubled by purchasing and demolishing the one building remaining on the square block in which the church is located.

During the late 1980's and early 90's, in response to the large increase in the number of youth participating in the church's youth activities and an interest in making these activities a higher priority, the congregation created the position of Youth Director to help with strategic planning, to oversee the expanding programs for young people, and to relieve parents threatened with "burn-out" from supervising the four established youth programs. In [**date**] the congregation hired Pastor Laurie Miller as part-time Family Life/ Youth Director to guide parents in

creating activities for young people and also to develop programs to enrich family structure. Immediately additional trips and new service programs were developed.

Kids of the Kingdom were divided into three age groups better to accommodate their large numbers and varied interests. A youth orchestra was established. Joint projects and overnight retreats were started with Camp Mowana. Older youth traveled to work in service projects in Chicago, Washington, D. C., and Philadelphia. The annual Youth Worship Service became a high point in dull, winter Januaries.

In 1993, the congregation began its connection with pastor Bennett Wilson of Ghana. Through his position on the Board of the Global Health Ministries, Dr. Dennis Radefeld learned about the plight of Pastor Wilson who had served as a Lutheran teacher in Liberia until civil war forced him to leave the country. He and his wife barely escaped with their lives by walking all the way to Ghana. This arduous trip exacerbated the pastor's congenital hip problem and left him unable to work. Because of the networks of physicians created by the Free Clinic in Lorain, Dr. Radefeld was confident that arrangements could be made for free surgery for him.

A congregation in Iowa paid transportation costs from Ghana to Lorain, and First Lutheran paid the expenses of his five month stay for surgery and recuperation in Lorain which began in November of 1993. When he returned to Africa in 1994, the congregation established a working arrangement with Pastor Wilson to serve as its missionary in Ghana.

10

He began work in the village of Akrampa, accomplishing a number of projects including building a community oven to generate income for the village; running a fresh water line into the village and creating a communal latrine to improve sanitary conditions; and building a school. All of these projects were carried out in the context of Bible study and prayer. There have been numerous baptisms in the village, and the elders are no longer tending the village idol that sits at the entrance to Akrampa. The work now continues with the adding of new classrooms to the school.

At the beginning of the new century, the church further developed the endowment fund originally begun with the Ellen Farley bequest. All monies received were invested through an outside investment consultant. Five per cent of the interest generated is used each year for a variety of ministries; the rest is returned to the fund as principal to hedge against inflation. Church committees and individuals through the committees suggest projects, and the Endowment Board grants funds as available. To date, the fund has supported youth groups attending national

assemblies; sent missionaries on medical mission trips; paid for refurbishing rooms in the church and financed replacing roofs; and underwritten projects for the 100th Anniversary Celebration. The Endowment Fund promises to provide mission and ministry, above and beyond the budget, for as long as First Lutheran Church lives.

When David Boe retired in 2002, Nicole Keller was hired as half-time Director of Music **[New duties, etc. What new programs? Any outreach?]** During the summer of 2002, the church added a fourth service, at 10 am, to the Sunday schedule, a gathering at the Chapel in the Woods for a simple communion service. Other congregation-centered programs include free monthly blood pressure checks and regular health fairs.

During its first hundred years, the congregation has given birth to two new congregations. In **[194X]**, members who lived on the east side of Lorain were encouraged to form a mission that became Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. That congregation had a long and productive ministry with remarkable growth in the 1950's. However, by the late 1990's the membership had dwindled, and congregational leaders approached First Lutheran about a merger which became official on Pentecost Sunday, June 3, 2001. The property of Wilson Street is used by First Lutheran for special occasions and especially for summer worship services at the "Chapel in the Woods" that was created on the property in 2001. The church building is also currently used by a Free Methodist Spanish mission and by an emergency food pantry. In 1959, members of First Lutheran Church who lived in the Vermilion area formed a mission which became Trinity Lutheran Church, a strong and growing congregation to this day.

11

First Lutheran Church has also had a long history of being open to community activities and to creating community outreach programs. At the beginning of the new millennium, the congregation began an outreach program to Lorain Middle School directly across the street from the parking lot. In September, 2002, the church hosted the first annual "School Daze" to welcome students back from the summer recess. Banners strung across the parking lot facing the school invited them to a free fair. Fliers were given to parents waiting in the church lot to pick up their students. When the school day ended, about 200 students crossed the street for hot dogs, cotton candy, pop, potato chips and pop corn. Bibles were distributed along with pens engraved with the church web address; pencils embossed with the church name; and keychains inscribed with the church phone number. There was a free drawing for CD players, Christian CD's and fast food coupons -- activities to obtain the students' addresses so they could be mailed invitations to future youth activities. School Daze also presented a mini-health fair which distributed information about teenage pregnancy and fetal alcohol syndrome; presented talks by a tattoo artist about the dangers of tattoos and body piercing; provided eye, hearing, and dental exams; and offered additional information for follow-up. Each

year as the students arrive across the street to start a new school year, First Lutheran Church wants them to know that they are welcome as neighbors and invited to be participants in our fellowship.

As it enters its 100th anniversary year, First Lutheran Church is embarking on a new form of church relations. Small groups are being formed to meet in members' homes -- to be supportive of each other and to engage in short-term Bible study. Prior to the 2002 Christmas season, the groups devoted weeks of studying how to make the holiday a Christ-centered Holy Day and how to reduce the stress of the materialism the secular world imposes, especially at Christmas. As more members of the congregation join them, these small groups hope to offer opportunities for spiritual growth and for making lasting friendships in faith.

In the 1980's, a Strategic Planning group began formulating a new statement of mission for the congregation. In the 90's, this statement has been repeated by the congregation each month during worship services as an offering to God. It has become a lynch pin encompassing and directing all events. In the new century, the mission statement will guide First Lutheran Church in setting priorities and developing its missions.

History compiled and written by Elizabeth Brinkman, Writer & Historian

Revised April 15, 2003