

THE FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH OF PALMYRA AND RIVERTON 1921

BETHANY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH 1938

Bethany Lutheran Church stands at the corner of Broad Street and Morgan Avenue in Palmyra. It is a brick building with white frame trim, plain in architectural design, topped by a simple wooden cross. The grounds are well-kept, but not especially spacious. At first glance, one could almost get the feeling that it had not always been used as a house of worship, and indeed this is exactly the truth of the matter. In order to put everything in its proper order, we have to take the time to tell the story of how this congregation was organized and follow it along as it grew.

Going back to the year 1912, existing papers indicate that the field of Palmyra and Riverton had been given a fairly casual evaluation as a possible area that might be in need of a Lutheran Church, but after consultation, it was decided that the time was not at hand. Still, there were a few families in the community who were faithful to the denomination of their heritage and who would not be absorbed into other congregations.

Sometime around 1920, a few of these people began to speak together about the need to establish a Lutheran Church in the vicinity. Come springtime of 1921, they sought out the Reverend Silas D. Dougherty, D.D., Superintendent of Home Missions of the East Pennsylvania Synod. They presented their case, and Reverend Dougherty agreed that the need and the opportunity was now present and should be attended to. He took charge of the canvassing personally, aided by the Reverend M. Eiler and other faithful Lutherans in Palmyra and Riverton. After carefully weighing and reviewing all the facts, the decision was to go forward with the organization of a Lutheran Church.

The first meetings were held in the home of Dr. H. W. Bauer, and it was in these meetings that the plans for organization were laid. The first problem, a place in which to hold worship services, was quickly resolved with procurement of the Society Hall at the corner of Cinnaminson Avenue and Broad Street. Services were held there regularly every week, and it was in this building that the formal organization of the church took place on October 21, 1921. Approximately ninety people were received as charter members. Following the organization the church was served by supply Pastors until Easter Sunday, 1922, when Reverend Harry L. Saul, a senior at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, was elected to become the pastor of the fledgling church. Reverend Saul accepted the call and took over the pastorate of the church on May 20th, 1922.

Very shortly after the beginning of Reverend Saul's ministry, his wife became very seriously ill, and after lingering for a year, passed away on July 14th, 1923. The congregation mourned with their pastor over the loss of Mrs. Saul, whom they had come to know and to love during her all too brief a time with them.

The members of the young church had been thinking about the need to build a church. A lot on the corner of Garfield Avenue and Broad Street, owned by Mr. George Wimer, was for sale. It measured one hundred by two hundred feet and was appraised at \$5,500. After due consideration, it was purchased during the month of March, 1923, and the following January the plans for the building itself were presented to the congregation. They were approved, and committees began the work of setting up the building program. Ground was broken for the church on April 27th, 1924, and a new era began for the Lutherans of Palmyra and Riverton.

The building committee, which consisted of Dr. H. W. Bauer, Paul Wolfschmidt, N. H. Schriver, John S. Warner, Morris Steedle, Charles F. Buckholz, and Dr. E. H. Grafton, had procured the services of Mr. Charles Mohrfeld, of the firm of Moses and Mohrfeld, as architect. George W. Shaner and Sons of Palmyra were given the construction contract.



"The First Lutheran Church building dedicated in 1924."

On June 8th, with impressive and appropriate ceremonies, the cornerstone of the church building was laid. Construction went forward without complication, and the building was put to use for the first time on November 6th. The actual dedication was held on November 23rd, 1924, with three services during that day and services every night for the following week with the exception of Saturday. Dignitaries of the church came from many different places to participate in the dedicatory activities.

A description of the building is found in the church records and reads as follows: "The edifice is constructed of Philadelphia Gray Stone, with a great tower for the entrance. On the main floor there is seating capacity for 450, and it is so constructed that the primary department can use the rest of the room. A large rostrum is at the front of the room with large meeting rooms on either side. It is ideal for Sunday School work. The entire floor is finished in dark oak as is also the furniture. There is a large balcony gracing the rear wall which seats 75, on which is a modern moving picture booth. The basement is large, having a fourteen foot ceiling and with the floor so arranged that basketball, handball or volleyball can be played. A fully equipped kitchen is at one end with a large rest room attached and a retiring room with a shower bath for the boys are provided."

The growth of the church continued apace, and the membership rolls displayed the expansion of the community. By Eastertime in 1925, nearly three hundred people were listed as church members.

The future of First Lutheran Church, at this time, appeared to be full of promise, bright with the potential for expansion, and excitingly oriented towards a successful adventure in development. The History of the Church, written for the Old Home Day celebration of September 26th, 1926, concludes with these words: "When the next History of the Church is written, it will demonstrate that the people of First Lutheran Church have been consistent with their past history and traditions in their ability and zeal to accomplish good works. The record of her past history has been praise-worthy; but real glory for the church still lies in the future."

No one could have doubted that the First Lutheran Church was headed for bigger and better things. The prophecy that her people would continue with the same zeal and fervor was a perfectly safe statement to make. Work they did . . . keep faithful and full of zeal they did . . . seek to know and do the Lord's will . . . this, too, they did. But while they worked and prayed and gave, the nation came upon the hard times of the depression, and even as banks and brokerage houses floundered and went under the barrage of depression, coupled with inflation, so too did some churches fall to circumstances one could not have foreseen no matter how carefully the plans were laid out. One of these churches was First Lutheran of Palmyra. It could not survive, and finally, Cinnaminson Bank foreclosed on the monies owing. But a church is not a building. God's flame burns eternal.

We now must take a giant step in order to come to the beginnings of what today is Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church. The year is 1938; the place is once again Society Hall, Palmyra. A group of Lutheran faithful have come together with Dr. Calvin Swank

on the matter of their church life. There were thirty-one people in the room on May 22, 1938, and their business was that of forming a new church to take the place of the now legally dissolved First Lutheran Church.

On June 12th, the first devotional meeting was held, once more in Society Hall with Dr. Henry Nicholas directing. The following week on June 19th, still another meeting was held to complete some of the necessary legal work and the name for the new church was proposed and adopted. "Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church" had been born and the infant now had a proper name. The feeling was that there might be others who would like to be placed on the original charter, so the rolls were held open until October 1st, 1938. When the charter was declared closed, there were 146 members on the official rolls of the new church.

About this time, having tried valiantly and failed to repurchase the old church building, another problem had come up and the church members were coping with that also. The Cinnaminson Bank served notice on the members of the Council who had personally endorsed a \$2,900 note for the first church that they were calling the note for payment and holding the signers responsible. The church members responded . . . \$1,100 was borrowed from several of the congregation . . . the Mission Board made a loan of another thousand . . . contributions from various people made up some more, and still a little more came from the building fund. At any rate, and at some hardship, the entire note, with accrued interest, was paid up on the first of January, 1939. As the old year passed, the new year came in unencumbered by old debts and filled with enthusiasm for new work that lay ahead.

The biggest problem facing Bethany was the very practical one of getting a building that would suit their needs. Providence took a hand, perhaps, or maybe it was just one of those happy times when the place and the moment meet for the common good. At any rate, while the church was looking, the building that had formerly housed the Palmyra National Bank, one of the many financial institutions that had gone under during the depression, came on the market.



"The Palmyra National Bank before it closed in 1933."

In February, 1939, Dr. Swank got together with the Church Council and proposed to them that they request the Board of American Missions to bid for this property. The motion was passed and proceedings started right away so that in April, 1939, the congregation received the good news . . . the bank building had been purchased at a cost of \$3,200 and renovation proceedings would begin under the direction of Mr. Curtis Staveland as soon as the present occupants were able to vacate the premises. Actual construction started in August, 1939.

The first service in the new building was held on January 28th, 1940, with the main service in the morning and a dedication service in the afternoon. Reverend Powers, the officiating pastor, conducted the service. The dedication message was delivered by Dr. Swank, serving as the representative of the President of the Synod, Dr. Hampshire. Mr.

Torry Walker, acting as the agent of the Board of American Missions, also spoke. Printed on the first paper of the order of worship for the dedication service are these sentences under the title "An Open Door":

"To the weary soul seeking rest; to the lonely soul seeking friendship; to the sorrowing soul seeking comfort; to the storm-tossed soul seeking calm; to the afflicted soul seeking peace; to the sin-filled soul seeking forgiveness; and to the despairing soul seeking hope, Bethany Church opens wide its doors."

Reverend Harold Rowe began his ministry on May 1st. Under his leadership congregational growth continued, and the Auxiliaries expanded and increased the contributions they were able to make to the church. One of the most unusual and truly unique church projects taken up by any church was the outfitting of a chapel for a Battleship. Bethany Lutheran did this for the "U.S.S. New Jersey" and just before the end of World War II, received a citation in recognition of the faithful services performed on behalf of the service men and women at the Lutheran Service Center.

Bethany Lutheran sent forty-three young men and women from their homes to serve in the armed forces during World War II. The narthex was built and stands in memoriam to three who did not return . . . Raymond Binder, June 15, 1923 — December 14, 1944; Frank B. Weigand, September 3, 1924 — December 24, 1944; William N. Ulrich, April 15, 1924, missing in action February, 1945.

The organ was dedicated in October, 1940, and among the oldest and finest organizations of Bethany Church are the volunteer choirs. In 1940 the Intermediate Choir was organized, followed by the Junior and Senior Choirs and, later on, a choir composed completely of men was set up. Music has always been an important ingredient of worship and even as the choirs played a large part in the life of the church, so, too, in 1976 are they used and appreciated by those who hear them sing to the glory of God. The Men's Choir is disbanded, as is the Intermediate Choir. The Music Department of Bethany is now composed of three groups . . . the mixed voice Senior Choir, made up of adult men and women; the Youth Choir, made up of young people from twelve through eighteen; and the Junior Choir which uses the voices of the primary and elementary school children.

In the early days, again, one of the most active of the auxiliary groups was the Ladies Guild. It was instrumental in purchasing the organ, worked tirelessly in fund raising programs, tended to the special needs of the sick and shut-in, took part in the projects at the Lutheran Homes in Moorestown and in Germantown. Many of its members gave time to the Red Cross, and in 1955 the ladies gave \$500 to the building fund for the enlargement of the Parish House. In 1958 the Ladies Guild voted to disband and become a part of the United Lutheran Church Women. Later, two more of the women's service groups voted to disband and become part of the one large group known as the United Lutheran Church Women. These were the Womens Missionary Society and the Young Womens Missionary Society.

In 1976 the women of Bethany continue to play an important role in the growth of the church. They function as a part of Lutheran Church Women, which is considered a part of the Lutheran Church in America. There are 6 circles with a membership of about 100 women.

During 1971 to 1973, Mr. Jack Horton assumed the presidency of the Cinnaminson-Palmyra-Riverton Council of Churches. Under his leadership, the organization was revitalized, and expanded its efforts in two major areas — Ecumenical Concern and Social Action.

In the year 1976 Bethany Lutheran Church under the leadership of the Reverend Howard M. Norris is involved in a person-to-person mission that will mark the beginning of a new life for a family from another nation. The congregation is committed to sponsoring a family from war-torn Vietnam, and as soon as it is legally possible they will be bringing the family here to start fresh after having been the victim of war. Once before the church did this very thing. In 1951 the Kolarovic family was living in a displaced persons camp . . . the family — mother, father and two sons — was given the necessary aid to come to the United States and find a home, employment, and a chance to live in peace and dignity because the people at Bethany not only cared, but showed their concern. The paraments now in use in the church were a gift of gratitude from the Kolarovic family for the Christian love shown to them by the Bethany people.

Mrs. Clara Kerr is the current superintendent of the Sunday School. The staff consists of 28 people and the current enrollment is 216. Through the work of these teachers and staff people, and through the instruction given to those who come into the classrooms, Bethany is doing its part to raise up more and more good Christians to carry on a witness that others will wish to follow.

In 1975 a tragic accident brought grief and sorrow to the church. A bus left the church at 7:00 A.M. on a rainy Sunday morning carrying 38 people on what they had every reason to believe would be a wonderfully happy day. They were going to visit with Reverend and Mrs. Rodney Saylor . . . Reverend Saylor had been at Bethany as an intern, and now he was occupying his own pulpit in a West Hazelton Church in Pennsylvania. The day's plans included going to worship service, having lunch, and visiting and laughing together over the good times they had shared when Reverend and Mrs. Saylor were at Bethany.

At 8:20 A.M. the bus skidded on a rain-slicked curve on the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. When the nightmarish day was over, a shocked and sorrowing community counted 36 injured in all degrees of severity, and two gone to God. Bethany Lutheran Church grieved, and the people of the community joined them in their mourning over the deaths of Mildred Beitz and Olga Schneider, both long-time and highly-dedicated members of the church, and respected and beloved residents of the Tri-Boro area. Two of the injured were the granddaughters of the Kolarovic family whom Bethany Lutheran Church had helped come to this country from a displaced persons camp in Europe twenty-five years ago.

In this Bicentennial Year, as on the occasion of its dedication, Bethany Lutheran Church members stand determined to offer the best of themselves to all men through Jesus Christ and in His name.

