

The History of Bethesda Lutheran Church

Bayfield, Wisconsin

75th Anniversary

1893 – 1968

Information Compiled by Mrs. Fred Peterson

History of Bethesda Lutheran Church of Bayfield

Bayfield has been on the map for a long time, with only vague information of its early existence. Records show that the part of land which is now Bayfield was laid out and made into blocks, avenues, streets, and alleys in 1855.

There were some Scandinavian people among the early settlers here of whom Marcus Corneliussen, Peter Mikkelsen, and Carl Christiansen may have arrived before 1880. Other Norwegians who arrived in the early 80's are Tom Hadland and Gustav Svannes, 1887; Ole Hadland, 1888; and August Lohman, 1889. Descendants of several of the above mentioned families are with us today.

The Swedish people were the first Scandinavians to take steps towards organizing a church which was done in 1886, assisted by Rev. J. D. Nelsenius of Ashland, holding their first service in their newly built church on Sept. 28, 1890. During this time the Norwegians desired to organize for Christian work, and it was the Scandinavian Congregationalists who were the first to assemble Norwegians for this purpose. By March of 1892 lot 10 block 100 had been purchased through a loan of \$500 with which to build a church; the Rev. H. Pederson, a Dane, became the pastor. This organization was not long lived as Lutheranism was too deeply rooted in the hearts of the Norwegians, besides having the misfortune of losing their building through fire due to a defective stove pipe in a house on the adjoining lot.

During this period the Norwegian Lutherans had an inner desire for a church of their own. Pastor H. Yderstad of Ashland had held a few services here, so in the early fall of 1893 a written request was sent to pastor Yderstad to preach the Word of God and administer the Sacraments in accordance with Lutheran doctrine and rules of the church. Pastor Yderstad readily accepted, and services were held in the Swedish Lutheran Church, the use of which they so graciously offered to the Norwegians. So on Wednesday evening, December 6, 1893, after a service, a congregation was organized with the name "Bayfield Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church and a constitution was adopted.

After the Scandinavian Congregationalists lost their building through fire they disbanded and offered to turn over to the Norwegian Lutheran Church the church furnishings salvaged from the fire, together with the real estate and a sum of money left after all debts were paid, which was joyously accepted. Also several of their members joined the Norwegian Lutheran Church. Pastor Yderstad served the church until 1901. The Ladies' Aid was organized during the summer of 1896, and the Sunday school was organized in December of the same year. A Building Committee was elected and together with the splendid support of the Ladies' Aid a church was built and taken into use in October, 1896. This is the same building which we are in today, and it is now 72 years old. Following three days of Evangelistic services the church was dedicated on Sunday, March 28, 1897.

Missionary work was started early in the church's history with the first Lutheran service conducted at a new settlement north of Bayfield in the home of Peter Miller on July 11, 1886, with infant baptism.

After the resignation of Pastor Yderstad in the early 1901 the church was without a pastor until June of 1902 when Pastor J. Fadum, newly graduated and ordained from Augsburg Seminary, came to serve the church for two years. During his pastorate two important items were noted – the women of the age of 21 were granted the right of voice and vote in the affairs of the church, and electric lights were installed. A Young People’s Society was organized in 1903, and continued for some time with more or less irregular functioning.

In the fall of 1905 Pastor Jacob Samuelsen, who came here to visit friends who had been in his former parish, found the pulpit vacant, and offered to serve the church for whatever the members could raise for his support. He served the church for eight years, during which time 14 families were granted membership, the constitution altered, and the name of the church changed to Bethesda Norwegian Lutheran Free Church.

After Pastor Samuelsen’s departure in 1913, Pastor Conrad J. Christensen, newly graduated and ordained from Augsburg Seminary, was installed in 1914 after one year without a pastor. He served the church from 1914 – 1917, during which the great changes took place. Two lots across from the old Court House were bought with intentions of moving the church to that location. Several obstacles were encountered in this procedure causing a delay. In the meantime the lot adjacent to the church was for sale so the members decided it would be a better proposition to buy that lot and move the church there. This was done, a basement was built and the church building was moved onto it, where it now stands. A Girls’ Society was organized during this period which met after school hours, but it was short lived.

Pastor J. Mikaelson came in May, 1918, to fill the vacancy in the pulpit of almost a year made by the resignation of Pastor Christensen who went to serve the Nidaros Lutheran Church of Ashland. During his stay of two years the indebtedness of the church in building and moving was wiped out and the Congregation celebrated its 25th Anniversary.

During the following year of pulpit vacancy Pastor Christensen, who was now serving the Nidaros Lutheran Church of Ashland, held regular services here, which led to the agreement of sharing the Pastor with Ashland; so in July, 1921, Pastor Lars Lund was installed as part-time Pastor here, serving the church for ten years. During his pastorate the altar and painting were acquired through the efforts of the Young People's Society, and all indebtedness was paid.

Pastor Torgney Kleven was installed in October, 1931, and served for 8 ½ years, during the trying times of the depression. The language question became an obstacle, resulting in the decision to hold services in the American language every Sunday morning at 9:00 AM, except the first Sunday of the month when the service would be in Norwegian. This did not prove very satisfactory so the Norwegian services were discontinued. A Mission Society was organized in 1933 and during its existence it raised the sums allocated to the church for both Home and Foreign Missions.

In June of 1939 Pastor John A. Houkom was installed. During his period of service, the Swedish church disbanded and its members joined the Bethesda Lutheran Church; also a few Finnish Lutherans joined who desired church fellowship. The interior of the church was re-decorated, new opalescent windows installed; the kitchen improved, Concordia Hymn books acquired, and new pews

ordered. The Luther League was organized in 1942, its purpose to provide a religious and social outlet for the young people after confirmation. Also a Fellowship Hour started having its meetings on Sunday evenings with the church's vocal and instrumental talent put to use. On November 5-7, 1943, the church observed its 50th Anniversary with appropriate services, having several former pastors taking part.

On January 16, 1950, the members of the church and their friends were greatly saddened by the sudden death of our pastor, John A. Houkom. On June 18 a memorial service for Pastor Houkom was held, also a Dedication service of the new Memorial pews recently installed, and new alter service.

In July, 1950, Pastor Claude Millage became our new pastor, who served our church for six years. During his pastorate extensive remodeling of the rear of the church was done. The old kitchen and furnace room were removed; a larger addition was made including a larger kitchen, furnace room, a rest room, rear stairs and entrance, and a Sacristy and hall upstairs. All of these have greatly aided the work of our Sunday School and social gatherings. An electric organ was purchased through Memorial gifts and enthusiastic work of the church. Also a new tile floor was laid in the Sanctuary.

After the resignation of Pastor Millage in July, 1957, our church was served by student pastors from Augsburg until January, 1958, when Pastor Donald Helland was installed. For several years the Lutheran Free Church had seriously considered the merger with other Lutheran bodies, which took place in accordance with official procedure and was called the American Lutheran Church. So in 1962 the Bethesda Lutheran Church merged, drawing up a new

constitution and adopting the new liturgy. The Ladies' Aid assumed the new name of American Lutheran Church Women, commonly known as ALCW. New hymnals were acquired through Memorial gifts, as well as the Paraments for the altar in keeping with the different periods of the church. Also a new rug was laid on the altar floor. A choir was active periodically for many years which was a pleasant addition to the Sunday church services.

Upon the resignation of Pastor Helland in 1962, Pastor Philip Paulson was called and was installed in February, 1963. During the interim guest pastors served. The Ladies' Aid worked diligently for many years, striving towards the remodeling of the front, with the aim of having the front steps and the entrance to the basement stairs enclosed. This was accomplished during 1965 with the aid of free-will gifts from members and friends. A beautiful memorial window and cross facing east, a cloak room, and an organ alcove was included in the remodeling, with the front entrance to the north. In 1967 a new arrangement was made on the altar with a louvered pillar placed at each end of the altar piece, a new light fixtures installed, and a new décor throughout the sanctuary.

For some time the Congregation felt it would try to go it alone and have a Pastor residing in Bayfield. During the 1967 year the Congregation voiced its desire, and Pastor Paulson was instrumental in bringing that about, so in the spring of 1968 we were granted a resident pastor by the help of the Board of Missions. Pastor Peter K. Anderson, newly ordained, accepted the call and was installed in July, 1968, releasing Pastor Paulson after serving our church for 5 ½ years. Pastor Anderson is also serving a newly organized congregation at Mason. Although we have severed our pastoral relationship with Ashland after sharing

the pastor with them for many years, we still maintain our social contact with them through Ladies' organizations and social functions.

Now the Bethesda Lutheran Church has reached its 75th Anniversary, and if God is willing, it is in hopes of continuing to serve the community by proclaiming the Gospel and administering the Sacraments.