

Albert H. Buser Called Lutheran Families for Church Organization

Early in 1897, Albert H. Buser, a member of Grace Lutheran church in St. Louis, who had moved his family to Webster Groves, was inspired to call together the few Lutheran families living in the neighborhood for the purpose of organizing a new Lutheran congregation in the city of Webster Groves. The first service was held Sunday, March 14, 1897, and the Rev. M. S. Sommer, then pastor of Grace Lutheran church, conducted the service and preached from the text: I John 5:4, "And this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

The families gathered for that first service at the Buser home, 787 Big Bend road, and went in a body to the meeting place which was in the Royal Arcanum Lodge hall, situated on the second floor above a grocery store, at the south-east corner of Big Bend road and Log Cabin lane. Arrangements were made to continue the Sunday services at this location, and the late Dr. Frederick Bente, a professor at Concordia seminary, was called to serve the congregation as its first pastor, in addition to continuing his duties at the seminary.

At times students from the seminary would assist Professor Bente in conducting services. An early member of the congregation recalls that Buser would reach the Lodge hall at 6 a.m. on Sunday, carrying fire wood from

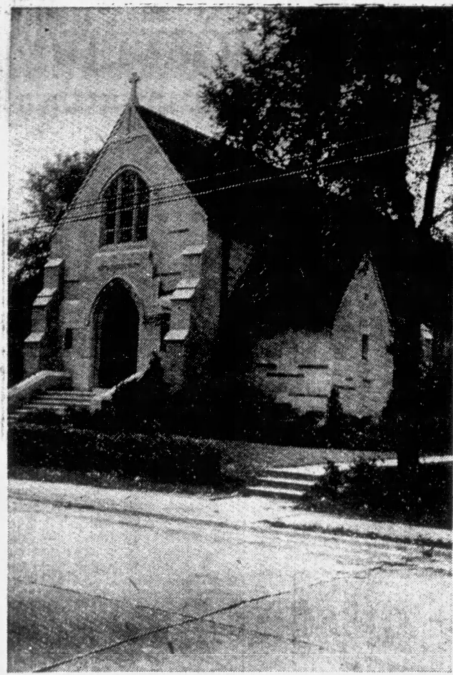
home. He would build a fire in the stove, sweep and dust the hall, and return home for more wood so that the hall would be warm before church time.

The families who made up this early congregation are names familiar to many Webster Groves residents today—Buser, Rasmussen, Jensen, Larsen, Grauer, Lauenborg, and Wolfram.

By 1900, the city of Webster Groves had grown to a population of 1,895. The congregation at that time was known as the Old Orchard Lutheran church. Some years later, at the suggestion of one of the founders of the congregation, Peter Rasmussen, the name of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Webster Groves was adopted.

The first confirmation class had one member, Lillian Lauenborg. The second class, in 1903, had four members, Edna and Florence Buser, Palm Lauenborg, and Ella Wolfram. The third confirmation class, in 1904, two members, Lillian and Ferdinand Larsen. The fourth class, in 1906, five members, Lillian Buser, Flora Larsen, Mary and Martin Rasmussen, and Helena Wolfram.

From the Royal Arcanum hall the congregation moved to temporary quarters nearby, called the Village hall, and then to the Suburban School of Music hall at Summit and Newport avenues. Several years later the congregation had grown sufficiently to own



CHRIST LUTHERAN CHURCH
Lockwood and Selma

a building of its own, and a small frame church edifice at 667 Atlanta avenue was purchased. Dedication services were held on June 27, 1909.

The altar in the church on Atlanta avenue was made by one of the members from an old office desk in reverse. The name plaque on the exterior was artistically decorated and painted by Miss Palm Lauenborg, one of the members of the second confirmation class.

An early roster of the church, some time prior to 1910, lists 52 members. A Ladies' Aid society was organized with Mrs. Buser as president and the pastor's wife, Mrs. Bente, as Treasurer. A roster of the congregation in December, 1914, lists 62 communicant members.

At this period of its development the congregation felt the need for a full-time resident pastor and in the spring of 1915, the Reverend George Luecke, Jr., was called upon his graduation from Concordia seminary. Under Pastor Luecke's youthful and vigorous leadership the congregation grew rapidly and within five years felt the need for a larger and more suitable building. In the year 1920, when the population of Webster Groves had grown to 10,500, the congregation purchased the large lot at the south-east corner of Lockwood and Selma avenues, adjoining the new high school site. The wisdom and foresight of the congregation in selecting this site is demonstrated by the fact that they selected a site which is today at the center of population of the city.

In the year 1921, the present constitution of the congregation was adopted and filed under state law. The constitution lists the following members as the first board of directors: Theo. J. Wolfram, John H. Steinmeyer, H. W. Suffeld, Robert C. Napier, Arthur O. Leutheusser, Fred P. Straub, and William J. Jaeger. It was this group of men who led the congregation in planning for a new church structure.

The building committee consisted of Mason Miller, A. O. Leutheusser, William Rummel, John H. Waldeck, and Theodore J. Wolfram. An architect was selected, plans were drawn, funds were raised, and the cornerstone for the new building was laid on August 26, 1923. The building

was completed in 1924 at a cost of \$30 thousand and the 125 members of the congregation were happy in their new chapel with its kitchen, basement assembly room, and other facilities which they had not enjoyed in the former church property.

The nave seated about 150 persons comfortably and was adequate to care for the congregation's needs for several years.

It is interesting to note that the structure was referred to as the "chapel" and was purposely located on the southern portion of the lot with the thought in mind that at some later date a larger and more imposing church structure would be erected on the northern portion of the lot. Within a remarkably few years the congregation was able to pay off all indebtedness on the new structure. During this period the zeal and generosity of Robert C. Napier was a great blessing to the congregation.

By the early 1930's it became apparent to the growing congregation that before too many years a larger church structure would be needed. A building fund was started, and even during the depression years of the '30's accumulations were added to the fund. The Sunday-school had grown apace, and the primary department, under the devoted and faithful leadership of Mrs. J. S. Lake, found it expedient to secure the loan of classroom space in the adjoining high school building. By 1934, it became necessary to hold two services every Sunday morning to accommodate those who came to worship.

In 1940, with Herman Gall as president of the board, the plans of the congregation for expansion began to crystalize. Theodore Steinmeyer was chosen as architect and sketch plans for additions and new buildings were studied. Finally arrangements were made to sell the entire church property to the Webster Groves school board and the present lot at the south-west corner of Lockwood and Selma avenues was purchased. Through the co-operation of the school board the congregation was enabled to occupy the chapel while planning and building the new structure.

Early in 1941, President Gall appointed a building committee charged with the erection of a new church edifice. Ground for

the new building was broken in August, 1941. The cornerstone was laid on November 2, 1941, and dedication services were held the week of November 8 to November 15, 1942. The building stands today as the fruition of the work of many, both living and dead, who served through the years in Christ church, to the Gloy of God. The members of the present board of directors are: Theodore

J. Herzog, president; Elwyn J. Miller, vice-president; Delmer O. Chase, secretary; and Ralph B. Neumann, treasurer; Arthur Franke, Paul Strippen, Sr., and Theodore J. Wolfram.

The present board of elders of the church is composed of: the Rev. George Luecke, Jr., chairman; Richard Herzog, secretary; William Brinkman; and Bernhard Keiser.

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