**First Evangelical Lutheran Church Archive Information**
complied by Arlene Mannlein, 2021

While First English Evangelical Lutheran Church was formally organized by constitution on Oct. 24, 1882, its foundations began before the Civil War.

As early as 1861, the Rev. Sidney Harkey came from Lutheran College in Springfield to help establish a Lutheran Church to provide services in English. Earliest services were held in the basement of a Baptist church at the corners of North and Water Streets. When the Rev. Harkey was called serve, the congregation met in the Second Ward School, probably where the old Gastman School was located.

However, the congregation experienced difficulty with finances and the Civil War broke out; this meant the congregation’s organization was suspended before being founded officially roughly 20 years later.

Probably early in the 1880’s, the Rev. J. E. Wesner came from Ohio to Decatur with a companion, Martin Luther Deck, a farmer who lived near Cerro Gordo. On Oct. 24, 1882, with the Rev. R. E. McDaniel serving as pastor pro tem. a group of seven created the constitution and by-laws of what is now First Evangelical Lutheran Church. Those seven included Deck and his wife, Elizabeth; Jacob K. Harry; his daughter Amelia Harry (later Vaught); Frederic Karsmeyer; Louisa Karsmeyer; and Albert G. Webber.

Services began on the rented second floor of the building at 503 N. Main Street. The Deck family purchased the lot at the corner of Main and William Streets and donated it to the congregation. However, there was no funding to build, so Webber went to a national church meeting in Philadelphia where he secured general council recognition of the new congregation, making it eligible for funding help. And First English Evangelical Lutheran Church began.

First Lutheran’s first permanent church building was begun in 1886 and dedicated in 1891. When the congregation began to outgrow those quarters, a federal building, the old post office as it was known, was purchased in 1941. Completely remodeled by church members, that structure was dedicated in services March 14, 1943.

There was an official name change to First Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1954. The congregation passed a resolution nine years later to construct a new building. The cornerstone of the original building was put in place on the current site in March, 1965, and the current structure dedicated Nov. 28 that year.

Some highlights of First Evangelical Lutheran Church pastoral staff

During its long history, First has been served by 21 different pastors, 13 assistant or associate pastors, eight interim pastors, one Christian Life Minister and one pastor emeritus, the Rev. Albert Weidlich.

Two of First’s pastors have left the congregation to become bishops. While still in the Chicago Theological Seminary, the Rev. Roy G. Catlin came to First in 1908 and left to become president of the Illinois Synod in 1931. In 1960, the Rev. Paul E. Erickson came to First leaving in 1971 to become assistant to the bishop of the Illinois Synod of the Lutheran Church in America. He was later elected Bishop the synod in 1975 and served two terms.

First has also sponsored or sent several members of the congregation to serve as pastors. By 1932, three had entered the ministry, Fred R. Webber, Gilmore R. Webber and Earl Coble. By 1957, two other young men associated with the congregation had become pastors, John W. Grohne and Roger Burchett. In May, 1961, the Rev. Robert D. Walters was ordained at First. And on Nov. 7, 1985, the Rev. Mark S. Brocker was ordained into the Lutheran Church of America in ceremonies at First. The Rev. Todd Hunter was ordained into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in summer, 1999, ceremonies at First. And most recently, the Rev. Beth Roegner was ordained into the ELCA ministry at First on in July, 2020.

Some unique features and historical events

of First Evangelical Lutheran Church

One unusual find. Well, two or three.

In the treasure of historical documents and photographs in the church vault was an issue in church history not mentioned in any other place. In the mid-1930’s, the congregation discovered a member apparently embezzling funds from the church building fund. The missing amount, around $10,000 including interest, was found in an audit. Though records never show either a legal accusation or that the embezzlement was formally admitted, the money was at least in part repaid by an insurance policy with the church as beneficiary.

In a council meeting, Sept. 24, 1935, it was moved and seconded an auditor be hired, specifically for the building fund. But more importantly, the council also adopted a motion to invite the accused embezzler and his family to return to church.

There was no record if they did.

Family sponsored

First sponsored the Vang family, Lao Hmong refugees, for a two-year stay in beginning in 1982. No other documents were found.

Unique book

A second unusual find was a book in German, published in 1892, use unknown. Unfortunately, there is no indication of owner, if it was ever used or what its use might have been.

Kriisa Organ

Harry and Veera Kriisa came to Decatur sponsored by First Lutheran in 1949. Harry Kriisa, a member of the Estonian Army, was wounded in World War II and taken prisoner by the Russians before being sent to a refugee camp. That camp was where he and Veera met.

Kriisa’s father, Tannil, was an organ builder who passed the trade to his sons. Harry Kriisa first helped with the organ in the second church building. But for the organ in the current building, he personally built the console, chests, expression chambers and many of the organ pipes. He also adapted many pipes from both the congregation’s first and second organs to incorporate into the current organ.

With help from his wife, First’s organ was the largest organ Kriisa built. The 2,619 pipes in the organ range from 16 feet to one-half inch. They are played from three hand keyboards and one foot keyboard.

The organ was dedicated in a concert by Herndon Spillman April 27, 1970. Supported by congregation members, the bulk of its initial cost was $22,000. The organ was updated electronically after Kriisa’s death and is in the process of being releathered.

Some distinguishing features of current building

The tortured brick exterior is a reminder that the church is made up of forgiven sinners with all their weaknesses. The altar, pulpit and baptismal font are of African mahogany, and the altar mensa, table, is reversible. Carvings, presumably those of the altar mensa and Ciborium of Pulpit (canopy cover) were the work of Ernest Schwidder, Seattle, WA.

The nave can seat 457, fellowship hall 200 for dining, 250 for meetings. Classroom windows are designed so children of any age can look out of their classroom. Originally, there were 10 classrooms and a church school office but three more classrooms were dedicated in a 1988 along with enlargement of church office area, accessible restrooms, an elevator and a covered entry area.

The stained glass windows of the nave were the work of artist, David R. Metlock, perhaps also the owner of The Stained Class Gazebo which installed them over the building’s original clear windows. While no record of the installation year was found, it is believed that the windows were installed in 1985.

Apparently, the artist felt that the church calendar year very important and not often expressed in stained glass.

Each window includes a symbol of the church and its calendar year. Represented are Advent, Christmas, Baptism, Annunciation, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost/Trinity, Evangelist St. Matthew, Luther’s Rose, Evangelist St. Mark, The Word, Evangelist St. Luke, Holy Matrimony and Evangelist St. John. A closer look will reveal all the saints and many symbols of the Lutheran church including Luther’s Coat of Arms and the Messianic Rose.

Etchings on the nave and narthex glass doors evoke the sacrament of holy communion and are in memory of Burt Ranney while the stained glass chapel/lounge door recall Jesus’ statement of vine and branches, given in memory of Clara Walters.

The nearly 9-foot tall bronze centennial sculpture near the building’s east entrance was created by Keith Knoblock, an art professor at Illinois State University, Normal. It dedicated in 1985. Representing we are one in Christ are the featured merged figures. They proclaim God’s love by reaching out to care for both one another and the world.

Sources: Some information for this history of First Evangelical Lutheran Church comes historical church documents found in the vault; from an article in The Chicago Synod Lutheran, publication date unknown, possibly authored by A. G. Webber; Golden Jubliee, a publication to recognize the 50th anniversary of the church’s founding; Dedication Service of second building, March, 1943; FELC’s 75th anniversary publication; dedicatory bulletin for the Kriisa Organ, April 26, 1970; script and publications from FLEC’s 125th anniversary celebration, author unknown; “Symbols of the Church and Christianity” by The Stained Glass Gazebo; Herald & Review newspaper articles.

Addendum: In different publications, the Rev. Harkey is referred to S. W. Harkey as well as Sidney L. Harkey. Names of the couple among original founders are spelled Korsmeyer as well as Karsmeyer.

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