

BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH
1450 McKinstry
(at Porter-2 blocks south of Vernor)
Detroit, Michigan 48209
Telephone 313-554-3728



On October 17, 1886, Immanuel Church, then located at 17th and Pine, under the leadership of her Pastor, the Rev. Konrad L. Moll, planted a branch school on McKinstry (across from the present Church) for her members' children who lived in the newly

developing neighborhood. After Seminarian D. H. Steffens taught the students for several weeks, Immanuel called Gotthold H. Strasen to serve as Teacher in the School.

With the encouragement of Immanuel and under the leadership of Pastor Moll, Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church was officially organized by 25 men on Easter Monday, April 11, 1887. The founders were members of Immanuel and the nearby Zion Church. On June 6, 1887, the current site was purchased.

Bethlehem's first Pastor, the Rev. Ferdinand Tresselt, was installed by Pastor Moll in Immanuel Church on July 31, 1887. The following November 20, 1887, saw the dedication of the present Church, a modified Gothic Revival edifice seating 600. Following the closing of older Lutheran edifices in Detroit, Bethlehem's House of God is now the oldest Lutheran church building in the City, and one of the oldest edifices of any denomination outside Downtown Detroit.

In 1890, Bethlehem built a branch school two miles west in the Woodmere section of what was then Springwells Township and, during the same year, the Rev. William P. Lobenstein was installed as Assistant Pastor of Bethlehem, with the intent of turning the branch school into an independent Congregation. This was done in October of 1890, as Stephanus (St. Stephen) Church was officially organized by Bethlehem, with assistance from Zion.

Bethlehem abolished pew rent in 1892, one of the first churches in Detroit to do so. By 1897, just 10 years after her Founding, Bethlehem numbered 1,000 souls, with many of the parishioners being recently arrived immigrants from West Prussia, Germany.

In 1901, with several of her area sister congregations, led by St. Stephen, Bethlehem joined in establishing Concordia Church in the nearby Village of Delray. 1903 saw the abolition of Day School tuition; again, one of the first Lutheran churches in Detroit to do so.

The Rev. Frederick A. Hertwig was installed as Bethlehem's second Assistant Pastor in 1908, serving until his installation as Pastor at the neighboring Gethsemane Church in 1918. During this two man Pastorate, the seating capacity of the Church was expanded to over 1,000 by the addition of a south transept.

By the end of 1912, Bethlehem had a membership of 2,000 souls. The parochial school

reached it highest level of pupils in 1911, with 278 in grades 1 through 8.

Regularly scheduled English language Services began at the end of 1915. During the mid 1960s, German language Services were discontinued.

On July 25, 1920, the Rev. Paul J. Gold was ordained and installed as Assistant Pastor, becoming Co-Pastor in 1932 and Pastor in 1938. In addition to serving Bethlehem for over 50 years, Pastor Gold also served the Michigan District of The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod as Secretary and Chairman of the Board of Missions.

A new brick School and Parish Hall was dedicated on November 30, 1924. The Parsonage, no longer owned by the Church, was dedicated in 1934. Concern for the spiritual nurture of her children led Bethlehem to organize an English-speaking Sunday School in 1925.

Two years later, in 1927, Bethlehem organized Mt. Hope Church in Allen Park. In 1930 she became a founding member of the Glen Eden Lutheran Cemetery Association.

The interior of the Church was modernized in 1939, with the neo-Baroque Altar and other Chancel furnishings replaced in 1940 with neo-Gothic appointments. All furnishings, with the exception of some wood carving, were executed by parishioner Albert Runkis, a master woodcarver. The following year, the Church was covered with a brick veneer. The World War II years saw five members paying the supreme sacrifice, with 115 serving in the Armed Forces.

The Rev. Leroy Biesenthal was called as Assistant Pastor in 1948, serving for three years.

In addition to the called Assistant Pastors, several part-time Ministers assisted at Bethlehem, including Rev. Merle Lutz, Rev. George Schroeder, Rev. H. Kupke and Rev. H. Riethmeier. The Rev. Carl Trosien and the Rev. Arnold Twenhafel served as Vicars.

Already from the mid 1920s, Bethlehem witnessed a decrease in membership, as hundreds transferred to congregations in the outlying areas of Detroit and the suburbs. With the Day School enrollment dropping, Bethlehem School combined with Gethsemane School in 1959. In 1962, this arrangement ended and Bethlehem continued to operate a one-room school of four grades under Mr. J. W. Straub. The School officially closed in 1965, after educating more than 2,000 children.

Over the years, a number of Teachers taught in the parochial school, including: J. G. Estel, William Paul, Hugo Burger, Herman Ude and J. W. Straub. A number of men from Bethlehem have entered the Holy Ministry, the first being the Rev. Fred Rutkowsky, in addition to sons and daughters who became Lutheran school instructors.

Following Pastor Gold's retirement in 1971, he was succeeded by the Rev. Henry Mack (1971-1973), the Rev. Charles H. Pool (1973-1976), the Rev. Roger L. Bronsted (1980-1987) and the Rev. Theodore O. Klein (1987-2001). Currently, Bethlehem is served by Dr. Stanley R. Topel from St. Thomas, Eastpointe.

In 1979, Bethlehem became a dual parish with Unity Church in Northwest Detroit, lasting

until Unity disbanded in 1997. In 1980, the Rev. George Hansell became Spanish language Missionary, serving until 1986.

Bethlehem rented office space in its Parish Hall to the Southwest Detroit Environmental Vision, whose mission is to improve Southwest Detroit environmentally as well as economically. In recent years, repairs to the church building and grounds have been made, such as the rebuilding of the steeple, painting of the church interior and repaving of the parking lot.

In 2002, Bethlehem continues her Gospel outreach to her members and community by conducting a Divine Service each week and additional services during the Advent and Lenten seasons.

CHURCH INTERIOR The Church, dedicated in 1887, is unusual in that it is the only edifice to serve Bethlehem in her 115 years. In 1910, a large wing was added to the south portion of the building, almost doubling the old seating capacity of 600. The newly refurbished Chancel, dedicated in 1940 (Altar, Pulpit, Lectern, Baptismal Font and woodwork) was followed by the addition of a Baptismal Altar in 1950. The beautiful old stained glass, still evident in the south window in the wing, was replaced throughout the remainder of the Church with tinted glass in 1952. Under the main church balcony on the south wall is a framed painting of the Risen Christ. This was taken from the original Altar when it was removed in 1940. The elaborate Memorial Window over the Altar was installed in 1943 in memory of Pastor Tresselt and depicts the Crucified Christ with the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. John the Apostle. Notice also the unusual Crucifix over the Pulpit dedicated in memory of Teacher Estel.

ORGAN: In March, 1888, a large pipe organ was proposed for the new congregation, but concern for the debt just incurred for the church building caused this proposal to be tabled for one year. Exactly when the first instrument was installed is not known, but a pipe organ was in service by June, 1903, for according to church records, a water motor for the organ was installed "for obvious reasons". On August 8, 1915, a contract to purchase a new organ was signed for the amount of \$4,235. Delivery was within seven months and on March 6, 1916, Bethlehem's second organ was dedicated. During the 1940s, concurrent with the remodeling of the Church, alterations were made to the organ. The original two manual console in the west gallery was replaced with a three manual theater-style console located in the balcony opposite the Chancel, and chimes provided from the Tresselt legacy were added. The organ was rededicated on November 9, 1947 with Prof. Victor Hildner of Concordia, River Forest serving as guest organist. Currently, twenty-seven speaking stops are distributed over three divisions: Great, Swell and Pedal. The Choir manua~ prepared for future expansion, is not functional except to play the chimes.

DIVINE SERVICES Sundays throughout the year 10:30 a.m.; Wednesdays of Advent and Lent 10:30 a.m. in the Parish Hall Chapel; Christmas Day 10:30 a.m.; Maundy Thursday 4:30 p.m.; Good Friday 1: 15 p.m.; Easter Sunday 10:30 a.m.; Ascension Day 4:30 p.m.

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