

## **Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church 113 Years of History in 1000 Words**

A brief summary of Zion's history must read, "In every circumstance of life, our Friend and Comfort, the Holy Spirit, works His good for those who love God." Romans 8:28.

Zion began with a summary rejection as the first pastor assigned to serve the congregation reported after only one service in early 1897, that "a mission in El Paso is not feasible". Undaunted, however, Zion "Evangelische Lutherische Kirche" was organized by lay people, July 7, 1898, in the Bergman home with the support of a new seminary graduate, H.A. Huebotter. Public worship began in September in a borrowed church and one month later a parochial school was opened in a rented store front. The pastor wrote of those early days, "Though organized, things look quite gloomy for our mission. I often preach to only three or four people ... however, we should not abandon our mission work in El Paso."

In early 1900, the Ogden family donated land that was subsequently sold and a building site purchased on San Antonio St. A church building was quickly erected and Huebotter both conducted the service and preached the dedicatory sermon August 19, 1900, as the nearest available pastor to lead or assist in the service was 500 miles distant. The first official act was the baptism of Gusta Fahrenkamp. The Ogdens also donated a church bell which 108 years later still finds a home in Zion's bell tower. Two years after the church dedication the pastor accepted a call to the Midwest and another seminary graduate, G.W. Fischer, filled his shoes and pulpit, preaching his first sermon to a congregation of 17 persons and also serving as teacher in the reopened parochial school.

A succession of seminary graduates served Zion in the following years and slow, but steady growth continued until in 1912, church records show 56 Baptized, 30 Communicant, and 15 Sunday School members. The Northern Mexico raids of the guerilla leader, Pancho Villa, had a strange but salutary effect on Zion in 1916, as National Guard units from Michigan and Wisconsin were mobilized at Fort Bliss and the troops swelled worship attendance. The following year meeting minutes quietly record that a transition from German to English language services began with one service in English conducted the first Sunday of each month. World War I introduced dramatic changes to Zion as law enforcement authorities kept a close eye on these "Germans" and dozens of new recruits at Fort Bliss created "standing room only" crowds for the recently introduced English speaking services. Less than a year later, 1918, the congregation encouraged by the growing attendance, voted to begin plans for a new sanctuary. In 1921, the congregation voted to join the "Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States and the following year Zion, not even a quarter century old, borrowed \$13,000 from the Lutheran Church Extension Fund, purchased land on the corner of Birch and Pershing, and on January 28, 1923, dedicated a new building at a total cost of \$18,535.55. W.J. Ahrens of the congregation served as construction supervisor. During this period and subsequent to it, El Paso became a healing destination for persons suffering from tuberculosis. Zion too became a destination and a place of Christ's healing for Lutheran families affected by the disease moving to the area from the Eastern and Midwestern United States.

After an extended vacancy in which lay leaders led worship and read the sermons, Pastor Theodore Evers was installed in 1924 and for 21 years served Zion faithfully until his sudden death in December of 1945 following a service for German POW's at Fabens, Texas. Once again, in the great tragedy of World War II, the congregation served as a blessing to the hundreds of military men and women stationed at Fort Bliss

who worshiped at Zion each Sunday and found a church home among the many members who invited them into their homes for food and family. Many of the members who remember this time of sadness and victory also attribute the retirement of Zion's mortgage in 1945 to the extraordinary stewardship of the military personnel who made Zion their spiritual home .

Pastor Paul Stueckler was installed as the 8th ordained pastor in 1946, and almost immediately began surveying Southern New Mexico - Deming, T&R, Alamogordo, Las Cruces, and Silver City - and initiating service to these new missionary outposts. By 1955 the congregation had grown to 460 Baptized, 302 Communicants, with an average worship attendance of 329, and a Sunday School enrollment of 114 children. Because of the rapid growth of El Paso and of the congregation, the Holy Spirit led Zion over the next decade to assist in the initiation of four new missions throughout the city and in 1967 a Lutheran Border Ministry serving Spanish speaking people on the border. Pastor Stueckler retired in 1968 as Zion's longest serving pastor and was succeeded a year later by Pastor Merrill Kluhsman who served the congregation for eight years and presided over the congregation's joy-filled 75th Anniversary.

Consistent with a century long tradition of Christian education through occasional parochial school offerings, Sunday School, and dynamic Vacation Bible Schools, the congregation initiated a community outreach through Zion Pre-school and Day Care Center in 1995. Mrs. Nancy Cagann has served as the school's Director since its inception and this Christ-centered educational outreach continues to grow into a vital mission to the city

Pastor Steve Hughey who had served as a missionary to Venezuela for 17 years was called to Zion in 1979 and served with many gifts especially with both language and missionary skills as Zion under his leadership was instrumental in the beginning of the Ysleta Lutheran Mission and San Pablo congregation in 1983. Pastor Hughey was called to the LCMS Board for Mission Services in St. Louis in 1988 and was succeeded in 1990, by Pastor Jeffrey Shearier who was blessed to lead the congregation in its first century celebration and ministered at Zion until 1995. Pastor Charles Canada, retiring Army Chaplain at Fort Bliss served Zion from 1995 until his resignation in 2005.

Zion has experienced many interim and transitional periods in its 110 year history; times of extended pastoral vacancy, institutional loneliness, painful change, and renewed hope. During these trying and transitional times our heavenly Father has unfailingly provided faithful lay leaders who have been supported by vacancy pastors, retired pastors, military chaplains and vicars. Again in this 110th year of God's grace, Zion lives in and through a time of transition, change and growth; and again the lay leaders of the congregation have responded with faithfulness, hope, and creativity. The signs of new life and new hope are everywhere; in the magnificent drama of the refurbished stained glass windows; in the brightness of inviting new signs; in the beauty of a refurbished sanctuary; in the introduction of new hymnals and pew Bibles; in the liturgical power of a new organ; in the addition of new families to the community and especially in the care of member for member and the proclamation of Word and Sacrament. God promises through St. Paul, "in every circumstance of life my Holy Spirit will work my good for those who love me". Zion Lutheran Church has been for 110 years a living witness to the daily fulfillment of this promise.