

How We Became St. Paul's Lutheran Family

(From Doug Thunder's 9/7/2014 Sermon)

When Pastor Luis from the Synod Office met with us a few weeks ago, he described the process that we would be going through to select our next Pastor. He indicated that this would be a time when we be asking questions such as those I just mentioned. He also said that it would be helpful to review the history of the congregation.

I believe I can help with the history at least a little. In less than three years St. Paul's will observe its 50th anniversary from the time it was chartered (May 21, 1967—first service was November 15, 1965). On September 13 I will observe the 50th anniversary of my ordination—coincidentally the same day that Bethlehem, Carson City, will be gathering to observe its 55th anniversary.

In September 1969 I was installed as Pastor of Bethlehem, where I served for 9 years. Shortly after Pat and I arrived along with our sons Scott and Ken (Tim was not yet with us), we attended the dedication of this building. The Rev. Daniel Bloomquist was St. Paul's Pastor at that time—he had organized the congregation, which originally met in the old Leisure Hour hall, located where the Presbyterian multi-purpose room stands.

After Pastor Bloomquist accepted another assignment in 1969 the Rev. Gerald St. John became Pastor, he served as Pastor until 1977. During that time St. Paul's and Bethlehem started sharing some ministries—vacation Bible school, confirmation classes, and joint services on some special days, for example, Thanksgiving. Upon Pastor St. John's accepting another call, the Rev. Kenn Bergmann accepted the call to St. Paul's. During Pastor Bergmann's ministry (from 1977 through 1984) the joint activity between Bethlehem and St. Paul's continued and increased—our services were at different times, so on occasion we would fill in for one another.

During my time at Bethlehem, the Missouri Synod was going through church wide controversy. The congregation voted to leave the Synod and join a new church body called the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC)—however the vote was only 64% in favor. We soon realized that in order to take such action, a two-thirds vote was required. The controversy in Synod had “taken over” the congregation, making a positive ministry nearly impossible. About a third of the congregation decided to leave Bethlehem, including most of the elected officers and my family. The Sunday after the split those who left began worshipping each Sunday and called ourselves “The Lutheran Family.”

After several years of meeting in homes and at St. Theresa School's multi-purpose room, we were invited by Pastor Bergmann and St. Paul's to worship here—the Family would hold an 8:00 a.m. service and St. Paul's would continue with its usual 10:30 service. We continued this arrangement for a couple of years, through the remainder of Pastor Bergmann's ministry in Carson City.

When Pastor Bergmann accepted a call to Oxnard, California, the congregation was vacant for several months. I

was asked to serve as the vacancy Pastor for St. Paul's and I would continue as Pastor of the Lutheran Family. Since leaving Bethlehem, I had become a “worker priest”—meaning that my leadership of the church would be a part-time endeavor and that I would seek employment in the “secular” field. I eventually was hired by the State of Nevada, ending up with the Department of Education.

Several months into the vacancy I received a call from a Pastor Stanley Pesis who was at the time serving a congregation in North Dakota. He told me he was interested in St. Paul's and that his wife, Ruth Hanusa, was also a Pastor and they were interested in hearing about St. Paul's.

They applied as a Pastoral team and eventually were issued a call to become joint Pastors for St. Paul's. For several months after Stan and Ruth arrived in June of 1985 I continued to serve as the Pastor of the Lutheran Family and still had a full time job with the State.

About the same time national merger talks were underway involving the Lutheran Church in America (LCA—to which St. Paul's belonged), the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC—to which The Lutheran Family belonged). About this time I was feeling the stress of full time work for the State and serving as Pastor for the Family and having completed the responsibility of serving as vacancy pastor of St. Paul's. I decided to take a “sabbatical leave.” That I did and I have never returned.

The merger took place; and about the same time, St. Paul's Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Family also decided to merge and to combine their names, hence were to be known as **St. Paul's Lutheran Family**.

Of course much has happened in the 29 years since all of this and I was only indirectly involved. I'll leave the history of those years to others who were far more involved than I was.

The newly merged congregation adopted a Mission Statement which reads:

“St. Paul's Lutheran Family's highest priority is to proclaim the good news of God's love for all people through the incarnation, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Baptized into the family of Christ, we commit ourselves to love and care for one another and to provide a safe home in which we celebrate God's love for us. In the midst of our sorrow and pain we also embrace laughter, fellowship, work and love for this family of God.”

It is my hope that we as a congregation will continue to grow in faith toward God and in love toward one another as we move forward, also sharing the Good News in Word and Sacrament that Jesus is our Lord and Savior, who lived, suffered, and died for us all so that me might have abundant life now and eternal life to come.

Or as St. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

In the name of the ☩Father and of the ☩Son of the ☩Holy Spirit! Amen