

**HIGHLIGHTS OF THE HISTORY OF
CHRIST LUTHERAN CHURCH
701 S. CHARLES STREET
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND 21230**

Founding

December 18, 2012, marked the 125th anniversary of the founding of Christ Lutheran Church. The first service was held in Triumph Hall, at 1240 Light Street, about five blocks from our current location.

A young pastor named Leander M. Zimmerman, who had only been ordained a few months, had been called by the Board of Home Missions to establish a new congregation in South Baltimore. There were already three Lutheran churches in the area, but they were all German speaking.

From the start, Christ Church was set apart in at least two ways: it was to be an English speaking Lutheran church, amidst several German-speaking ones, and all seats would be free and welcoming to all. On a cold, snowy day in December of 1887, 150 people were present at the morning service and 115 in the evening.

Pastor Zimmerman made more than 600 neighborhood calls over the next two months, resulting in the formal organization of the church in February, 1888. Soon the congregation began to look for a permanent home and arranged to purchase one of the oldest church buildings in the city, a Methodist Episcopal church at 9 E. Hill Street, between Light and Charles Streets. The previous congregation sold the building because, in their words, "There is no future here."

But the members of Christ Church saw a great future at the location. Just one year after its founding, the congregation became self-supporting. During the early years, several customs and organizations started, many of which continue even to today, including regular visiting of the sick and shut-in, the Ladies Aid Society, a Christian kindergarten, bowling league, church picnic, youth groups, and Wednesday prayer meetings. Christ Church had the first public address system in the city and was the first church in Baltimore to install a telephone.

Early Growth

By 1925, Christ Church had the largest Lutheran membership in the city: 2,000. A newspaper article around that time called Christ Lutheran, “a downtown church doing work all around,” whose goal was to be “as great a blessing as possible to as many people as possible, as long as possible.”

Dr. Zimmerman understood the power of publicity and was far ahead of his time in the use of promotional materials, such as by distributing booklets with upcoming sermon topics, buttons (often with his own picture on them), and cards with personal messages. After 38 years as pastor, Dr. Zimmerman retired in 1925. He remained quite active, writing and speaking, until his death in 1952.

Some felt that, with Dr. Zimmerman’s dynamic personality and leadership gone, Christ Church would decline or even close. But none of these dire predictions came true. Dr. Oscar Blackwelder became pastor in 1925 and expanded the church’s initiatives into new areas.

A formal church office was established, an assistant pastor to specialize in youth work was called, a boy scout troop organized, and weekly church services just for young people were started. The Christ Church Luther League (an organization for teenagers) had 600 members, the largest youth group of a Lutheran Church in the country. Special services were added for holidays, and streetcars hired just to bring people to church. To extend the influence of the congregation, Dr. Blackwelder broadcast his eloquent sermons on the radio.

After eight years, in 1933, Dr. Blackwelder resigned to move to Washington, DC, and Dr. John L. Deaton accepted Christ Church’s call to become its third pastor, a position he would hold for almost 27 years. The current physical plant was constructed during his pastorate.

The Parish House was dedicated in 1936, with funds raised during the Great Depression. The addition included what was called “the most beautiful children’s chapel of any Lutheran church in America,” a Fellowship Hall, 22 classrooms, and a large kitchen. The hall had an overflow which was connected to the church by folding doors, doubling the nave’s seating capacity.

In the 1930s and 40s, a longer period of confirmation was started, and an Altar Guild was formed. The adult choir grew, and junior, intermediate, high school, and young adult choirs were formed. A newsletter, the *Christ Church Visitor*, was sent to

members' homes, and the 11 a.m. service was broadcast live on the radio each week to an audience numbered over 10,000. By this time, 12 Christ Church members had entered the Lutheran ministry.

In the 1930s and 40s, a mother's club and a young women's missionary society were formed, and father-son and mother-daughter banquets and summer Vacation Bible School classes were added to the annual calendar. Church suppers, featuring oysters and sour beef or crab cakes and ham, became social highlights of the year, attracting patrons from all over the city.

Dedication to God's Work in the City

Clearly, the original 100-year old church building was becoming increasingly inadequate. Engineering studies found it unsafe, and it could not be made sound without a complete rebuilding. The question became: Should Christ Church stay in what was an increasingly poverty-ridden immediate area or move to the more affluent suburbs, as many other churches had done?

Pastor Deaton advocated remaining in South Baltimore. He wrote: *"Let no one say our location is not good. This has always been our excuse for doing nothing. The unique thing about our church, and that which makes it the 'talk of the city' and the whole church, is that we maintain our strength and give such an effective witness in this location."*

Members rallied around this cause, and the beautiful edifice we worship in today was dedicated in 1958. Completed at a total cost of more than one million dollars, it was the only new religious building built in Baltimore's inner city for over 50 years. Dr. Deaton died a few months before the burning of the mortgage, less than three years after the building opened.

Dr. Warren C. Johnson was the fourth pastor of Christ Church from 1961-1964. Outreach programs during his tenure included a Sunday School class for young married couples, a bus route through neighboring communities to bring people to church, and committees to contact every parish member several times a year to encourage greater participation in church life.

Service to Others

Early attempts in the 1960s at hands-on social ministry got off to a rocky start. An initiative to hire a part-time social worker was initially rejected by the congregation, leading to Dr. Johnson's resignation. However, with the installation of Dr. Carl

Folkemer, Christ Church's first "homegrown pastor," in 1965, the church slowly became involved in a wider range of social programs. Meals on Wheels came to Christ Church, a social worker was eventually added to the staff, and a teen center was started.

Through the late 1960s and 70s, the church expanded its ministry beyond its own community of believers to meet the medical and housing needs of others. Using seed money raised by Christ Church members, the 220-bed John L. Deaton Medical Center, an apartment building for low and moderate income senior citizens, a beautiful plaza, and an underground garage all opened. This complex was the first project completed in Baltimore's nationally-renown Inner Harbor redevelopment program.

In January 1983, the Rev. John R. Sabatelli became the sixth pastor of Christ Church. Under his dynamic leadership, the congregation built on its existing ministries to the sick and elderly; the quality of the music program was enhanced significantly; new opportunities to worship were added in a variety of formats, including weekly "contemporary" and Wednesday evening services; and opportunities expanded for members and friends to learn, socialize, and grow spiritually. The Ministry of Word and Sacrament was enhanced through the weekly celebration of the Holy Communion and Dr. Sabatelli's high level of pastoral care and thought-provoking sermons centering on God's Word.

Opening a temporary shelter for the homeless men in the church's lower hall led over time to a major commitment to social ministry through the establishment of the non-profit Baltimore Outreach Services, providing not only housing, but substance abuse counseling, job skills training, and transition housing services for homeless women and their children, empowering them to become self-supporting citizens. Tutoring programs were started at neighboring elementary schools, and Pastor Sabatelli served as a mentor for many members of the congregation who entered the ministry, as well as several seminary interns and pastors from neighboring churches.

Future Possibilities

Upon Dr. Sabatelli's retirement in 2012, Christ Church's leadership transitioned to its seventh pastor, the Rev. Susan Tjornehoj. Pastor Tjornehoj comes to Christ Church with a rich background of service, starting in Inupiaq (Eskimo) villages on Alaska's Seward Peninsula. She later moved to northern Minnesota as Pastor of a three-point parish, became an Assistant to the Synod's Bishop, served as pastor of Christ Lutheran Church on Capitol Hill in St. Paul, Minnesota, and was the ELCA's first Director of Evangelical Mission.

Her pastoral leadership is a ministry of welcome and hospitality grounded in Christ's wide love. She preaches as an eyewitness to Christ's presence in the world and shapes worship that always leaves room for more at God's table of grace. Pastor Tjornehoj leads, in this critical time, with energy and passion for God's reconciling work of justice and mercy among the vulnerable and marginalized in the neighborhood and the world.

Under her leadership, a new mission statement was written, recognizing the special role for the congregation in the new century: "As a uniquely metropolitan congregation, the people of Christ Lutheran Church are called to proclaim the Gospel, serve others, and invite all to experience God's love and saving grace."

Highlights of Pastor Tjornehoj's ministry so far have included:

- Twenty-eight areas of service are currently available to members and friends, with additional ones always under development.
- Outreach has continued to the surrounding community through neighborhood walks, canvassing to almost 1,000 homes, and community musical programs.
- The church facility continues to be used 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing long-term shelter and education to 40 homeless women and children. In 2014 alone, the shelter served 115 families with minor children, for a total of almost 250 people. Forty families have moved to permanent housing placements, over the years of the shelter, following job training and securing permanent employment facilitated by the shelter staff.
- Twenty Eucharistic ministers share communion with many homebound each month.
- "Hafenmusik," music by the harbor, is in its second season, with appearances of the United States Navy Band Sea Chanters, the Valparaiso University Chorale, and the congregation's own new musical group, Brassivity, participating in worship services as well as bringing high-quality concerts to the community.
- People are gathering around "The Story," reading through and studying scripture from beginning to end. Through the Prayer Chain, dedicated members pray daily for individuals and the mission and ministry of Christ Lutheran.
- Teams from Christ Lutheran have traveled with friends and family to El Salvador and Viet Nam. The congregation has supported them with prayer and, together, members have been a part of building seven homes.
- A new website has been constructed and a newly-completed sound system will provide an enhanced experience for in-person worshipers as well as CDs for the homebound, podcasts, and the capacity for livestreaming worship.

- Agreements were made with the developers of the property of the former University of Maryland Medical Center across the plaza that will preserve the congregation's access to the parking facilities under the plaza.

Construction of a new 350-unit apartment complex, Banner Hill, is beginning in mid-2015, directly across from the church on the other side of the Christ Church Plaza.

To prepare for our new neighbors, the congregation council recently took bold and faith-filled actions which will position Christ Church well for its future witness to "live" our mission statement of proclaiming the Gospel, serving others, and inviting everyone to experience God's love and saving grace. An inclusive Renewal and Mission Enhancement Task Force has developed a series of recommendations based on the Strategic Mission Plan. Committees are designing strategies; reviewing site engineering reports; and establishing a list of projects, a financial goal, and a time schedule.

Christ Lutheran's ministry is one of welcome and hospitality grounded in Christ's wide love, love that has emanated from Christ Church for well over 125 years and will continue as long as God's people come together in this place.

It has been said that part of the greatness of Christ Church is its amazing ability to hold on to its rich and glorious traditions and history at the same time it is open to change and the future. This wonderfully creative and innovative mix – firmly rooted in the past, optimistically open to the future, and always grounded in the cross – is vitally important.

Christ Lutheran is a special fellowship of caring, Christian people, a place where hundreds respond to God's Love by giving their time, talents, and treasures on a regular-basis. Christ Church has truly been "blessed to be a blessing." As the church continues well into its second century of service, the congregation rededicates itself to be a good and faithful steward of the gifts that have been entrusted to it and to go from "strength to strength" in the Lord's service.

*- Ronald S. Thomas, Ph.D.
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