



First Lutheran Church

Christ-Centered People: Caring & Sharing

Our History

For over 125 years, First Lutheran Church has been an integral part of the Freeport area community. Here you will find some interesting historical facts about our congregation. If you have any questions, please feel free to [contact us](#).

Beginnings

When the line that designated the northern tier of the Illinois as Indian Territory was removed in 1840, the area opened up for homesteading. This made the rolling land of Stephenson County safe for farming. Settlers began to move into the area, and a number of the families that settled in the northern part of the county were second and third generation Americans of German descent from Pennsylvania. The timber had been cleared away from the hills of central Pennsylvania, some of the iron mines were beginning to play out, and their large families could not be supported by these enterprises on their relatively small farms. Stephenson County, with its hills and timber, presented to them the opportunity of a "new Pennsylvania."

One family that came here with their eight children during the mid-1840's was Samuel and Catherine Grossman, who originally settled between Lena and McConnell. As population began to increase, so did the demand for places of worship. However, it was not until 1850 when the first resident Lutheran pastor came to Stephenson County. Rev. George J. Donmeyer was urged by his in-laws, the Grossmans, to leave his parishioners in the hills of central Pennsylvania to serve on the frontier. He received a small stipend from the Home Missionary Society of the General Synod of the Lutheran Church. In the early 1850's, he established churches at Cedarville, Orangeville, McConnell, Lena and several churches out in the country.

Shortly before 1850, a Lutheran pastor, Rev. Jared Sheetz, settled in Freeport. He had been a member of the Pennsylvania Synod, preached for a short time in Freeport, but soon relinquished the work of the ministry and devoted himself to business.

In his first report to the Home Missionary Society (September 13, 1850), Pastor Donmeyer states:

"Freeport, the county seat, is an important point in my field. I preached three times in this place, had about seventy-nine attentive hearers, visited a number of families - a request has been made to organize a congregation, which I think will be done before long. I made the proposal to establish a Sabbath School and as soon as a convenient place can be obtained, one will be organized. There is already some talk of building a house of worship next season."

He continues to be enthusiastic in his next report saying:

"I have preached here three times, attendance as usual. Of late I had communion. People are encouraged and arrangements have been made to erect a Lutheran Chapel in the coming summer - but more about that in my next report."

However, his next report at the end of 1850 has a different tone.

"Freeport - Of this place I can say nothing particularly encouraging for our cause. Extensive revivals have taken place here in the Methodist and Presbyterian churches, and perhaps two-hundred people have united with the Church of Christ. But we had neither place nor time to attend to our cause. Since my last report, I preached thirteen sermons, held a communion season, received eleven into our connection, visited ten families. A place for worship has of late ben ordained and the building of a chapel abandoned for the present, but a lot has been purchased, unto which, through the help of God, we intend to erect a Lutheran Church, as soon as circumstances will permit. Other denominations are using all their influence and effort to draw into their churches the few members we have here.

This is a growing place, one-hundred houses are now building, three churches are up and more will be erected next season. The Chicago and Galena Railroad will soon pass through the town and in consequence of the fertility of the soil and the peculiar location of the town, it will soon be one of the most important places in Northern Illinois. What will we do for a minister in this growing town? If I do not get a speedy supply I must entirely abandon the place. My heart often begins to fail when I see the downfall of our cause here."

Three months later (April 1851) he reports,

"I preached two sermons (in Freeport), prospects still dull. Br. P. (?) has now taken charge of this place and will, it is hoped, supply it better."

His next quarter's report speaks of the "nominal members living here who scarcely ever visit our meetings, but we have also some whole-souled Lutherans and if they remain faithful, I will not - no I cannot despair of our cause in Freeport."

The Minutes of the Synod of Northern Illinois in 1854 report that "Br. Donmeyer made a partial organization of a Lutheran Church in Freeport ..." We next hear of the Freeport situation in the Synod Minutes of 1862. Reverend Solomon Ritz (Lena) has visited some Lutherans in Freeport, but the cry is "the war" - "the war" - "hard times coming" and they are obviously not interested in a church. Nevertheless, in 1863 Reverend Thomas Easterday is recommended for the work of the "Freeport English Mission." He visited the field but felt that matters were not sufficiently promising for the development of a congregation. The next year, he became a Presbyterian minister. For a year or so, Reverend J. M. Lingle of Yellow Creek served the Freeport people as well as Reverend Reuben Weiser of Forreston, but neither met enough encouragement to proceed with the work.

In 1867, Reverend George Donmeyer reported at the Synod meeting that "the old First Presbyterian Church was to be sold and like could be bought for a mission church." Lack of funds prevented this, but a later report brought by a special committee of the Northern Conference of the synod (Reverend Donmeyer and Reverend John Stoll) raised hope by revealing:

"about forty to fifty Lutherans are in the city, some connected temporarily with other churches. We found a number who will give \$500 toward the building of a church, and as far as we could learn about \$6,000 will be raised. They would probably raise \$500 toward the minister's salary."

With the intent of carrying this out, the Synod sent the Reverend Steven N. St. John to the Freeport Mission at a salary of \$40 a month. A licentiate, and consequently a man of little experience, he was permitted to abandon the work after a short time in 1869.

Women's Work

The early enthusiasm of the 1850's subsided, and after several more unsuccessful attempts in the 1860's to get the church started, little is heard about the "Freeport situation" during the next ten years. No doubt the Civil War and the national financial problems that followed into the 1870's were forces that dulled the prospects of a new congregation in Freeport.

However, work was quietly going on that would eventually result in the present day church. Sometime during the 1870's, Sarah Grossman, in her thirties, moved to Freeport from her father's farm near Lena, Illinois. She resided with her brother Samuel, who ran a sewing machine repair shop. Realizing that there were English-speaking Lutherans in the city, many like her, second-generation folks who had moved to town from the surrounding farms, and that there was no church to serve them, Sarah began to organize a Sunday School. They first met in her brother's storeroom, and outgrowing that, held sessions in the Good Templar Lodge, where, on occasion, they had services conducted by one of the Lutheran pastors in the area. Eventually, Miss Grossman made a canvass of the city of Freeport to secure the names of those who had formerly been members of the Lutheran faith but had drifted away because there was no English Lutheran Church in the city.

This is evidently the canvass that finds its way to the Northern Conference of the Synod of Northern Illinois in 1879, a request from twenty-eight families for the organization of a church. In 1880 the Home Missions Board of the Synod responded favorably. The Reverend J. W. Goodline, the Secretary of the Board of Home Missions, declined the call as pastor and so did one other. There was another wait as organization was delayed for was delayed for lack of pastoral leadership.

In 1880 the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society (WHFMS) was organized by the General Synod. In their first decade of work, this national women's group assisted four new churches get started. Freeport, perhaps partly through the interest of a Mrs. Breckenridge, who was a native of Northern Illinois and President of the Executive Committee, became their first project. The other three were in Omaha, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The Rev. Thomas F. Reeser of Williamsport, PA. was called as a missionary to Freeport under the direction of the WHFMS, arriving June 1, 1881.

Worship services were held in Temperance Hall, corner of Chicago and Exchange streets. The charter was opened on September 19, 1881 and closed on November 12, 1881. The following twenty are reported as charter members:

- Rev. T. F. Resser
- Mrs. Mary Reeser
- Mrs. Beal
- Mr. & Mrs. E. H. Foy
- Mr. & Mrs. W. W. Frey
- Thomas Botdorf
- Mrs. Mattie Botdorf
- Mr. & Mrs. W. W. Krape
- Dr. J. F. Fair
- S. B. Grossman
- Sarah Grossman
- Mrs. David Cross
- Mr. & Mrs. M. M. McEntee
- Mr. & Mrs. Cyrus Cooken
- Mrs. C. E. Cross

Progress was made toward a church building in 1882 when the lot on which the church now stands was purchased for \$900 and the cornerstone laid for the first building on October 16, 1883. The new church was dedicated December 21, 1884.

This was made possible through the aid of the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society (WHFMS). Rev. Edward Scharf wrote in the 50th Anniversary Booklet,

"The Freeport Memorial Mission was a household word in the homes of women who supported her. They thought of her as they did their housework. They talked about her at their meals. They prayed about her in both their family worship and in most of their meetings. It was their 'first child.' In many homes in the East, as well as in Illinois, one would see on the mantel or upon the center table in the parlor the 'Bee-Hive' or some other mite-box, into which were placed the pennies, the two-cent pieces, the three-cent pieces, and the silver half-dimes of that day, for our First English Lutheran Church in Freeport. How these small daily offerings multiplied. In twelve years the women contributed \$15,500 to us."

No wonder we were known at first as "Women's Memorial Church!"

Dedicating a Beautiful Ediface

Headlines in the Freeport Daily Journal read:

A beautiful ediface. Large congregations present morning, afternoon and evening. Dr. Conrad of Philadelphia, delivers the dedicatory sermon — excellent singing by the Lena Lutheran Church Choir — nearly \$900 subscribed toward the church fund.

This chapter is best written by excerpts of the reporter from the Freeport Daily Journal

who was in attendance at all these services.

Although a little inclined to be stormy, and it did snow a little in the evening, Sunday, December 21st, (1884) was a very pleasant winter's day. The temperature was very much moderated when compared with what it was three or four days earlier, and taking it altogether, it was a day well adapted to the dedication of the "Women's Memorial (English) Lutheran Church," of Freeport. On this first day of public services in the church, three meetings were held. The first at half-past ten in the morning, the second at three in the afternoon and the third at seven o'clock in the evening. Large congregations attended and in the morning many were obliged to stand. Many people were present from Lena, Orangeville and other places outside the city. The Lena Church held no services that day as their pastor and choir were involved in the service. Participants Pastor Reeser of the Freeport church, Rev. J. H. Stough of Lena, Rev. Peter Ghoen of Orangeville were followed by the keynote preacher of the day, the Rev. F. W. Conrad, D.D. Dr. Conrad was the well-known editor of the Lutheran Observer, a capacity he had served in for nearly 25 years. He was one of Philadelphia's best-known preachers, a leader in Lutheranism, and now at the age of 69 was nearly blind. His hour-long morning sermon was consequently preached without notes of any kind and he held the closest attention of the large congregation.

He noted in his sermon that the new building had cost \$11,700 of which amount \$8,000 had been contributed by the WHFMS, church members had raised \$2,400 more and there was \$2,300 yet to be raised. At the conclusion of the service an offering of \$800 was received. The names of the donor with the amounts are all duly listed for the public to read in the Freeport Daily Journal!

Dr. Conrad preached a sermon of equal length at the afternoon service after greetings from local clergy, Dr. Jenkins of First Presbyterian Church and Rev. S. M. Chrissman. In the evening, Rev. J. W. Richards of York, PA. was the preacher. He had served for ten years as professor at Carthage College and was currently secretary of the Board of Church Extension of the General Synod.

In his article the day previous to the dedication, the reporter described the size, shape and dimensions of the building. Some \$2,000 of the cost was in the beautiful memorial windows. Friends in the East had subscribed, \$300 for the double windows, the main window about \$600. He writes:

We hear that instead of old-fashioned pews, the church has plush, upholstered assembly chairs of modern design. They are about 300 and an umbrella holder. They are arranged in a true circle, so that each one faces the pulpit, and as the floor is laid on a slant toward the pulpit, that portion of the room being two feet lower than at the entrance, so that the person sitting near the door can see as well as though he were in the front. To carry out the memorial design all through, each chair, costing five dollars, is paid for by voluntary contributions, and the name of the donor is given a place in the chair back, and in consideration of this fact, the seats will be free to all who may come. The four aisles in this room converge toward the pulpit. The platform is provided with three large, carved walnut upholstered chairs and a beautifully wrought pulpit desk, the handiwork of David Weary. The

choir's platform is in the corner, which also contains a fine Estey organ. The auditorium floor is covered with super extra Lowell carpet and the room is heated by a large Ruby furnace from the basement.

At the rear of the auditorium (in back of the chancel) is the lecture room, 42 by 18 feet, nicely carpeted, lighted and heated. Over this room are the two church parlors. One of these will be used as the pastor's library and study room.

The architect was Hansen of Chicago. Members of the church building committee were Rev. T. F. Reeser, Mahlon McEntee, E. H. Foy, and H. Poffenberger.

The congregation, which numbered 19 souls at the time of organization, has been increased to fifty under the able ministrations of Rev. Reeser. Part of his salary has been paid by WHFMS.

The members were proud of their new church and in 1885 hosted the convention of the Synod of Northern Illinois and the Synod WHFMS.

From Crawling to Walking

In 1885, Rev. Reeser moved to the church in Polo, and Rev. A. M. Barrett became pastor for a little over two years. Membership moved up only into the 60's. The pastor who was to leave the heaviest mark upon the congregation, Rev. Hamilton A. Ott from Ohio, came next. Nina Cross in her recollections of childhood at First Lutheran described him.

Rev. Hamilton Ott was a live wire, his purpose was to clear us of debt, but he also while here added 135 members to the church roll before he left in 1896. Our Sunday School he named the Bee Hive which grew in numbers and spirit. "At it, all at it, all the time" was his slogan. He had a real method to clear the church debt. Every month he was able by strenuous work — it was considered a common sight to see him hustling down the streets — going so fast his coat tails flew out behind him. One of his paying investments of the time and money was the "Memorial Chimes" a church paper he edited, by means of ads in it to the merchants of Freeport. Edna Botdorf and I were commissioned to deliver the papers. Our pay was just happy cooperation with him.

Pastor Ott had the foresight to have bound volume made of the monthly issues of the "Memorial Chimes" so that period may be read about first hand. The newspaper's first issue of 1,500 copies was sent to friends and churches throughout the nation. Typical of letters received was one from Jennie Cameron of Ottawa, Kansas:

Dear Mrs. Ott: I see from the Chimes that your Aid Society is making "Missionary Sun-Bonnets," please mail one to my address, blue and white gingham preferred. Enclosed is fifty cents. Hoping many will be prompted to aid you in this humble manner, and with sincere sympathy for your work ...

In the "Memorial Chimes" the reader will find that Ott begins a Christian Endeavor Society for young people; tells about the autograph quilts the ladies of the church are

making for an auction; keeps his readers abreast of Lutheran Church news in Northern Illinois and the nation; praises the efficiencies of passenger trains; introduces the congregation to the mimeograph machine; reports that the church has the third largest Sunday School enrollment in the city; educates his readers on Lutheran doctrine; thanks a reader in St. Louis for the No. 30 Windsor hard coal furnace received in answer to an appeal; takes a few swipes at Sabbath-breakers in Lena who have their stores open on Sunday; reviews events at Rock River Assembly in Dixon (the Lutheran Chautauqua of the Midwest); says he posted photographs of the church in local hotels with times of services; and generally keeps the reader informed about the "local happenings" of church members.

During their nine years in Freeport, Rev. Ott and his wife, Lydia, had two children die in infancy. Brother H. Poffenberger gave the church a plot of six cemetery lots where these two babies are buried. The church still owns the unused graves in City Cemetery.

Women's Memorial Lutheran Church is the name commonly given to the church during its early years. In a new constitution adopted in 1890 during Pastor Ott's leadership, the name First English Lutheran Church of Freeport first appears. However, he continued to call it "Memorial Lutheran Church" while he was here.

On Easter Sunday, 1892, the mortgage was burned. The Rev. S. B. Barnitz, Western Secretary for Home Missions, was present for the ceremony. A year later the church was self-supporting in salary. H. A. Ott got the church out of debt and built up its membership and program. First Lutheran was ready to take its place as a leading congregation in Northern Illinois. When Ott resigned in 1896 he moved to Quincy, Illinois and performed a similar task. From there he went to serve as the General Synod's Western Home Missionary Secretary.

The Turn of the Century

In the decade following the pastorate of Rev. Ott, there is little record. Four pastors served during the period:

- W. S. Dysinger
- Homer W. Tope
- G. C. Cromer
- W. Gardner Thrall

When 1906 rolled around, the church was ready to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The year following, the corner lot at Galena and Jackson was purchased and the house remodeled for the parsonage.

Twenty-five years had brought life and growth to the church. Furnishings were wearing out already. New pews and new chancel furniture were installed, and the first pipe organ, at a cost of \$8,000. Growth was evident in that the present basement under the sanctuary was excavated for much needed room.

Rev. P. H. R. Mullen became pastor in 1908 and served until 1915. He was followed by Rev. W. F. Rex who was to serve for fifteen years. A Men's organization was going by 1916, which eventually became the Brotherhood of later years. The Ladies Aid was busy with one of a series of fifteen-cent suppers featuring a menu of sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, roasted wieners, gravy, pickles, apple pie, bread and butter, jelly, coffee.

It was in 1922 that the idea for a Sunday School building was presented, and a committee composed of Alfred Holtum, W. C. Beidler and Mr. Leroy Folloett was appointed to submit plans for the building. The following year the building committee, Chris Holtum, A. H. Mellott, Frank Shawl, Mrs. Arthur Wheeland and Mrs. E. A. Cross, began their work. The three-story building was completed in 1924. The ground floor contained a gymnasium with a balcony at the north end, with a seating capacity for 100. The kitchen was located under the balcony. Special speakers for a week of dedicatory events included Rev. Mullen, who returned from Swissvale, PA.; Dr. John F. Seiber, Superintendent of Home Missions for the Illinois Synod; Dr. John Bramkamp, President of the Synod; and area pastors, including Rev. Walters of Dixon and Dr. Harris from Sterling.

Sometime during 1923 the Tri Mu Class of young ladies was pleasantly surprised by a newcomer who moved to Freeport to teach Latin at the high school, Miss Erva Moody. She was soon elected president and composed the class song, "Here's to the Might of the Gold and White." Through the urging of Rev. and Mrs. Rex, Erva Moody was encouraged to enter into missionary work. Leaving Freeport after several years, she began her career in China and kept up a lively connection with her Tri Mu friends. An Erva Moody Society was formed here, as in other congregations in Illinois, and partial support was provided. Miss Moody left China during World War II and returned after it was over, having to leave again during the late 40's at the time of the Communist take-over. She returned to her hometown of Fillmore, Illinois where she assisted her elderly mother until Erva was killed in an auto accident.

In 1931 Rev. Edward Scharf became pastor. The following year the wall above the altar was graced by the large picture, "Christ in Gethsemane," a memorial for Mrs. Elizabeth Zimmerman, painted by Buford Jones of Chicago. Rev. George J. Curran served from 1939 to 1943. In 1941 one of several redecorating and remodeling projects in the sanctuary was completed.

Growing and Building

Charles F. Landwere accepted the call to First Lutheran in 1943. His 21 years of service came during the period of the church's greatest numerical growth. A chapel was made in the north room behind the chancel and dedicated as the Holtum Memorial Chapel in 1943. During his pastorate, several vicars were employed to assist in teaching and pastoral duties. As membership increased, it was apparent that a one-pastor church could not adequately serve all the people. It was then that the idea of a new mission congregation was suggested by Pastor Landwere. Freeport was rapidly growing on the west side of town. Members who lived west of West Street were asked to seriously consider becoming members of a new church. So it was that through the efforts of Pastor Landwere, 68 adults and 39 children from First Lutheran were part of the nucleus that began [Prince of Peace Lutheran Church](#) in November of 1960, under the leadership of Pastor Paul Oye.

The members of First Lutheran, however, were not just concentrating on getting a new church started. The Greater First Lutheran Fund had been started with the goal of providing much needed office and Sunday School space for a church continuing to grow.

On January 21, 1962, the new \$186,000 addition that included offices and classrooms was dedicated. Dr. A. Howard Weeg, president of the Illinois Synod, was the guest speaker. Hans Midstokke and Howard Roen served as co-chairmen of the Building

Planning Committee.

Pastor Landwere resigned in 1964 and was followed by Pastor Nels Bengtson. It was during his pastorate that the first ordained assistant pastor was called, Arthur Bowman. At a cost of \$45,000, the sanctuary was renovated in 1970 and a new pipe organ installed. Ann Valkema served as organist from 1960 until 1998.

Arthur R. Stees was called as pastor in 1976 following the retirement of Pastor Bengtson. Pastor Stees served until 1994. The following assistant pastors served the congregation together with Pastor Stees; Katherine Zimmerman (the first ordained woman to serve at First Lutheran), Charles Strietelmeier, Michael Blair, and the husband and wife team of William Swanson and Twila Schock. During those years the congregation reaffirmed its desire to remain in the downtown area and in that context to carry out its mission. During the ministry of Pastor Stees the Sunday school classrooms, the Martin Luther and Youth rooms were remodeled. Additional pipes were added to the organ. The elevator was installed and a ramp was built to provide direct access from Galena Avenue into the sanctuary.

In November 1995 Pastor Neville Kretzmann was called to serve the congregation. First Lutheran developed a joint confirmation program with [Prince of Peace Lutheran Church](#) in 1996. In that same year Pastor Linda Kersten was called to serve as associate pastor. She served until 2000. She was followed as associate pastor by Catherine Burnette who joined the staff at the beginning of 2002. During the interim period between Pastor Kersten and Pastor Burnette the congregation shared the services of a youth ministry leader named Reuben DeMaster with Grace Episcopal Church. In 1998 Dawn Zeigler was called to serve as the organist. In 2003 the congregation felt called to make outreach into the neighborhood surrounding the church one of its mission goals. It began to experiment with various forms of outreach. In 2003 the congregation paid off the remaining debt from the Growth Fund (remodeling costs, installation of elevator, etc.) and the congregation held a special worship service to celebrate that milestone. In order to facilitate the ministry that was being performed by members in the congregation and the recruitment of volunteers the congregation called JoAnn Beckman to serve as the volunteer coordinator in 2001. In 2004 the congregation decided to remodel the fellowship hall and kitchen. In addition a ramp would be added to the Jackson Street entrance into the fellowship hall. The stage area would be converted into a lounge area. The work began in November of 2004.

More to come »