



**150+ YEARS OF  
CELEBRATING GOD'S  
FAITHFULNESS**



**FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH  
LINCOLN, NE  
1870-2022**



### INTRODUCTION

Anniversaries are opportunities to travel back to where it all started and see if you can figure out how you arrived at where you are. They raise questions: Who were we back when? Who were we supposed to be? How did we change? Have we been faithful? And, if we know where we have been, will that tell us where we are going? The story of First Lutheran poses all these questions - the answers to which are not always what one would anticipate. But if one thing always comes through in every era and its changes, it is the desire to remain open and faithful to the God of love and the Christ of the Gospels who calls us back to be the ministers of God's grace.

### ORIGINS 1870-1900

There is always a great deal of interest in knowing where we first came from, but often little evidence with which to work. Such is the case with First Lutheran. Most of the records of the early history are lost, though there are a few intriguing stories recounted in a fiftieth anniversary history book. The first effort to found the church in February of 1870 seems to have been more a profit-making scheme by someone who subsequently absconded with funds, and only later in the year, did a sustainable institution get grounded; we know only a little about those who accomplished the feat, though one fact is clear; they were Swedish. We assume our founders were heroic, and in the Lutheran tradition, we look to find them among the pastoral leadership. But, First Lutheran in its first thirty years was mostly under the leadership of anonymous laity, with a rotating cast of preachers moving through as churches struggled to serve the new towns out on the prairie. The congregation was small, finances were always precarious, and there was constant concern about the spiritual state of the congregants. Membership was fluid, and immigration brought to First, among others, young Swedish women who came to the growing city to serve as domestic labor. For the first thirty years, the language of the church was Swedish; English was not used in a service until the 1890's and a monthly English-language service was held first in 1900 when there were around 100 members.

### GROWTH AND CHANGE 1900-1930

The story of First comes into better focus with the turn of a new century with the growth and stabilizing of its membership and the longer-term service of pastors who brought

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vision and leadership. One great concern was the development of the physical facility to serve the needs of worship and the addition of a pipe organ bespoke the importance of music as the church grew. Though the membership remained primarily Swedish, the church was much concerned about the education and nurturing of young people, most of who now were born in the U.S. and for whom English was a first language. One challenge was the issue of language; the change of the name of the church to simply "First Lutheran" in 1921 signaled the gradual evolution away from an exclusively Swedish identity, as did the increasing primacy of English in worship. Church records reveal this change, as English frequently pops up in the midst of Council minutes written in Swedish, with a full transition to English after World War I. The services in the early 1920s were divided between English and Swedish, with significant congregational division, as leadership encouraged a full transition to English in the main services. By the end of the 1920s, Swedish was used only once a month in an evening service. With the change of language came also a growth in attendance and the need to find a larger facility. Though the church at 13th and K St. had been developed over the years, in 1930, the decision was made to move to a facility at 17th and A St., reflecting the expansion of Lincoln, as well, to the south and east.

## THE MIDDLE YEARS 1930-1960

These years brought economic hardship, then war and the sudden death of a pastor. Then, after the war, growth. The church eventually flourished at 17th and A with the post-war baby boom expanding families and bringing a large number of youth into the congregation. A commemorative volume produced for the eighty-fifth anniversary of the church counts 589 confirmed members, but 200 children in the Sunday School. It also states that *"An invitation to worship is extended to all by First Lutheran Church. There is an atmosphere of serene reverence and devotion in our sanctuary; the worship is in conformity with the high traditions of the Augustana Lutheran Church,"* adding that, *"one of the greatest treasures of First Lutheran Church is the fine music. The organ and other musical instruments and the choirs are recognized by our church as among the most meaningful media of worship."* That spirit of openness combined with tradition and an embrace of music forms a continuing feature of First Lutheran's ethos. With growth came issues of space - members today who worshiped at the

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17th and A church in the 1950's remember vividly the struggles with parking, and later in the 1950's, First helped seed the congregation for St. Andrew's Lutheran at its founding, with around 100 members joining the mission congregation.

## NEW FRONTIERS 1960-1995

The early 1960's brought dramatic changes to First Lutheran. To begin, the Augustana Synod joined a number of other Lutheran bodies in forming the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). While the spirit of ecumenism was active in American Lutheranism at that time, the merger created some vexing challenges. In First Lutheran's case, the close proximity of Grace Lutheran Church, now a sister congregation, was only a few blocks away. When merging the two churches proved to be a non-starter, First Lutheran began to look at moving out to the boundaries of Lincoln where property was available, and where it was clear the city would expand. After some hard work by Pastor Richard Englund and members of the congregation, a site was acquired at 70th and A St.; funds were raised, a new structure was planned and built, and on January 23, 1966, dedicated. A new phase in the life of the church began. The area of Lincoln into which First Lutheran moved grew rapidly, which also meant an opportunity for the church to grow, with all the advantages and challenges. Space remained an issue since the reluctance to take on debt meant the original structure only included a part of the larger plan and space for classrooms, offices, and other structural features were left for later development. A building campaign in the early 1980's added office and classroom space, but left still additional needs for the future. Despite the space issues, the church grew to its greatest membership numbers in these years with up to 1700 members by the 1980's. Other changes in this time involved the worship service. During the time of Pastor LaVern Grosc, communion was offered every Sunday and a pipe organ was funded and built, exemplifying the continuing importance of both tradition and music at First Lutheran. By this time, the Scandinavian beginnings became increasingly distant and many members joining the church came from backgrounds other than Lutheranism. A sign of this evolution was the creation in 1989 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which the LCA helped form with other Lutheran bodies, and is still our denominational home today.



### THE LAST 25 YEARS 1995-2020

In some ways the last twenty-five years have seen only gradual changes compared with some of the more daunting transitions of the past. No moves took place, membership has been relatively steady, finances as manageable as any era of the church's history, and, finally, enough space was created to realize the original plans for the church. Able leadership has insured that, in these years, First Lutheran would build on its heritage while adapting to the changes in the world at large to maintain the relevance of our church and its work.

#### BUILDING

At the start of this period, building was a literal activity as Fred Nelson, installed in 1993 as Lead Pastor, began to orchestrate a building campaign in 1996 to finish what had been started in the mid 1960's. Titled, *"Building First's Future,"* the campaign followed on some earlier work that had yet to come to fruition. In materials prepared for the campaign, Pastor Nelson noted *"...there hardly was a time when First Lutheran wasn't 'building First's future' in some way. There is a tradition here of taking bold leaps of faith in response to God's call to establish and continue a gospel-driven mission to the city of Lincoln and the surrounding region."* At the center of the plan were an activity center, expanded kitchen and classroom space, a chapel and room for fellowship - all needs long felt since the original structure was built. It wouldn't have been a building campaign without some vexing issues: how much money could be raised; if we raised that money, what would be the impact of giving to other areas, such as benevolences or the annual budget; how much debt should be taken on (or, should we even take on debt). But, with steady leadership from many in the congregation and Pastor Nelson, there was a unanimous congregational vote (112-0!) to move ahead, with a goal of \$1,000,000 and an estimated cost of around \$1,600,000. In the end, these numbers proved surprisingly on target, with more than \$900,000 in pledges and only small cost overruns. Pledges were collected, loans were arranged (with a satisfying low, low interest rate of 7.5%, as announced in *The Voice* newsletter) and the addition was built. On August 29-30, 1998, the newly enhanced facility was dedicated - about a year earlier than anticipated.

Then, twenty years later, after some preliminary work during Pastor Brian Maas' tenure, the church moved into another building project. In February of 2015, led by newly installed Pastor Dan Warnes, plans soon moved forward - inspired by the realization that our facility was, for those with limited mobility, not as welcoming physically as we might imagine. As part of a larger attempt to have First welcome all, by mid 2017, a building committee had been appointed, and by early 2018, plans had been drawn up, a capital campaign initiated, and by July saw over \$2.5 million pledged, with a ground-breaking ceremony in October. Though April 2019 saw the necessity of worshiping for a time in the Activity Center, Palm Sunday 2020 was anticipated with more than the usual enthusiasm, as the entry to Jerusalem would involve also the entry into the refurbished worship space. Though concerns about the impact of a capital campaign on annual budgets and giving are a hardy perennial, we took some hope from our experience in 1996-98 and beyond, as the years that followed that campaign, as detailed below, saw a remarkable expansion of annual giving.

### GIVING AND SERVING

The building of structures always raises up the issues of how the church navigates the delicate terrain where its mission intersects mammon, that is, the need for physical resources - structures and money. On the one hand, the just shall live by faith and we should consider the lilies of the field. On the other hand, it is impossible over time to sustain the work of the church without resources. While First Lutheran has not escaped facing this reality, the last twenty-five years have mostly proven heartening, as giving has grown and been sustained and our long-time commitment to contributing 20% of our annual budget to benevolences beyond the congregation - our community and the national church and its ministries-has been sustained. The years between 1994, the start of the building campaign, and 2008, saw a dramatic rise in giving. From a total budget of \$495,000 in 1993, a steady rise in giving led to a total budget for 2008 of \$941,000, a near doubling of the financial resources. And when considered in terms of per capita giving, the increase is even more striking; while the average contribution in 1993 was \$311, in 2008, it was \$773. While budgets since then have remained relatively static, the period of the last 12 years saw low inflation, some erosion of the number of our church membership, plus a significant economic downturn. With the most recent capital campaign, the generosity of our members, and the degree to which that is inspired by the vision of a church serving all

people, leads one to view with hope our resources going forward in service to a larger vision of God's faithfulness and our role in serving as instruments of his grace.

The vision of serving all the people of God is deeply embedded in First Lutheran's identity. The early days of the church involved serving a community of immigrants looking for a home in a strange land. Many were passing through on their way to somewhere else and many were young women, brought from Sweden to the middle of North America to serve as domestic labor. The ethos of service and openness to change is exemplified in many passages in the history of the church - in its transition from an ethnic church to a church for people of various backgrounds, in its relocation to serve the needs of the new church body, in the prominence of social ministry as a part of congregational life, in the desire to double tithe its resources to benevolences beyond its walls, and now, most recently, in the negotiation of a number of changes to extend its service and openness in new ways. It is emblematic that at the start of the last 25 year cycle of the church, as it considered and then raised the funds to build a new addition, it also took on the fund-raising and building of a Habitat for Humanity house as a part of its celebration of the 125th anniversary, which was completed, dedicated, occupied in August of 1996. The last 25 years have seen a number of ways this disposition of service and openness has been extended and nurtured.

### CHANGING

One of the most difficult themes when seeking to decipher what it means to be open has involved human sexuality, for the church at large, and also First Lutheran. The sexual nature of humanity has a long and difficult role to play in Christian understanding, going back to early developments in church practice. The ELCA struggled in the last 25 years to come to terms with this theme, seeking to develop social positions, and to open up church thinking about same-sex relationships. This engendered turbulence. At First Lutheran, consideration of the issue began with discussions led by Pastor Nelson in the summer of 2000, with a six-week long series titled, *"Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality."* Members of First Lutheran from that time remember the large attendance at these sessions and also the civil and respectful nature of the discussion, which avoided some of the recriminations and divisions that often attended the consideration of the topic with the church at large. Partly, this came from the adept pastoral leadership. The

discussions at First preceded the decision of the National Assembly in August of 2001 to study the issue of opening the ministry to gays and lesbians. Pastor Nelson, anticipating the sensitivity of even studying the possibility, enumerated in a *Voice* newsletter article the many changes that came through the Church in the past and how *"God's Holy Spirit has continued to recreate the Church over and over...and will continue to do so through our present controversies."* The study of the issue in the congregation continued in 2002 and 2003, emphasizing, in addition to our unity, the need to remain open to the moving of the Spirit among us. Though there were some individual members who left the church, uncomfortable with what they perceived as a turn away from the traditions of the faith, more notable was how little turbulence resulted from these discussions and the changing perspectives they represented. Not that the issues raised in the early 2000's were resolved at that point, but the willingness to open up the conversation paid dividends over the longer term, as additional statements on sexuality were issued, as the National Assembly first rejected changing church practice concerning acceptance of same-sex clergy and marriage, and then later allowed congregations to call pastors and marry people in same-sex relationships. At First Lutheran, there were further discussions about this in April and June of 2015. In January 2016, a new welcoming statement (our current statement) was adopted, and in October, the Council affirmed same-gender marriage at the discretion of the pastors. In addition, Adult Forum sessions to bring understanding to the congregation about LGBTQA+ people have followed. The issue of sexuality highlights the challenges faced by the church as it lives its mission out amidst changes in the world and finds its unity in Christ.

Of course, other sorts of changes have occurred in the world and at First during these years, as well. One interesting feature of the last 25 years has been the fundamental shifts in technology as a tool of communication. Given that one vital element of the church is communicating with its members, changes in technology present another kind of challenge. It is interesting to consider the technology of 25 years ago (which for some of us doesn't seem all that long ago), when cell phones were still a curiosity, the internet a wonder, newspapers and magazines still printed and delivered, and the fax machine something new-fangled. For one, *The Voice*, the newsletter of the church, was mimeographed and mailed to every member. One of the technology upgrades for 1995 was



the purchase of a new mimeograph machine. But, change was coming. In 2002, the church's website was first up and running, though content developed slowly; the initial notice announces the availability of *The Voice* on the website. In 2008, the first wireless internet hotspot for the church is announced, along with a note in *The Voice* that the pastor's emergency pager is once again operational; the latter technology would rapidly become a relic of the past. The impact of technology is more halting in a congregation which, at least when it comes to the forms of worship, has a strong attachment to tradition, and which must serve older congregants. But, as of 2020, the website is now well developed, most members receive *The Voice* in electronic format, worship assistants are arranged online, and even *Living Lutheran*, the magazine of the national Church, is circulated primarily online. While virtual services are not seemingly in the offing, it is interesting to consider what things will look like in another 25 or 50 years.

One area of First Lutheran's church life where change has come more slowly is worship. Since its early days, music has been a cornerstone of the church's identity. Early church records show a concern for the musical offerings in the church, and in those early years when financial resources were in short supply, funds were still found to build a pipe organ as one of the first improvements in the 13th and K church. Later records of the church affirm the continued pride in the church about the quality of the music. This orientation was more recently affirmed with the fundraising and installation of the current pipe organ in the late 1980's. The author and wife, newly arrived and looking for a church in the late 1980's, asked advice of Lincoln insiders on where one might find "good music." More than once they were directed to 70th and A and one visit by them explained why. And, while there have been adaptations to the musical settings at times - in the late 1960s popular music was experimented with as part of the service, in the late 1990s and early 2000s a "world music" supplement to the hymnal was introduced, periodic jazz orchestration was used in services - on the whole, there has been a strong attachment to tradition when it has come to music. When pastoral vacancies led to self-studies, one consistent sentiment expressed by congregants, when queried about what we should communicate about our church to prospective candidates, was the priority of "good" music. And when change did come to First Lutheran worship, such as the move to every service communion in the 1980s, it was accomplished by an appeal to tradition, to returning to a more authentic sort of worship.

Emblematic of this attachment to traditional worship, when in 2012 there was an attempt to shorten and make more streamlined the 8:15 am service - moving it to 8:30 am and truncating some of its features - this "grab-and-go" format (as one congregant termed it) was quickly withdrawn in the face of pronounced resistance. Though there has been periodic discussion about updating the service, or providing a different sort of service for different tastes - often in the context of trying to attract a more youthful audience or to keep younger people attending, as of 2020, this has not gained traction. On the other hand, the translation for the past year or so of worship to the multi-purpose facility, with its cinder block walls and improvised aesthetic, has been taken in stride, though the promise of a refurbished worship space has perhaps smoothed the acceptance of this innovation.

And, no account of First Lutheran's work would be complete without accenting the prominence of social ministry and service to the community. The last 25 years has sustained and enhanced that dimension of its life. As noted above, the period started with the Habitat House and the continued affirmation, in the midst of a building campaign, of its practice of benevolence. New aspects of our social ministry emerged with the work with prisoners and the welcoming of them to our services. Another dimension of this openness involved the sponsorship of immigrants from Africa and the welcoming of Nuer-speaking worshipers to our services, including their original-language worship in the Chapel, providing the church with another way to understand and experience our unity in Christ. And while the building of our new structure bears the worry that using our resources on ourselves will draw us away from serving the community, the rooting of the building campaign in making a church that is open to all abilities reaffirms that larger aim to be the church open and in service to all the world.

One constant change in any church involves staffing and the last 25 years has not been an exception. At the start of the period, Pastor Fred Nelson was the somewhat recently installed Lead Pastor, with Pastor Don Griffith continuing as his associate. Sister Jean Widmeyer oversaw education, Bonita Johnsen continued in her role as Director of Music while Catie Malone served as Youth Director. Aside from Catie Malone's departure and replacement with Sheri Roberts as Youth Director, this staffing remained in place until the beginning of 2005 when Pastor Nelson resigned to accept a call in Arkansas to be nearer

family. During the interim year, Pastor Bill Shaner filled in as the church searched for a new Lead Pastor, who came in June 2006, after a congregational vote in March (226-0!) to call Pastor Brian Maas. With him came a new staff - Associate Pastor Aaron Erdley in 2007, Sunni Richardson in 2008 and Heidi Widner in 2009, with Bonita Johnsen continuing on as Director of Music. This staffing continued until 2012 when Pastor Maas' election as Bishop of the Nebraska Synod led to another interim period, with Pastor Dennis Anderson serving the congregation as interim Lead Pastor. In August 2013, Dan Warnes was installed as Lead Pastor. Pastor Aaron Erdley's departure in the second half of 2015 led to another pastoral search and the calling of Pastor Justin Eller, who joined First Lutheran in the second half of 2016. Since then, the departure of Heidi Widner led to the arrival of Sharon Hardel, and the retirement of Bonita Johnsen in June 2017 led to Masako and Boyd Bacon taking over her long-time musical legacy. In addition to the changes in major church staff positions, First Lutheran welcomed the services of a string of Vicars during this time period who served us ably and all of whom we wished we could have kept - Juliet Rasi (now Focken), Jody Rice, Norma Malfatti, Sarah Timian, Chris Suehr, Lauren Muratore, Katrina Vigen, Joshua Gyson, Kelsey Fitting-Snyder and Jean McCartney. While the church is the congregation of all believers, part of the blessings First Lutheran has enjoyed involves the leaders and servants who have been sent to us.

### BEING THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Looking beyond the changes and challenges that have faced the church, the record of its activities display the work of all the people of God. From the earliest phase of the church, through all its many changes, it has been the people of First Lutheran who were the Church. A perusal of one edition of *The Voice* (January 16, 2004) provides, in brief, the evidence of this: the Adult Choir gives a concert at Madonna, the youth raise funds for an AWOL trip to Denver ("*don't miss YOUTH SUNDAY!*"), the Worship and Music Committee will be presenting on the new hymnal, the fifth graders study the Ten Commandments and teachers will prepare for the new term, Adult Education continues with a study of ordaining and commissioning people in committed same-sex unions and explores Evangelism for Shy Lutherans, the Spirit Kids are going bowling, a talent show will be held on February 15, preparation is being made for Lenten worship on Wednesdays ("*There will be drama! See Bonita.*"), work to support Friendship Home continues, a new member class is

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being offered, WELCA women will be playing bingo with Tabitha residents (donate items for this in the Bingo Box), there is a reminder of Food Pantry needs and to sign up on the flower chart, and a listing of the latest births, baptisms and sympathies in our congregation, plus notes of thanks from those who were helped in their time of need. This edition of *The Voice* offers one typical moment of the continuing life of the church. The names and images from across the years, some who stayed with us a very long time, others whose time was briefer, are the foundation of the church's continuing life. One can't help notice each year on All Saint's Sunday, when the names of those who passed on during the previous year are read, that individually we are just a moment in a larger drama as God brings the church together to do the work of Christ in the world, both among our members, but also out in the world. And that has continued, not just for 150 years within our institution, but continually in time that preceded and will go on for years to follow. While change is our experience of the church, the true basis of our faith is the faithfulness of God to the body of Christ and the love that engenders among us and toward the world.

## TWO YEARS ON 2020-2022

The text above was composed to be presented to the First Lutheran community at its big 150th celebration in April 2020 which never took place. In a stark reminder of the provisional nature of our life in this world, a pandemic swept the globe, and everything, including First Lutheran, was interrupted, including our plans for celebrating. Quickly, new ways of doing things were improvised (a quote from page 8 is now completely outdated: "*While virtual services are not seemingly in the offing...*"), and we soldiered on, though not without many changes. *The Voice* newsletter in April 2020 announced the cancellation of all activities in the church facility until May 6 (then extended a number of times), as well as ways the ministry would continue, with the celebration of our anniversary waiting until it was safe to do so, with pre-recorded service elements for home-based church, and Adult Forum via Zoom filling the gap. By September, livestreaming of services began and still continue as of April 2022. Advent brought "parking-lot" caroling as we waited for the pandemic to ease. Amidst these changes, there were also changes in our ministerial leadership, with the departures of Deacon Sunni Richardson in April, Pastor Dan Warnes in May and Pastor Justin Eller in October of 2020. In July 2020, Pastor Steve Griffith began his

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interim service while we searched for our new Lead Pastor, assisted by Pastor Bill Peterson, beginning in January of 2021. Ash Wednesday of 2021 brought the return of live in-person worship services, albeit social distanced and masked. Finally, in August of 2021, First Lutheran called Pastor Erin Heidelberger as its new Lead Pastor, the first woman to serve in a lead or assisting pastoral role in the history of the church, with the assistance from September 2021 through February of 2022 of Transitional Pastor, Susanna DesMarais. Upon Pastor DesMarais' call to a church in Grand Island, Pastor Suzanne How joined First Lutheran as Transitional Associate Pastor in March 2022. Amidst all this change, the life of the church continued, because our God is faithful through all the trials of life and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. On April 24, 2022, we will once again celebrate that gift of love to our church community these last 150+2 years. To God be the Glory!

*Thank you to First Lutheran member, Patrick Hayden-Roy, for writing this overview of our history of the last 152 years.*