

# FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH HISTORY

Missoula, Montana

1900 to 1999

Starting in March 1884, the history of the Missouri Synod in Montana spans several years and includes various cities and towns. For this historical summary, however, the focus will be on the roots and expansion of the LCMS fellowship in Missoula, Montana.

## Significant Events: 1900 to 1940

- In May of 1900, Gustav Mertz accepted a call to Western Montana. At that time, there were not enough active members in the Missoula congregation to affiliate with the Missouri Synod. The Ladies Aid Society of the First German Lutheran Church of Missoula organized and became authorized to raise funds and purchase property.
- In June 1901 the foundation for a church on Hazel Street was laid. In September 1902 the first Lutheran building in Missoula was dedicated. By 1903 enough men were available in the congregation to assume leadership duties. At that time, the congregation was formally organized.
- In 1903, Pastor Mertz started a parochial school and personally taught 27 pupils. It closed in 1912. This effort was the first of many in the history of this church to emphasize the value of a Christian education. Pastor Mertz resigned in June of 1919.
- Reverend Henry Kumnick succeeded Mertz in July 1919.
- On August 31, 1924, the church changed its name from the First Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church to the First English Lutheran Church. Worthy of note, during this period services were conducted in both German and English.
- In 1925 land was purchased on Higgins and Daly Avenues for a new church site. Later that same year a parsonage was purchased on 808 Chestnut Street.
- Construction began soon after with the church structure being completed in 1927. That same year Rev. Hugo Lang was installed as Pastor. Later in the year, Rev. Lang accepted a call to Valparaiso University. The Mission Board of the English District appointed Rev. Mel Wertman of Deer Lodge as vacancy pastor.
- The rest of the history between 1927 and 1940 is vague and documentation is very scarce.

## Significant Events: 1940 to 1945

- June 1940 the Rev. Walter Frederick Wolbrecht was installed and became Pastor. He endeavored to restore and unify a congregation in crisis, and he was successful.
- On July 8, 1942, the Ladies Aid Society became a member of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League (L.W.M.L.). Later, the Montana District of the L.W.M.L. was organized and established in October 1943.
- February 1945 the Rev. Robert Mackensen was ordained and installed as Pastor.
- During Pastor Mackensen's pastorate the church moved from a missionary status to a self-sustaining congregation.

## Significant Events: 1950 - 1960

- The name of the church changed from First English Lutheran to First Lutheran.
- September 1950 the Rev. Daniel Ondov was called to First Lutheran. During his pastorate the congregation grew rapidly.
- Pastor Ondov established mission congregations in Stevensville and Superior.
- September 1955, the church opened its first kindergarten.
- 1959, Pastor Ondov accepted a call to Nebraska. That same year First Lutheran received its first vicar – Norman Raedeke.

## Significant Events: 1960 - 1965

- May 1, 1960, the Rev. O. Wm. Luecke was installed as Pastor.

- Significant planning took place in 1961 to address the need for more space to accommodate worship and expand Christian education facilities. It was decided during this period that the best option was to remodel the existing church on Higgins and Daly Avenue.
- After securing financing from the Montana District LCMS and the Church extension fund the remodeling project was initiated in April 1962 and completed in August of that same year.
- This project doubled worship seating to 300, provided large and small classrooms for Sunday School and Kindergarten, added an auditorium and kitchen. Adjoining the church a small gymnasium was also constructed.
- In February of 1964, Rev. Albert G. Pullman, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Eureka accepted a call as missionary-at-large for the Montana District. His chief assignment was to establish a second parish in Missoula.
  - Coupled with this responsibility he initiated a major effort to expand churches located in Seeley Lake, Condon, Superior, and Lolo. This was accomplished by acquiring land with the assistance of the Montana District Office and then building inexpensive A-frame type churches. Much of the labor for these endeavors was from church worker volunteers.
  - Pastor Pullman's efforts to start a second church in Missoula went as far as to release 22 families from First Lutheran to form the nucleus of the new congregation. In addition, land was purchased at the corner of Reserve Street and South Avenue with a Church Extension Fund Loan.
  - A constitution was prepared, and the name "Good Shepherd Lutheran" was chosen for the new group. Unfortunately, a problem arose when it was discovered that various Lutheran churches in Missoula had promised one another that no other Lutheran church would be built within one mile of another Lutheran congregation. Since there was already a Lutheran congregation within this radius, coupled with First Lutheran having second thoughts about losing the 22 released families, the whole project was abandoned.
  - Later, a sister congregation was established (Messiah Lutheran Church) in the Rattlesnake area of Missoula.

#### Significant Events: 1965 – 2000

- Pastor Lueck accepted a call to Huntsville, Texas in 1965 and was replaced by Pastor Pullman as interim pastor.
- On October 3, 1965, Rev. Paul Blunck was installed as Pastor to First Lutheran. Pastor Blunck faithfully served the needs of the congregation until his retirement on October 3, 1993.
- Between 1965 and 1975 First Lutheran purchased more property in the vicinity of the Higgins Avenue church and did extensive upgrading and remodeling of these facilities.
- During this period the congregation also embarked on various outreach initiatives that included a campus ministry, given their proximity to the University of Montana.
- These efforts resulted in more growth to the point to where thoughts were again being given to building a new worship facility.
- In 1969, the congregation became involved in what was called the "Spiritual Life Mission" (SLM). From this initiative the "Satellite Concept" was born. Eventually this concept was adopted and passed as the guiding principle for planning the future growth of First Lutheran.
  - Gamma Delta was a tangential initiative pursued at this time. It included the purchase of a residence with about 10 rooms for limited student housing and an apartment for the Vicar. The idea was to involve selected Lutheran students in the University ministry by providing spiritual leadership and scholarship funds to enable interested students to be a witness to our Lord on campus.
- To clear the way for a day care center, the voters assembly passed a resolution calling for the creation of a second non-profit corporation called the Lutheran Community Center, LLC. This corporation followed the SLM recommendations guiding the church and community outreach programs.

- In 1973 a day care was established on church property with Mrs. Joyce Kruckeberg chosen as Administrator assisted by Kathy Bousfield. In its first year of operation, it proved to be financially self-sufficient.
- Rev. John Fritz was installed in August of 1984 as assistant pastor with an emphasis on serving University students and people who are deaf.
- On October 19, 1993, Rev. Mark Schultz was installed as Senior Pastor after serving as Assistant Pastor.
- After general research, discussion, and planning the congregation purchased property next to Community Hospital on South Avenue in early 1992.
- In 1998 a Stewardship Campaign (First in Christ) was undertaken with the assistance of a consultant, Pathways Ministries. The focus of this effort was on stewardship renewal and spiritual growth by setting goals to develop financial support for a new worship facility and promote congregational fellowship.
- The results of this campaign yielded \$450,000 in pledges.
- On February 28, 1999, a groundbreaking ceremony was conducted. Interim pastors Ray Wiegert and Pastor Herbert Schiefelbein led the service for this event.
- The weather was cold with drizzling rain, but prior preparations for this condition had been anticipated. Shelter was made available to parishioners with a 20' x 40' tent. Music was also provided by the youth band and choir accompanied by an electric keyboard.
- Pastor David W. Renfro was called to serve First Lutheran in the Spring of 1999 and was installed on July 11, 1999.