

A HISTORY OF GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH NORRISTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

Grace Church started as a mission congregation. Mr. Henry Lehman of Trinity Lutheran church on Main St. proposed the start of a mission in the west end of Norristown. His proposal was approved by the Church Council of Trinity, and a lot was purchased on George Street. The first worship service was held on June 7, 1885 in the former Chain St. School at Chain and Airy Sts. The first official meeting of the congregation was held at the home of George W. March on Astor St. Dr. B. K. Johnson was elected president and a committee of six was named to draft a constitution. It is interesting to note that a motion was adopted "that all persons prepare to contribute to the Pastor's support at once."

Robert D. Roeder, then a student at Mt. Airy Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, accepted a call on April 17, 1885, to become the first pastor of the church upon his ordination. On August 30, the Rev. Roeder was installed at the services held in Trinity Lutheran Church, Norristown. A total of 79 members were on the rolls when the charter of the church was approved by Montgomery County President Judge B. M. Boyer on Oct: 12, 1885.

In September 1886 the congregation dedicated its first church on George St., just north of Marshall St. Some 19 years later, on Sept. 2, 1906, a new Grace Church costing some \$44,000 was dedicated on the present site at 506 Haws Ave., property that was purchased for \$10,000.

A history written at the time said in part, ". . . with this splendid church building and an interested active congregation, the outlook for the future of the Lutheran Church in the western part of Norristown is full of promise and encouragement."

The Rev. Roeder served Grace Church until Feb. 21, 1904. The Rev. George A. Kercher was installed as pastor Aug. 7, 1904, and served until June 1, 1915. He was followed by the Rev, A. Charles R. Keiter who served from Nov. 16, 1915 to Dec. 31, 1920.



On Dec. 19, 1920, property at 1 101 W. Airy St., Norristown was purchased as a parsonage for \$5,000. It was sold four years later for \$9,000 when property at 504 Haws Ave. was bought as a parsonage for \$13,500. On Feb. 1, 1921, the Rev. Clarence M. Snyder, was installed as pastor of Grace and served until his death on Oct. 4, 1937.

The Rev. John W. Doberstein became pastor Feb. 15, 1938, and served until June 30, 1943, when he accepted a call to become chaplain and professor of religion at Muhlenberg College, Allentown. In 1942, his book, *On Wings of Healing* was selected as one of the 50 best religious books of the year.

In 1938, certain structural deficiencies were discovered in the church and in October of that year, church council, acting on a report from an architect, closed the building. On Oct. 18th, the Norristown building inspector officially condemned the building.

The last worship service in the church was held Oct. 16th and a week later, services were held in the Norristown YMCA at DeKalb and Chestnut Sts. On Nov. 2nd, the church received permission from the Norristown School District to use Stewart Junior High School, at Selma and Marshall Sts. for church services and Sunday school classes, "at proper rental charge."

The condition of the red sandstone church building necessitated its razing. The congregation developed a comprehensive building program of colonial design and constructed the first unit which was dedicated June 16, 1940, for use as a temporary structure and church school facility. The Rev. Samuel E. Kidd was installed as pastor on Aug. 10, 1943, and resigned the pastorate on Apr. 15, 1953, after being elected stewardship secretary of the Lutheran Ministerium of Pennsylvania. While a student at Mt. Airy Seminary and during the illness of the Rev. Clarence M. Snyder, Mr. Kidd served as supply pastor at Grace.

In June 1945, at the 60th anniversary of the congregation, a final payment was transmitted to Norristown Penn Trust Co. on the \$37,000 loan from 1939 and the mortgage was burned. On Nov. 22, 1953, the Rev. Claude R. Baublitz became pastor of Grace. He resigned on June 15, 1957, to become chaplain of the York, PA County Institution Board.

The Rev. Asa S. Wohlsen, who had served churches in Pottstown and Allentown, accepted a call on Jan. 15, 1957, to become pastor. He was installed at a Vespers service on Feb. 9th. The Rev. Peter N. Wohlsen, D.D. (retired), delivered a sincerely impressive charge to his son at the installation service.

On Oct. 25, 1959, a total of 49 members of Grace Church were granted Letters of Transfer to provide the nucleus of the newly organized St. Andrew's Lutheran Church of Audubon, in Lower Providence Township.

In January 1961, the congregation began to plan for the completion of the building program started in 1939 in order to provide adequate facilities for worship, Christian education, and congregational fellowship. Following completion of architectural drawings construction contracts were awarded in March 1964 to build a new sanctuary and classrooms and to renovate the existing church facility. Additional contracts were awarded for the rebuilding of the organ; chancel, furniture, artwork, and kitchen installation. The new structure was dedicated on Trinity Sunday, June 13, 1965, the 80th anniversary of the congregation. Former pastor, the Rev. Samuel E. Kidd, then the president of the Eastern Pennsylvania Synod, served as officiant for the dedication and delivered the sermon.



On Sept. 10, 1972, Pastor Wohlsen resigned his pastorate and retired from the active ministry. Four months later, on Jan. 28, 1973, the Rev. Frederick P. Schneeberg, who had served as assistant pastor at Grace at the time of Pastor Wohlsen's retirement, was installed as pastor. Pastor Schneeberg resigned as pastor May 31, 1975. Following an exhaustive search by a church council appointed committee, the Rev. John L. Kinzel, who was serving as pastor of University Lutheran Church of the Incarnation, Philadelphia accepted a call to Grace and was installed as pastor on Nov. 23, 1975.

During the Rev. Kinzel's time here, the Lutheran Book of Worship was introduced in 1978, Holy Communion became a weekly service at 8 A.M., a door-to-door evangelism effort was started in the West End of Norristown, a Word and Witness class was begun, an internship program was inaugurated in conjunction with the Lutheran Seminary in Mt. Airy and an additional parking lot for use of church members was purchased on the northwest corner of Airy St. and Haws Ave. The Rev. Kinzel resigned his pastorate and retired from the active ministry on June 10, 1990.

With the retirement of the Rev. Kinzel, the Rev. Paul Cornell served as interim pastor until the Rev. L. George Detweiler accepted a call to become pastor on Feb. 16, 1991. The Rev. Detweiler had previously served churches in New York City and Connecticut. During his tenure at Grace, several new programs were begun. An interpreter for the deaf signed the 10:15 A.M. worship service the first Sunday of every month and the first scholarships were awarded to members who were continuing in higher education. The first Soup Kitchen geared for 30 years and younger with little or no Christian background, a parish nurse program, and an after-school program were also initiated.

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod offices in Philadelphia relocated to Grace and a sign for Grace and the Synod was erected at the corner of Airy St. and Haws Ave. A hymnal supplement, *With One Voice*, was introduced and new sets of paraments for the altar, pulpit, and lectern were purchased in the colors of the church seasons. In 1997 Grace Church welcomed the Rev. Kay Hollinger as an associate pastor. The building also saw changes: in Grace Hall and in the narthex, carpet was laid, and the Narthex cloak room renovated into a kitchenette.

On Mar. 15, 2001 the Rev. Detweiler resigned as pastor to become interim pastor at a church in Baltimore, Maryland and the Rev. Vicki Hall was assigned to Grace as interim pastor for a short period by the Synod. The Rev. Janice A. Vogt was then appointed by the Synod for a term of three years beginning Jan. 16, 2002 She was so well liked that the congregation requested a special exception to allow the Rev. Vogt to become the new pastor. The Synod agreed and the Rev. Janice A. Vogt accepted the call on Nov. 16, 2003.

Since the Rev. Vogt has been with Grace, the intern program returned to Grace, a Director of Youth Ministry was hired, and the after-school program was restarted. A Kids' Night Out program, a coffeehouse for youth program and a five-week summer camp were initiated. A new hymn book, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* was introduced, the Synod offices relocated to the Seminary campus in Mt. Airy, and the ACPPA, an arts program for children took up residency in the building. When ACPPA closed, it was replaced by Community Arts Norristown. The church opened its doors to additional NA groups, the Girl Scouts, the LuLu Dollz, a program for young girls, and three different worshipping communities: Power in the Cross, Redemption 1010 and Seventh Day Adventists. It also became the site for the Community Interfaith Food Pantry which serves over 350 families a month.

Throughout Grace's history, music has been an integral part of its worship. Special music and extra instrumentalists and the Handbell Choir enhanced the celebration of Christmas and Easter. The Adult choir was so dedicated that they sang every Sunday even during the summer.

The congregation voted at a special meeting in July 2019 to adopt a resolution for Holy Closure. It was the desire of the congregation to be faithful stewards of its remaining endowment. These funds will used to support the needs of the neighborhood as well as contributing to the Mission Fund of the Synod. The final worship service was scheduled for January 12, 2020, with Bishop Patricia Davenport preaching and presiding.

