

This history is a tribute to Pastor Paul Brauns who served Zion Church for 41 years. The church is celebrating its 167<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Think about it. Pastor Brauns ministered to Zion for almost one quarter of its history.

### **The History of Zion United Church of Christ, Peru IL, 1852-1941**

Zion United Church of Christ traces its origins to a mere coincidence; a chance meeting between two individuals in 1852. Rev. William H. Uhl, an ordained Lutheran clergyman and graduate of Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, was travelling through Peru in 1852 with no intention of settling in that city. Rev. Uhl boarded with local resident David Lininger during his stay. Lininger prevailed on Rev. Uhl to preach a sermon once it was discovered that he was a Lutheran minister who spoke both English and German. Peru in the early 1850's was a burgeoning city with a large German immigrant population. Uhl chronicled in his autobiography that it appeared the whole city descended upon Brewster's Hall when the public learned Uhl was to preach. He spoke in English at the morning service. Peru's German residents insisted Uhl preach in German at an afternoon service. Peru's English-speaking residents asked that Uhl again preach in English that evening. Rev. Uhl was initiated into the ministry at Peru by preaching three services in two languages, all in the same day. Zion Church was organized September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852 as "The First German and English Evangelical Lutheran Church of Peru." Rev. Uhl served as pastor and David Lininger became a church trustee.

The history of Zion is sketchy from 1852 to the mid-1860's. Three pastors, Rev. Uhl, Rev. Rosenberger, and Rev. Mueller known as the "Circuit Rider-Preachers" served Zion from 1852-1859. Rev. J. Zimmerman (at one time president of the Evangelical Synod of North America) served as pastor at Zion from 1859-1862. Rev. H. Siekmann served as pastor from 1862-early 1866. It is not known for certain where the congregation worshipped at this time. It is believed that property at the northeast corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Grant St., as well as property at the southeast corner of the same intersection, site of the first parsonage, was purchased in 1862; however, there is conflicting information. *The LaSalle County Directory for 1858-1859* lists the following: "First German and English Lutheran Protestant (Church), Sixth St., corner of LaSalle (now Grant), organized 1852, services, 10:30am and 1:30pm, Without a Pastor at present. An article in *the Peoria Journal Transcript*, August 7, 1927 on Zion's Diamond Jubilee provides a clue: "When the first church was opened a small building sufficed for the worshippers, but the parish so increased in size that the original building was razed, and the present church was erected in 1871." (1871 appears to be an incorrect date.) Perhaps a building used as a place of worship existed at this site before the congregation purchased the property.

Rev. L. Austmann served as pastor from 1866 to 1874. Revs. Siekmann and Austmann also served as pastors at Immanuel Lutheran Church between 1864 and 1866. The present church sanctuary was built in 1866. The *Frauenverein*, Women's Guild/Ladies Aide Society, was founded in 1866. The congregation authorized the construction of a bell tower in 1871. Two bells were purchased and installed in the tower in 1872. *The 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History, 1852-1942* chronicles that Zion took great pride in calling members "to worship by means of the clear ringing of bells which were imported from Germany...In the summer of 1891, the old tower was struck by lightning and then steps were taken to construct the present tower with its high steeple."

Two pastors, Rev. L. Luer and Rev. O. Nietheimer, served Zion from 1874 to 1882. Zion purchased its first organ in 1879. Rev. David Ankele served as pastor at Zion from 1882 until 1886. A Peru city directory from the mid-1880's records that a parochial school existed at Zion: "*German Evangelical Zion School* – 6<sup>th</sup> ne (northeast) corner of LaSalle (Grant): Rev. David Ankele, principal."

Rev. S.E. Hoffmeister served as pastor at Zion for 14 years from May 2, 1886 until his death on February 11, 1900. In 1889 the old parsonage was sold and a new parsonage to the east of the church was built. Rev. Hoffmeister became ill in late fall of 1889. He was assisted with pastoral responsibilities by Rev. Mernitz until his death.

Rev. Paul Brauns served as pastor at Zion from April 29, 1900 until his death on June 9, 1941. He was born in Heisede, Hanover, Germany, on January 27, 1864. He attended Goettingen and Heidelberg Universities in Germany before immigrating to the U.S. in 1881. Pastor Brauns completed his theological training at the Lutheran College in St. Louis and was ordained as a minister in February of 1885. He served two Lutheran churches in Chicago before arriving in Peru.

Both Pastor Brauns and the people of Zion faced many challenges during his long tenure. He left his imprint on the church and community in many ways. The congregation celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1902. A third bell was installed in the tower and a building fund was started for expansion of the sanctuary. Membership at Zion continued to increase in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The increased membership necessitated an enlargement of the church. The congregation authorized a 32 ft. addition to the north providing more seating capacity in the sanctuary and more room for the Sunday School downstairs. Construction took place in 1905. A souvenir booklet chronicles the completion of the new addition and rededication ceremony on Jan. 21, 1906. The 1911 *Twentieth Anniversary Souvenir Edition of The LaSalle Tribune* (p.52) reported that Zion's membership ranged from 400-500 with 235 voting members.

Zion made the transition from an Evangelical Lutheran church to an affiliation with the Evangelical Synod of North America during Pastor Braun's tenure. The Evangelical Church is a variation of the German Protestant movement dating back to the Reformation. In 1817, the King of Prussia, on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther issuing his 95 theses, combined the Lutheran and Reformed churches within his kingdom. The result was the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union. German immigrants brought their Evangelical church with them as they came to America. The German Evangelical Synod was established in 1840 in the St. Louis area. Pastor Brauns served Zion Church in a dual role: first as a Lutheran minister, and second as an Evangelical minister.

Pastor Brauns called the first citizens' meeting on July 5, 1907 for the purpose of organizing a hospital association as a first step toward a new up-to-date hospital for Peru. His efforts culminated in the creation of People's Hospital, now IVCH, which opened in May of 1914. IVCH is one of his lasting legacies.

World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, The U.S. declared war against Germany in 1917. It became unpatriotic to speak German or embrace German culture. This unfortunate event posed a dilemma for Peru's German American community and its German speaking churches. St. John's Lutheran Church and Zion Church reacted differently to this anti-German sentiment. The decisions they made affected each congregation for decades. The leadership at St. John's Church decided that church services should be in English rather than German. St. John's Lutheran Church reorganized in 1919 and made the transition from a German-speaking church to an English-speaking church. Pastor Brauns continued to conduct services at Zion in German during World War I.

Pastor Braun's insistence on conducting services in German caused problems at Zion that continued until his death. One must remember that a language is more than a means of communication; it is a vehicle of culture. Many older members felt comfortable with services in German, the language to which they were accustomed. Many younger members no longer understood German, resented the fact that church services were in German, and did not feel an affinity to German culture. Pastor Brauns delivered excellent sermons in German but was uncomfortable speaking English. However, the congregation demanded that he conduct services in English. German continued to be his preferred language. Membership at Zion declined. Former Zion members began attending services at St. John's Lutheran Church and Peru Congregational Church.

Pastor Brauns celebrated 50 years as an ordained minister at a special Golden Jubilee Service on Feb. 10, 1935. The final years of his ministry at Zion were fraught with difficulties. Church attendance was low. Both the Guild and Choir remained large and active. As Pastor Brauns health declined, he was barely able to perform his duties. His family helped maintain the functions of the church. Mrs. Brauns continued to act as church secretary recording council minutes in German. Son Paul Jr. "Pete" continued to act as treasurer. Pastor Brauns announced at the Easter Service on April 13, 1941 that he would retire from the ministry on August 1, 1941. He purchased a home on West 4<sup>th</sup> St. for retirement. He conducted his last service on Mother's Day, May 11, 1941. He never made it to retirement. Pastor Brauns died on the morning of June 9, 1941 at age 77, in the church parsonage. His funeral services were held at Zion church on Thursday, June 12, with services both in German and English. He was buried at Peru City Cemetery.

Pastor Brauns was Zion's beloved pastor who had ministered to his church family for 41 years. For many parishioner's he was the only pastor they knew. He baptized them, confirmed them, married them, and officiated at the funeral of loved ones. Pastor Brauns reached out into the community. He considered unchurched German immigrants to be members of his flock and ministered to their needs. It is said that he never turned down a request to officiate at a

funeral, bringing comfort and closure to grieving family members. Many could not understand his Old World ways, his affinity to German culture, and his difficulty adjusting to change. No one could question his integrity, his commitment to his profession, and his love and service to his church and his community. His role in the creation of People's Hospital/IVCH is a testament of his commitment to the citizens of Peru.

Postscript:

The Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Reformed Church in 1934 to become the Evangelical and Reformed (E&R) denomination; Zion Church did not join until 1945. The E&R denomination merged with the Congregational/ Christian Church to become the United Church of Christ (UCC) in 1957. Because of Pastor Brauns' decision to withdraw from the Ev. Lutheran denomination and join the Evangelical Synod, Zion Church has evolved into the UCC Church of today.

Submitted by Bill Johnson