



THE HISTORY OF

LUTHER MEMORIAL CHURCH

BY WALT MINER

The Shaping of Luther Memorial Church

Dear Reader:

The most important thing to know about Luther Memorial Church is that you are welcome here—whether you have come on some practical errand, as a visitor, as a new member, or as a life-long member with family here before you; whether out of curiosity or from attraction to the place, the services, or the fellowship—whether you are at peace or happy, tired or anxious, in pain or sorrow. You are welcome here whether someone is at hand to tell you so or not: the very stones are here to express it, the stained glass, the high vaulting of the nave, every carving in the altar, the music of organ and choir, the services of worship, the traditions and history. And the people, all bearing in faith their own burdens and sharing those of others.

You are invited to read this online booklet because it hopes to show something of how and why Luther Memorial came to be here, how it was shaped and grew (and sometimes shrank), how it gained strength (sometimes even in times of trouble or disaster), what makes it the particular kind of congregation it has become, even as it continues to change in order to serve.

Not much will be said here of doctrine, though like other Lutheran churches it greatly prizes its Reformation heritage, interpreted by a well educated and thoughtful clergy and understood by caring lay members. But learning about faith and other deep realities is a life-long search, and this booklet is short. One question touching on this topic, though, can be asked as a kind of preface:

What is a Church?

In daily speech it's often a building, but also an organization, a religious fellowship, a pattern of changing activities and goals spread (in this instance) over more than a hundred years—and thus, a history. It is made—and continuously remade—by the One who says “Behold, I make all things new.” He has made it of the people among whom He placed it, and has drawn to it, and in the making has even used some of the choices they have made, or almost made, or failed to make. He has shaped it partly by the setting where he placed it: its neighborhood, the countryside or city in all its uniqueness, the changing times through which it continues to pass.

But also, it's something *beyond* time, surrounding time: the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, a Holy Fellowship, a Cloud of Witnesses where even two or three gathered together may be truly in their Lord's presence: an eternal reality, once described (by C. S. Lewis's elderly devil Screwtape) as “spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners.”

In some mysterious way, Luther Memorial is both of these realities, in time yet timeless, at once. We can speculate but not fully know how that happens or even what it means. But whether you believe, or hope, or only wonder if it is true—or entirely disbelieve it—we hope you may be nourished by reflecting on Luther Memorial’s story.

“The Language of the Children”

In the spring of 1889 Dr. William Keller Frick, a young professor at the then new Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, was invited by the Home Mission Board of the national General Council of Lutheran Churches to take the lead in bringing “the faith of the fathers in the language of the children” to the former Northwest Territories. There was not then a single predominantly English speaking Lutheran Church in the new state of Wisconsin and perhaps anywhere in the former Northwest Territories.

Dr. Frick first organized the Church of the Redeemer in Milwaukee as a home base with at least some services in English. In 1891 he advertised a meeting in Madison to discuss the possibility of a wholly English speaking Lutheran congregation. Nothing came of it. Seven years later English services were provided by a church in Racine, where the Rev. G. F. Gehr was pastor.

Seven years passed, and in the spring of 1905, during a horse-drawn tally-ho ride at a Luther League gathering in Milwaukee, Pastors Frick and Gehr were talking about high school students in their congregations and how they might fare when they entered college that fall in a Madison with no English speaking Lutheran services. They could also have known of immigrant congregations elsewhere in the West already struggling to maintain membership, and some shrinking, a few even facing collapse as their English speaking children more and more found worship in the “old” language nearly unbearable. As they rode along and talked, the two pastors realized that they already knew a few people who might serve in Madison as Sunday School teachers, a sexton, and an organist for a wholly English speaking congregation—if only one might come to exist there.

That October a meeting was advertised in Madison at the State Street home of the Carl H. Juergens family, recent arrivals from Milwaukee. Seven people came. It led however to a canvassing of dormitories and sororities and recruiting of Sunday School pupils by house calls. Students and professors at a Lutheran seminary in Chicago came from time to time to help. The planning group met upstairs at a “Palace of Sweets” on State Street, then in a dance hall, in a college book store, and in homes. The first service was held on November 19 in Keeley’s Hall, conducted by Western Field Missionary Rev. A. C. Anda with 14 present.

When the new church was organized on May 23, 1907, as “Holy Trinity Lutheran Church,” 35 adult members signed its constitution. In addition many students at the University of Wisconsin took part as associate members. One of the founding members and first organist, Olga Nelson Berg, later wrote that Pastor Frick’s “brilliant oratorical talents, missionary zeal, and dynamic personality” had earned him the informal title of

“Bishop of the Northwest.” The Rev. Howard R. Gold was called to become the first pastor of the new congregation and arrived in July.

Early Rapid Growth

The new English-speaking church met a real need and soon grew rapidly. It met in a hall above the College Book Store on Capitol Square but had outgrown it in less than a year. On September 1, 1908 it rented a former Synagogue building now still standing in James Madison park but then located on West Washington Avenue and Henry Street, outgrew that too, and built its own chapel seating 350 near the corner of University and Lake Street, where that building still sits with its churchly architecture now housing (after several other uses) “The Church Key Bar.” The original name was changed to Luther Memorial to avoid confusion with another Trinity Lutheran Church on Madison’s east side and to honor the 300th anniversary of the Reformation. Growth of the all-English church was perhaps also partly spurred by the outbreak of World War I, which raised harsh suspicion of Germany and Germans and even of foreigners in general. The economic prosperity which followed the war also helped.

Continuing growth in members and attendance encouraged even more ambitious building plans. Moreover when these were frustrated in 1910 by the University’s purchase of the intended site by its power of eminent domain, plans shifted to a virtual Lutheran “cathedral,” for the entire Northwestern Synod of its national church body (though without either the supervisory authority or revenue that such a title might imply). It was to be very large, with seating for over 1650 worshippers, and in an imposing neo-Gothic style. For its outer walls and tower over 7,000 tons of stone were hauled 200 miles by rail from a quarry north of Eau Claire.

Construction began in 1921, and on October 28, 1923, the congregation dedicated what a newspaper of the day called “Madison’s new Luther Memorial Cathedral,” the largest church building then in Madison and the only church of any kind west of Capitol Square. Rapid growth continued, with 125 adults received into membership at a single service one Easter in the late 1920s and child baptisms by then totaling more than 800.

Half a century (and a second world war) later, the Lutheran change to English in Madison was virtually complete in what by then was not *one* but some *two dozen* Lutheran churches in the metropolitan area. The Lutheran “cathedral” for all the northern Midwest states had become a downtown city church, with a confidence grounded on rapid early growth and great energy that would soon help it to endure great trials.

Blessing in Times of Trial

The congregation had grown amazingly in membership just six years after completing the largest church building in Madison, with congregational programs to match. Pastor A. J. Soldan, the chief mover of that achievement, had accepted a call to California in April. In

September Pastor Carroll J. Rockey arrived and launched a campaign to raise \$100,000 toward paying down the \$225,000 mortgage (many millions in today's economy).

Just a month later, the U. S. stock market crashed and the worldwide Great Depression followed. The "\$100,000 campaign" brought only \$40,000 in pledges, of which only \$8,000 was actually received. Membership declined sharply. By 1937 funds for mortgage payments could not be found, and creditors were insistent. A bankruptcy sale of the church property was ordered. But a reprieve was managed. The property was indeed sold, but not by the county sheriff: the national United Lutheran Church (then financially strong) was the purchaser, through its Board of American Missions, and deeded the whole property back to the congregation for the startling bargain price it had paid: \$3,000 cash plus a \$50,000 mortgage. The church set about rebuilding its membership, hope, and determination to survive. The pastor of those hard days, Carroll J. Rockey, later wrote of that struggle, "With a congregation intact and a property saved Luther Memorial could march on to the glory which should be hers! The duty was plain, and statesmanship, whose details are not known, are not in print and never will be, accomplished the end result."

The anxiety, discouragement, and great danger of failure were real. Yet through them the congregation was seasoned, toughened, strengthened, and enriched. The end of World War II in 1945 brought home millions of military men and women, followed by whole new subdivisions of housing in Madison as throughout the country. That led to what came to be called The Baby Boom generation which with other new members brought Luther Memorial to the largest size in its history, and a deepening of liturgical worship that has ever since been a principal feature of its life. The mortgage was paid off in 1948. Since then building expansions and renovations have been frequent and sometimes extensive, silently encouraged by that earlier deliverance.

The church has endured other severe losses. In 1970 after growing demonstrations and rioting against the war in Viet Nam, a University building across the street was bombed late one night by a small group of protesters. The blast killed a researcher and, even from nearly a block away, severely damaged the church's stained glass windows and roof. A few years later an arsonist broke into the church, torched newly purchased choir robes and hymnals and caused extensive smoke damage throughout the building.

In the 1980s Pastor Bremer, who greatly deepened the church's capacity for liturgical worship, proposed moving communion from the stone altar in the shallow chancel area to a new, free-standing altar on a forward platform with pastor facing the congregation and members kneeling on three sides. After months of fierce debate a temporary platform and altar were installed for six months, then dismantled and stored. Debate continued, and four years later it was reinstalled (the wood now painted to resemble terrazzo) and, after still more debate, was allowed to remain, become fully accepted, and appreciated. Recollections of those events, even today, suggest that the congregation debated fiercely for years while remaining united in friendship and in Christ.

Blessing within Blessings

This brief booklet has shown only glimpses of Luther Memorial Church, based on records and recollections covering more than a century, barely a fragment of the deep reality known fully only to its Maker and Lord. In some sense, though, that whole reality *is* suggested and even known to members and friends, however thinly we may sometimes be conscious of it. The errors and inadequacies of our knowledge, however, cannot diminish the presence of the One that created the church, who saves it, and continually shines through it. We hope his blessing may fall on all who come here for worship, prayer, comfort, shelter, or even (it may be at first) only from curiosity.