

Altoona, Pennsylvania

+ A BRIEF HISTORY +
Sources

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- 2) **A GOLDEN SHEAF OF HISTORY and DEDICATION OF FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH**, May 21-24, 1897, Geo. W. Curfman, R. Rhoades, and Will V. Glenn. Geo. W. Curfman, Altoona, PA, 1897.
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- 4) **THE DEDICATION OF THE NEW EDUCATIONAL BUILDING AND RENOVATIONS**, First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Altoona, PA, July 25, 1971.
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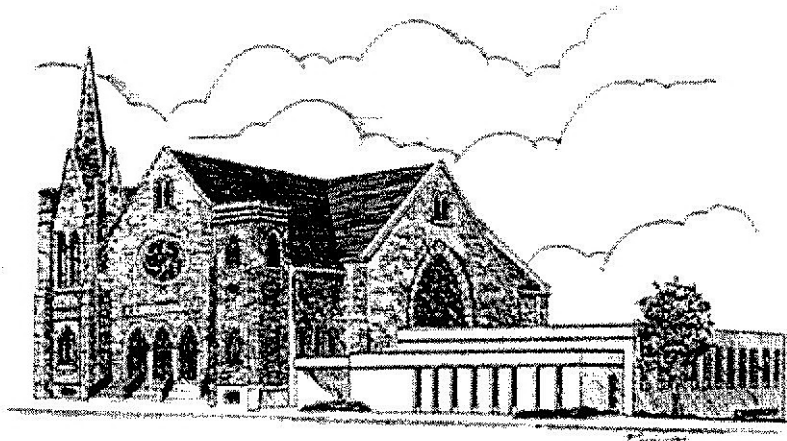
FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

Altoona, Pennsylvania

+ A BRIEF HISTORY +

The 100th Anniversary of the Church Building

1896 - 1996



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FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The dream of erecting the church building that now stands on the corner of 12th Avenue and 14th Street, Altoona, remained only a dream for many years before becoming the imposing reality for which we celebrate this 100th Anniversary in 1996. Countless difficulties and discouragements were encountered through several years of planning for a new building. Then on February 11, 1896, The Rev. Dr. Michael W. Hamma, the pastor at that time (1896-1898), invited eight or ten of the most prominent members of the congregation to confer with him privately on this matter. By the close of that meeting it had been determined that the existing church property could be sold for \$40,000, and enough money was pledged by those present to assure the financial feasibility of building a new structure. Thus, the First Lutheran Church that we admire and cherish today came into being.

The raising of congregational monies for building the new church actually began much earlier, on June 1, 1891. By September 1, 1895, member pledges toward the project totaled \$25,252, leaving only \$19,000 yet to be raised. By May 1896, the valuable property on Eleventh Avenue between 14th and 15th Streets, on a lot sized 100 feet by 110 feet, was sold. The site for the new building on the corner of 12th Avenue and 14th Street, a 100 by 120-foot lot acquired during the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Elias D. Weigle (1887-1895), was prepared for construction.

The formal ground breaking for the new building was held on April 3, 1896. Since the ladies of the congregation had been primarily instrumental in soliciting and acquiring support for the building program, they were given the honor of actually breaking the soil. A silver-plated pick and shovel, still displayed in the church today, was presented to the Ladies' Aid Society as a memento of the occasion. It is said that the Logan Band played hymn tunes as the ceremony progressed; a young boy of the congregation wheeled away some of the freshly broken soil in a miniature wheelbarrow; then Pastor Hamma dismissed the gathering with a benediction just before a snow squall burst over the scene.

Part II

Excavation for the cellar of the new church began on May 19, 1896, followed in only a few weeks by the laying of the cornerstone on July 18th. The day was favored with pleasant weather for the ceremony, which began at 3:00 p.m., with a large assemblage of members of the congregation and their friends. Lutheran clergymen from throughout the city participated in the readings from Scripture and in offering prayer. Pastor Hamma praised his congregation for its faith and enthusiastic determination in its unyielding labor to bring the building project to that day in the short span of only six years. An offering amounting to \$150 in additional contributions was collected. (That was a sizable offering, considering that 5¢ to 25¢ per person was a common contribution at most church services in those days.) After singing a hymn, the cornerstone was cemented into place by masons. Floral offerings made by six young boys and six young girls from the Sunday School were laid upon it, and the president of the Ladies' Aid

Society laid a sheaf of wheat on the flowers. Then everyone joined in singing the Doxology and the festivities ended as the pastor pronounced a benediction.

The sealed copper box placed into the hollow of the 1896 cornerstone contains the following items:

- * The Holy Bible
- * The Book of Worship
- * The Report of the Synod, 1895
- * The daily newspapers of Altoona, July 18, 1896
- * Periodicals of the Lutheran Church--The Observer, the World Evangelist, and the Luther League Review The Lutheran Almanac, 1896
- * Coins bearing the date 1853 (the only items surviving from the 11th Avenue church cornerstone)
- * U. S. coinage, 1896 -- \$1, 50¢, 25¢, 10¢, 5¢, and 1¢
- * The Report of the Sunday School, 1896
- * The Program for laying the 1896 cornerstone
- * A paper listing the names of the following:
 - The President & Vice President of the United States
 - The Governor of Pennsylvania
 - The Mayor of Altoona
 - Present & past officers of the church
 - Members of the Women's Home & Foreign Missionary Society
 - Members of the Ladies' Aid Society
 - Members of the Mission Band
 - Members of the Children's Society
 - Members of the King's Sons
 - Members of the Luther League
 - Members of the Building Committees
 - The architects who designed the new church
 - The builder of the new church

The First Lutheran congregation continued to meet in its 11th Avenue church building until Memorial Day, December 27, 1896, the day of its formal leave-taking from that building. The last Lord's Day morning service celebrated in the old building was held during the regular Sunday morning worship hour; it was long remembered for its unusual impressiveness" and Pastor Hamma's "able and instructive sermon." Then at 2:15 p.m., the Sunday School met to say farewell under the leadership of its superintendent. Speakers included two former superintendents, whose addresses merited a hearty Chautauqua salute (the boisterous waving of handkerchiefs). Letters from other former superintendents were read and brief but appropriate remarks were made by the assistant superintendent and the pastor. These many reminiscences clearly conveyed a sense of sadness at leaving familiar surroundings mingled with hopeful anticipation of expanded opportunities for the Sunday School in its new facility. After singing "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," the audience was dismissed. Finally, in an evening service attended by a more-than-capacity crowd of church members and friends, the last regular meeting in the old church began. The service consisted principally of further reminiscences and historical addresses made by members of the congregation, Scripture reading, hymn singing, and a brief sermon by Pastor Hamma entitled "Bidding Farewell." After a warm gesture of appreciation for the pastor's leadership in bringing the building project to completion (a form of ovation in which the entire

congregation respectfully rose in body), a hymn was sung, the benediction was said and First Evangelical Lutheran Church on 11th Avenue, Altoona, closed its doors for the last time.

Part III

On the first Sunday of the new year, January 3, 1897, a jubilant congregation gathered for the first time in the newly-erected church. All the meetings on that day were held in the Sunday School rooms. The decorations alone demonstrated a poignant expression of the collective gratitude of the members of First Church for God's blessing of their efforts in bringing their building project to fruition.

"A canopy made of strips of delicately-tinted paper, hundreds in number, was erected over the room. The outer border of the canopy was decorated with thousands of little green leaves, while the iron pillars were covered with paper and garlanded with vines and roses from top to bottom. In front three large panels were erected, one on the left bearing the date "1846," while the one on the right bore the date "1896." The central panel in the rear of the altar was made entirely of vines and carnations, and was in itself a work of art. Roses and sweet peas were used in the side panels. A large floral wreath, made by Mother Way, adorned the altar."

No record is available for the worship attendance on that first day in the new building, but the titles of both the morning and evening sermon are known: "What Mean Ye By These Stones?" and "So Teach Us to Number Our Days That We May Apply Our Hearts unto Wisdom." The Sunday School's celebration was held in the afternoon. Including officers and teachers, there were 700 members in attendance. Without a doubt, for many members of the congregation who gathered to celebrate that wonderful day in this church's history, January 3, 1897, was one of the truly monumental days of their lives.

The services of dedication encompassed an entire weekend of festivities, Friday evening through Monday evening, May 21-24, 1897. The guest speakers included two former pastors, The Rev. Dr. Milton J. Firey (1883-1886) and The Rev. Dr. E. D. Weigle. The chief dedicatory services were held on the Lord's Day, May 23rd, with Pastor Hamma presiding at the Act of Dedication in the evening service. To grasp the sense of fellowship and thanksgiving that must certainly been apparent in the congregation that day, consider the following description of the afternoon gathering of the Sunday School:

"At 2:15 o'clock the Sabbath school convened in the Sunday school room in charge of the superintendent, George W. Curfman. After the school was called to order and the necessary class work done, the choir sang "When the Roll Is Called up Yonder," when the school proceeded to the main auditorium. Singing and addresses were made by the Lutheran ministers of the city, as well as the visiting clergymen. The Primary department sang several selections. At this point of the exercises, T. B. Patton, of Huntingdon, a former superintendent of the school, stepped forward, when four little girls advancing, to the sweet strains of music, unveiled a beautiful Italian marble baptismal font, bearing the following inscription:

**"IN HONOR OF
REV. M. W. HAMMA, D. D. AND WIFE.
PRESENTED BY THE SUNDAY SCHOOL."**

Mr. Patton then presented, in pleasing manner, the font to the church in behalf of the school in honor of Dr. Hamma and wife. Dr. Hamma accepted the gift in an appreciative manner. The exercises closed, all joining in singing "God Be with You Till We Meet Again," and the benediction pronounced."

The total cost of the new church building was \$90,000. The mortgage covering this cost was burned in an appropriate ceremony on March 2, 1902, during the pastorate of The Rev. Oliver C. Roth (1898-1908).

Part IV

The preeminent architectural style of the 1896 church building (approximately one half of the structure known as First Evangelical Lutheran Church today) is Gothic, with its pointed arches, graceful outlines and lofty spire, pointing like the finger of faith always heavenward. The roof line of the building is simple, although the exterior denotes a Latin cross shaped plan. Most of the interior is comprised of two large rectangular assembly halls: The main floor worship space, accented with an elliptical vaulted ceiling and a horseshoe shaped gallery, and the lower level Festal Hall (Sunday School room) with kitchen and toilet facilities. The building's steel superstructure and its substantive Ohio buff stone veneer certainly make this church one of the most permanent structures in Altoona. Charles M. Robinson and M. V. Hughes, both of Altoona, were the architect and the builder contracted to design and create this house of worship and learning that has helped to influence the faith of thousands of believers over the past one hundred years.

One enters the main floor of the church by way of a wide stone staircase of ten steps leading from the avenue to the main entrance, a triple set of double doors set into pointed stone arches, and through a narrow vestibule into the nave. Of the magnificent treasures housed in this building, the first catches the eye immediately upon entering the nave in the sumptuous feast of art and color that are the priceless stained glass windows of this church. All the windows were produced in the studios of Redding, Baird & Company of Boston, and they were installed here in 1897. The various scenes depicted in stained glass were personally chosen by Pastor Hamma. The sixteen primary panels include the Lutheran reformers and prominent events in the earthly life of Jesus Christ in historic order.

Included among the presentations in stained glass are:

- 1) "Martin Luther," adapted from the sculptured monument at Worms.
- 2) "The Virgin Mary," adapted from Murillo's painting "The Assumption."
- 3) "The Nativity of Our Lord," adapted from a famous Renaissance painting.
- 4) "Journey into Egypt," adapted from the painting by Furst.
- 5) "The Boy Jesus Teaching in the Temple," adapted from the painting by Hoffman.
- 6) "The Baptism of Our Lord," a semi-original composition.
- 7) "Jesus Walking on Water," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 8) "The Raising of Lazarus," a semi-original composition.
- 9) "Jesus Praying in Gethsemane," adapted from the painting by Hoffman.

- 10) "Jesus before Pilate," adapted from the painting by Munkacsy.
- 11) "Jesus Bearing the Cross," a semi-original composition.
- 12) "The Resurrection of Our Lord," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 13) "The Walk to Emmaus," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 14) "The Ascension of Our Lord," adapted from the painting by Bierman.
- 15) "The Gate of Heaven," an original composition in both its subject and all its essential details by Pastor Michael W. Hamma.
- 16) "Philip Melanchthon," an original portrait.

Much of the glass utilized to create the religious scenes and portraits noted above is of the layered variety known to artisans in stained glass as "drapery glass." As it was originally produced in Belgium, "drapery glass" is believed to have been heated to around 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Pigments were "puddled" into the heated glass with charcoal sticks. Varying intensities of the same color were achieved after the glass cooled by layering two or more pieces of the glass face-to-face, thereby deepening the tone. This type of stained glass was especially used for the creation of effective skylines and the delicately contrasting tones and shadings in the garments worn by biblical figures or portrait subjects.

The last two panels noted above do not appear today in their original locations. "The Gate of Heaven" panel is now located where the "Philip Melanchthon" panel originally appeared. The "Melanchthon" panel was removed during a 1949 renovation project and later relocated inside the lower 14th Street entrance to the Festal Hall (Sunday School chapel), where it remains today.

In 1949, as part of a major renovation of the worship space of the church, all the stained glass windows were removed and disassembled, with each piece of glass being cleaned and resealed, resulting in the complete restoration of each window to its original condition. Yet, another 41 years would pass by before steps would be taken to assure the proper protection of these beautiful windows. The reason for this was undoubtedly the high cost of accomplishing the task, not willful neglect.

Finally in 1991, hoping to safeguard to the fullest possible extent the irreplaceable works of art that are theirs in this church's stained glass windows, the First Lutheran congregation contracted with Phillips Stained Glass Studio, Inc., Canonsburg, to clean and seal each window behind customized Plexiglas storm shields. Most of the work, including the construction of each individually fitted iodized frame, was done on site. The job began early in the spring of that year and was not finished until late fall, at a total cost of \$60,000.

Part V

As the following historical sketch clearly reveals, First Lutheran Church, Altoona, has been in an almost constant state of repair, renovation, improvement, or expansion since the day of its initial completion in 1897.

In 1904, extensive alterations were made to the building and a magnificent three-manual Pilcher pipe organ was installed in the chancel. These improvements cost about \$7,500. During that same year, a parsonage was erected beside the church on 12th Avenue at a cost of about \$6,500.

Major repairs were made to the slate and copper trimmed church roof in 1911, early in the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Marion Justus Kline (1908-1934). Excavation was completed to build the Henry Baker room below the Festal Hall (Sunday School room) and the heating system was enlarged and improved. The interior of the church was redecorated in buff and tan, and the furniture and woodwork were cleaned and revarnished. The cost of these renovations was about \$2,300.

In 1919, a new lighting system was installed and the interior of the church was redecorated in white and ivory. The cost was \$4,000. Early in the nineteen-twenties, the stairway from the main Sunday School lobby and Festal Hall to the upper 14th Street entrance was erected. Then in 1926, the interior of the church was again redecorated, new lights were installed again, and other minor improvements were made at a cost of \$5,100.

The congregation undertook its first major expansion of the church facility in 1927, with the erection of a new Sunday School building behind the parsonage and extending along the alley. To accommodate the new addition, a new and expanded heating system was installed. The total cost of this building project was \$24,700.

In 1936, early in the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Luke H. Rhoads (1933-1950), the Pilcher pipe organ was cleaned and totally restored. A church office was set up and furnished, and the entire interior of the church was rededicated. After many years of seemingly endless building debts, the 1936 rededication marked the clearing of all such indebtedness after paying the immediate costs of \$2,300.

In 1938 and 1939, new carpets were laid in the nave and chancel and in the rooms of the Sunday School. New cushions were obtained for the church pews and all the woodwork was cleaned and revarnished. Wood-simulated covers were placed over all the radiators, railing draperies were hung in the chancel, and new indirect lighting fixtures were installed over the chancel. Exterior improvements at that time included a complete renewal of the copper trim on the church roof. The total cost of this two-year program was \$20,000.

1942 saw yet another routine redecoration of the church's interior at a cost of \$2,600. A special fund was established in 1943 for the eventual replacement of the aging pipe organ and a radical renovation of the chancel.

In June 1949, that major renovation of the chancel and sanctuary was begun. For the third time since the day of the church's dedication in 1897, the chancel was dismantled and removed. The renovation that took its place was a complete one, involving the entire front of the worship space of the church. At the same time, the large Pilcher pipe organ, after 50 years of service, was removed and sold to a Pittsburgh firm of organ rebuilders. The dedication of the new chancel, appearing as it does to this day, was held on Sunday, March 12, 1950. Then only a little more than two months later, on May 21, 1950, a service of dedication was celebrated for what must surely be considered another of the magnificent treasures housed in this church building, the great Æolian-Skinner organ, widely considered to be one of the finest pipe organs in the Alleghenies.

The congregation's most recent major construction project occurred in 1970 and 1971, during the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. F. William Brandt (1959-1973), when the 1896 church was more than doubled

in size by the addition of the Educational Building. This \$500,000 structure adjoins the original church building on 12th Avenue and extends to and along the back alley. The ground breaking ceremony was held on April 12, 1970. The lot of ground located next to the church's property on its south line, occupied by the Winter's Warehouse, was acquired in July; the warehouse was demolished in August; and the cornerstone for the new structure was laid on September 27th. Actual construction of the new addition progressed quickly and the First Lutheran Educational Building was dedicated to the glory of God on July 25, 1971.

The sealed copper box placed into the hollow of the 1970 cornerstone contains the following items:

- * The Holy Bible
- * The (Red) Service Book and Hymnal
- * The First Lutheran Yearbook, 1969 (Annual Report)
- * The First Lutheran News, September 1970
 - * The bulletins for The Ground Breaking, April 12th, and The Laying of the Cornerstone, September 27, 1970
 - * A microfilm of the Construction Specifications
 - * A listing of everyone involved in planning for the construction of the Educational Building
 - * A few coins

Part VI

Thus far, we have noted two of the magnificent treasures housed in this building that we call First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Altoona: 1) the wonderful depictions of Lutheran reformers and biblical themes in stained glass dating from 1897, and 2) the splendid three-manual, thirty-rank Æolian-Skinner pipe organ installed in 1950. This church's greatest and most precious treasure, however -the one without which the church building would never have been erected, and the one which gives this congregation its primary cause for gathering here at 12th Avenue and 14th Street today --is the Holy Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, transmitted by Holy Scripture, to which the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions bear witness, is indeed this church's finest treasure, for by its regular and faithful proclamation and by the ministration of Christ's Sacraments, the Holy Spirit works in this place to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship.

In short, the Gospel of Jesus Christ holds the root of our being and reveals this world's only hope of knowing the wholeness of life that God wills for his creation. We who are this Lutheran congregation know that God comes to us in his Word and Sacraments. Through this Gospel, we hear about God's love for us and his forgiveness in Jesus Christ; it reveals to us the abundant life God desires to give us and what he expects of us. In grateful response to this Good News, we come together in this church building as a worshipping faith community, gathering regularly around this Gospel to confess our needs, to celebrate God's saving presence in Jesus Christ, to open ourselves to his creative Word, and to dedicate our lives to his service.

Upon this foundation and toward these ends, throughout the past one hundred years of its history the First Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Altoona has sought to utilize this wonderful church

facility as the center for the daily conduct of its ministry. Today, may we who are the recipients of this heritage and legacy of faithfulness mark this milestone year of 1996 with the personal rededication of ourselves to this church's mission of lifting up the Gospel in Word and Sacrament so that all people may find hope and salvation in Jesus Christ, for the glory of almighty God, the Father, the (+) Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Pastors Who Have Served in This Church Building 1896-1996

[Pastor/ Acting Pastor Pastorate [Assistant/ Associate Pastor Ended	Pastorate Began	
THE REV. MICHAEL W. HAMMA, DD, LLD	JANUARY 1, 1896	JULY 1, 1898
THE REV. OLIVER C. ROTH, DD	JULY 1, 1898	APRIL 30, 1908
THE REV. MARION JUSTUS KLINE, DD 29, 1934	JUNE 1, 1908	SEPTEMBER
THE REV. LUKE H. RHOADS, DD JANUARY 31, 1935 FEBRUARY 1, 1935	SEPTEMBER 1, 1933 NOVEMBER 15, 1950	
THE REV. CEDRIC W. TILBERG, STM	JUNE 1, 1951	AUGUST 31, 1958
THE REV. J. RICHARD FISHER, BD	JUNE 1, 1952	DECEMBER 8, 1953
THE REV. EUGENE R. McVICKER, BD	JULY 1, 1954	NOVEMBER 15, 1956
THE REV. CARL H. GREENAWALD, BD	JUNE 10, 1957	NOVEMBER 5, 1959
THE REV. F. WILLIAM BRANDT, DD	DECEMBER 1, 1959	AUGUST 31, 1973
THE REV. ROBERT A. WILLAUER, BD	JANUARY 1, 1963	AUGUST 29, 1966
THE REV. ALFRED A. AMBROSE, BD	JUNE 15, 1967	OCTOBER 31, 1968
THE REV. GLENN L. STAHL, BD	NOVEMBER 18, 1973	JUNE 30, 1984
THE REV. PAUL W. SMELTZ, BD	JULY 1, 1976	JUNE 30, 1978
THE REV. ROY A. STEWARD, JR., M. DIV.	FEBRUARY 17, 1985	DECEMBER 31, 1991
THE REV. FRED L. ROMIG, M. DIV.	APRIL 1, 1993	

FIRST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH