

St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Amherst prepares for 100th anniversary celebration

Written by Chris Lee

It began as a school in a building originally intended for use as a chicken house. Numbers grew and weekly Sunday worship services were conducted. In 1916 the first church building was dedicated. Fourteen years later, a second church was built and dedicated. Today, both churches still stand and are getting ready for a big celebration.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Amherst welcomes the public to help celebrate its 100th anniversary Sunday, April 11. A dinner at the Amherst Community Hall will follow the 10:30 a.m. worship service. Another service of praise and thanks is scheduled for 2 p.m. followed by a reception in the church basement.

Four pastors who have served the congregation will participate in the services, according to member Gordon Leben. They include Rev. John Larson, Rev. George Hesse, Rev. Alan Borchert and current pastor Kurt Hatteberg.

Photos and information from the 100 years will be on display for members to view and discuss. Leben estimates around 300 people will be present Sunday.



100 years of history

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In 1909 a number of Lutheran families were settling in the vicinity of Amherst. Many of those were German Lutheran families from eastern and central Nebraska. The prairie land in the area was being homesteaded and transformed into wheat farms.

Back then, the nearest places with worship opportunities were in the mission congregations of Holyoke and Venango, Neb. Rev. William Leitz was serving both congregations until he accepted a call to Fort Morgan in July 1909.

Vicar George Steinkamp was sent by the Mission Board of the Kansas District to Amherst. He had a goal of starting a Christian day school since there was a large number of Lutheran families with children living in the area.

The first classes were taught in a building originally intended for use as a chicken house. The building sat just to the south of the present church. Julius Schmidt, who used the building temporarily to live in while he built a new home, donated the building to be used as a schoolhouse.

During the first school year, 1909-10, Steinkamp not only taught classes, he also prepared three young people for confirmation. Rev. Leitz came back from Ft. Morgan to confirm the class.

Divine services had begun, with regular Sunday worship being conducted in the public schoolhouse. Both Christmas and New Year's Eve were observed with services in the building as well.

March 25, 1910 was a big occasion as families of the nine charter members gathered at the home of Fred Niermann one mile south and one mile east of Amherst. The meeting was to discuss the formation of a congregation.

The nine charter members include Ernst H. Claus, Fred Niermann, Julius Schmidt, Charles Redies, Herman Leben, Sr., Henry Niermann, Carl Radtke, Herman Senstock, Sr. and Johan Petau.

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Vicar Steinkamp left in May 1910 and a pastor from Big Springs, Neb., served during the vacancy. It was decided to call a pastor, together with the congregations in Holyoke and Venango. Pastor John Rozak was called and he accepted. He was installed on the first Sunday in Advent in 1910 as the first pastor of the congregation.

Six years later on Jan. 16, 1916, a dedication was held for the first church building. Before the new building was built, services had been held in a public school building. The school made its home in the basement of the church.

The cost to build the new church, which still stands north of the current church, was \$2,728.16. Of that amount, \$2,000 had been paid with the remainder being borrowed.

The building was used as First Church from 1916-1931 and Parochial School from 1916-1957.

A total of 15 pastors have served with many others filling in during vacancy periods.

Following Rev. Rozak was Rev. Ernest Drinkgern. He was installed Sept. 8, 1912 and served until May, 1917.

1917 would be the last year confirmation classes would be taught in German. January of the following year, it was decided to discontinue the teaching of German in school until after the war. Six months later in July, the congregation voted to have English services every other Sunday. German services were discontinued in 1933.

Rev. Otto Hoyer was installed Aug. 10, 1917 and stayed in Amherst for nine years. During his time, the church became a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other states (now known as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod). He also was the last pastor to teach, as the first teacher (Carl Eberhard) was hired at the school.

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Rev. Walter W. Wilk was called from Arriba on Oct. 23, 1926. He served 14 years and during that time saw a lot of change within the church.

Jan. 1, 1930 a resolution was passed to erect a new church. Eugene Groves from Denver served as the architect and the total cost for the new building was \$22,600.

The need for a new building was evident as there were 370 baptized members, 245 communicants, 120 children in Sunday school and 30 in the school at the time of the dedication.

In 1931, the new church building was dedicated with 1,200 people being served lunch that day. By 1938, the communicant membership was about 300, but in two years' time, approximately 100 members moved away due to the depression and repeated crop failures.

The depression also made it hard for the church to be paid off. Not until 1941 was the remaining debt on the church liquidated.

After Rev. Wilk's departure, Rev. Harold Brauer served as a vacancy pastor and was installed on Oct. 6, 1940. He left in 1944. Rev. A.H. Kerstner was called and installed Jan. 7, 1945. Rev. Kerstner served for only two years before he died of a sudden heart attack. He was buried in the Amherst cemetery.

A Reuter pipe organ was installed in the church July 1946 and dedicated in October to those who served in WWII. It is the same organ used today. It was completely dismantled, cleaned and repaired in 1997.

Rev. A. Bruenger was installed Nov. 23, 1947 and served until Feb. 22, 1951. A pastor from Julesburg served as a vacancy pastor for nearly 16 months, during which time 13 pastors were called before the next pastor, Rev. Theodore Schauland was installed in 1952.

Work on a new parsonage began Aug. 6, 1952. The old parsonage was sold May 15, 1953 and

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a month later the new one was to be dedicated. Three days after the sale of the old parsonage, a fire broke out in the new one and before the fire could be controlled, nearly two-thirds of it was destroyed.

The interior had been painted but the cupboards and other things had yet to be installed. After a few days of cleaning the debris away, the ruins were ready for rebuilding. The current parsonage was dedicated Oct. 11, 1953.

Rev. Schauland served until June 1977. During his tenure, several improvements were made to the church properties. On Oct. 3, 1971 the congregations of Amherst and Venango voted to become a dual parish, with Rev. Schauland the pastor of both.

Rev. Gerald Werth was called and installed Aug. 26, 1977. He served for nearly 26 months before moving to Denver. Rev. Gary Rahe of Holyoke served the nine-month vacancy before Rev. Douglas Keene was installed July 20, 1980. He served until May 31, 1982. Rev. Rahe again served during the vacancy.

July 3, 1983 was when the church's 11th pastor was installed. Rev. John R. Larson served the two congregations for over eight years before moving to Arvada.

In 1989 the brick on the outside of the church was repaired for \$15,065. It was just one of many additions and repairs over the years.

Rev. Larson was followed by Rev. Harold Rathjen who was installed June 14, 1992. He was forced to resign May 30, 1999 due to health problems.

Rev. George Hesse was installed in the dual parishes of Amherst and Venango Aug. 5, 2001. He served until Feb. 8, 2004.

On Dec. 12, 2001, the church was listed in the Colorado State Register of Historic Properties. A

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plaque can be viewed at the front doors to the church.

Rev. Alan Borchert would become the church's 14th pastor on June 27, 2004. He served for four years before being called to a startup church in Riverton, Utah.

The current pastor, Rev. Kurt Hatteberg has served since Jan. 11, 2009. He and wife Suzan have a daughter Theresa and two sons Karl and Jared.