

Zion Lutheran Church

Bismarck, North Dakota

Historical Notes



The history of German Lutheranism in Bismarck finds its beginnings in the early 1900s. There is evidence that some worship services were available for resident German Lutherans in Bismarck as early as 1904. It was not until June of 1913 that the first resident missionary, Rev. Fredrick Proehl, was assigned to the field between Jamestown and Mandan. Rev. Proehl at first lived in Driscoll. Prior to 1914, weddings and other social functions were held in the local Methodist Church building. In 1914, work began in earnest to minister to the German people in Bismarck.

By 1915, there were nine families attending Divine Services that were being held in a Norwegian Lutheran Church building later to be called Trinity Lutheran Church. A congregation in Bismarck was organized on August 1, 1916, under the name St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church with Rev. Proehl (*pictured right*) as her first pastor. After Pastor Proehl left to serve as a chaplain during World War I, St. John's was very fortunate in getting a new pastor almost immediately. The Mission Board transferred Pastor John Koch from Anaconda and Deer Lodge, Montana, to Bismarck, and put him in charge of the mission station.



The work of Rev. Koch was well received by the people, and the prospects looked very bright. When the Spanish influenza epidemic struck, it took a large toll in Bismarck. Rev. Koch contracted the illness, followed by pneumonia. The local paper carried a black headline telling of six deaths in the city. Most prominent of these was the Rev. John Koch, the "popular and zealous worker, only 26 years old, pastor of the German Lutheran Church in Bismarck."

In August 1919, Rev. Victor Bartling was installed and would serve the congregation for five years. During his time in Bismarck the North Dakota District purchased a house to use as a parsonage, located at 1020 Ave C. Sunday School and Bible classes were held in the parsonage, giving the little congregation the first feeling of having their own property.

On April 30, 1924, the congregation of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church was re-organized and renamed Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was incorporated with seven charter members. After Pastor Bartling took a call to serve Grace Lutheran, Fargo, Rev. J.V. Richert accepted the call to Zion and was installed in July of 1924. The announcement in the Bismarck Tribune noted that he was installed at the morning service in the "English language." This may have been the first English worship service held at Zion.



Plans for the first church building for Zion were very modest. The overall size of the building was to be 24' x 36'. The cost of the project was \$4,200. The dedication of the first church building (*pictured left*), located at 419 N. 4th Street, was on September 25, 1925. With the dedication of Zion's own building, regular worship services were now held every

Sunday. The demand for more English services also resulted in services now being conducted in English 2/3 of the time and in German 1/3 of the time.

Included in the Bismarck parish at this time were the congregations of Bismarck, Driscoll and Windsor. Through rearrangement of the Mission Field, Windsor began being served through the Wisconsin Synod. In 1926, the Baldwin

congregation was added to the Bismarck parish. Later, the Driscoll congregation was added to the Napoleon parish, giving Rev. Richert more time for attention to the local needs in Bismarck.

At the January 1942 Voters' Assembly, the chief topic was the need for a new place of worship. A committee was formed to begin looking for a suitable building site. The congregation was once again affected by war when Pastor Richert enlisted to serve as a chaplain during World War II. Candidate Elmer Moeller began serving in 1942 as a mission developer in the Bismarck area. After Pastor Richert officially resigned his call, Rev. Elmer Moeller was installed as Zion's pastor on April 17, 1944. During Rev. Moeller's ministry, Zion began using a new worship book, "The Lutheran Hymnal" (TLH). In January of 1945, the congregation decided to become self-supporting and adopted a constitution. At a special voters' meeting held October 5, 1947, the congregation officially changed its name to Zion Lutheran Church and started a special Building Fund drive. On Easter Sunday, (*pictured right*) April 9, 1950, the groundbreaking ceremonies were held at the new church basement site on Avenue D and Fifth Street. During the building project, Pastor Moeller accepted the call to a professorship at Concordia College, Milwaukee, WI. The congregation grew from 60 communicants in 1942 to an astonishing 401 communicants in 1950.



Rev. Norman Brauer was installed as Zion's pastor in January 1951. On September 2, 1951, the last services were held at the little white church. The dedication of the new church basement, which would serve as the new church home for Zion, took place on September 9, 1951. (*basement pictured left*)

The basement lines of our present church building were originally designed to carry a superstructure of Gothic style (*pictured right*). Various factors, however, caused the congregation to think in terms of a more contemporary superstructure. Zion's congregation determined to plan a church of simpler design and at a cost more compatible with the



financial ability of the congregation. The result of months of planning and building was a church of moderate contemporary design with emphasis on the functional. The current building's simple lines mark it as belonging to the present era, while at the same time leaving no doubt in the minds of those who pass by that it is a



church. Upon completion of blueprints and specifications, bids were received for the superstructure of the present sanctuary in May of 1956, and at a voters' meeting, low bids were officially accepted and signed. Total contract expenses and architect's fees amounted to approximately \$135,000. The stained-glass window above the altar in the chapel is part of

the original frame church building, which was located at 419 Fourth Street and erected in 1925. The overall dimensions of the sanctuary addition to the building are 150'8" x 50'9". The point of greatest width measures 112'5". The overall height of the building is 44' above ground level. A new Allen organ was purchased for \$8,549.62. A week full of worship services in March of 1957 was held to celebrate the dedication of the new worship sanctuary for Zion.



Pastor Brauer took a call to Calvary, WA in 1958. The ministry of Rev. Alwin Reimnitz (*pictured left*) began in September 1959; it was a ministry that would span six decades in various areas of service.

A Christmas tradition of a “Live Nativity” for the community of Bismarck began in December of 1960, led by Zion’s Men’s Club. Over the years the Live Nativity stable was up against the church building, in a local mall, and in the south parking lot. Farm animals from various local farmers have filled the stable over the years. Cows, sheep, donkeys, and even llamas have been seen at the Live Nativity. The adults and youth of Zion have portrayed the different characters of the Christmas story. The tradition continues today. (*pictured right*) The reenactment in 2006 was in jeopardy when a fire destroyed the straw stable. With the help of the National Guard, a tent was used as a stable and the Christmas witness to the birth of Jesus Christ was continued. During Christmas 2007, a new wooden stable was dedicated for the ongoing celebration each year of the Live Nativity. Over the years different elements have been added to the event: candy canes and warm apple cider for the visitors, music, a fire pit, radio broadcast of the Christmas narrative, and online live streaming of the event. Starting in 2023, the celebration was moved to an earlier date in December and became a one-day-only event with a meal for the community being added.



In 1969, Zion was able to burn the mortgage on the Sanctuary addition (*pictured left*). At the 1967 North Dakota District convention, Pastor Reimnitz was elected District President. With the added duties of District President for Pastor Reimnitz, a Seminary vicar was

added to Zion's ministry staff. Over the next 15 years, many vicars would complete their year of internship at Zion during Pastor Reimnitz' presidency.

Starting in 1975, Zion began calling Directors of Christian Education (DCE) to add to the ministry staff. These DCEs worked with the congregation's youth and educational programs. Serving during this time were Ken Hauf, Jim Anderson & Dennis Meyer. Zion expanded its outreach ministry by offering kindergarten classes. Since there was no public-school kindergarten at this time, the ministry quickly expanded to offer 4 class sections. As the kindergarten grew, there was a need for more classroom space. On November 12, 1978, Zion dedicated a new office and education wing. This addition added 4 offices, bathrooms, and 4 large



school-sized classrooms. The cost of the project was \$415,834. When the public school system began offering kindergarten, the ministry was shifted to preschool. Zion Lutheran Preschool (*pictured left*) was an important part of Zion's ministry and would later become a part of the Bismarck/Mandan Lutheran School Association.

Since the 1940's, Zion had been using "The Lutheran Hymnal" (TLH) during public worship. The "Lutheran Worship" (LW) hymnal became a part of the worship life of Zion in 1981. In 1999, the "Hymnal Supplement 98" was added. In 2007, Zion switched to "The Lutheran Service Book" (LSB) as it's hymnal in the pew. Today, Zion continues to use a combination of liturgies and hymns from the LSB, as well as liturgies from "Creative Worship for the Lutheran Parish" and a selection of contemporary Christian music for some services.



By 1983, the congregation had decided that the ministry had grown to the point that an assistant pastor, rather than a vicar, would better meet the needs of the congregation. On July 31, 1983, Rev. Greg Williamson (*pictured left*) was ordained and installed as Assistant Pastor at Zion. At the 1985 North Dakota District convention, the office of District President was made a full-time position,

resulting in Pastor Reimnitz leaving Zion to become the district's first full-time president. Rev. James Wuebben was installed as the new Senior Pastor of Zion on August 24, 1986. Before Pastor Williamson took a call in September of 1987, he urged Zion to become involved in the Stephen Ministry program. With the assistance of Ms. Florence Montz, Zion implemented Stephen Ministry in 1988. This lay-led program became a valuable part of the care ministry at Zion.

Rev. Thomas R. Marcis, Jr. was installed as Senior Pastor on July 16, 1989, at Zion. As the ministry continued to grow, Rev. Bradley Stoltenow was called and installed as Zion's Assistant Pastor in August of 1992. In 1993, Pastor Stoltenow's title was changed to Associate Pastor. This team ministry would serve Zion for 14 years. (*pictured right*) During this time, the pastors of Zion continued



to serve the broader church and community as well. Pastor Marcis served as the chairman for the LCMS Board for Human Care Ministry and as chaplain for the Western Plains location of the Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch. Pastor Stoltenow served as chaplain for the North Dakota Highway Patrol and on the Board of Directors for the North Dakota District. Both Pastors also were involved in the Bismarck Public schools as athletic coaches: Pastor Marcis coaching soccer for

Simle Middle School, and Pastor Stoltenow as Assistant Coach for the Bismarck High wrestling program.



The Large Print Ladies group at Zion donated a 3-octave set of Handbells in 1990. Adults and youth (*picture left*) of the congregation have participated in the Handbell choirs. A set of chimes was added in 2004, and a fourth octave of bells was added in March of 2009.

With the purchase of a new digital

Allen organ in 1992, the organ was moved from the back of the balcony to the front of the Sanctuary. The organ was purchased for \$44,000. (*pictured right*) In December of 2007, a baby grand piano was purchased for \$25,249 to further enhance the music ministry of Zion.



In 1993, Gordan Hoberg, the President of St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Napoleon met with the Bismarck/Mandan area pastors to see if they would be willing to serve the congregation as a vacancy. Pastor Stoltenow agreed to coordinate the preaching schedule. By 1994, only the pastors at Zion were serving St. Matthew. In 2010, the Synod declared that Zion and St. Matthew were officially a dual parish. The pastors of Zion continue to serve St. Matthew today.



With the completion of a major remodel to the building in 1994, the old, converted coal furnace from the 1950's was updated to include air-conditioning in the sanctuary for the first time. The front of the sanctuary was remodeled, (*pictured left*) moving the communion rails to the

nave level of the church. New carpeting was installed throughout the building. The cost of the project was \$240,000.



In 1994, the LCMS congregations in Bismarck and Mandan began exploring the possibility of establishing a Lutheran day school in the area. *(pictured left)* The Bismarck/Mandan Lutheran School Association was formed, and in the fall of 1995, Martin Luther School (MLS) opened its doors, operating in the education

wing of Zion's building. As Martin Luther School continued to grow and more classroom space was needed, Zion and the Bismarck/Mandan Lutheran School Association partnered to complete a 4-classroom addition in 2003. The original classrooms from 1978 were also remodeled at this time. The project was completed for \$820,000. *(pictured right)*

In 2008, two more classrooms were added to the south end of the building. MLS currently provides classical, Lutheran education for preschool through 8th grade students. The school proudly celebrated 30 years of educational ministry in 2025, with enrollment of 135 students, served by 12 full-time teachers and many part-time staff members. Zion's pastors continue to be active in the ministry at Martin Luther School by conducting chapel services, leading staff devotions, and teaching religion classes.



In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as Zion continued to grow, there was an increased demand for additional staff to serve the needs of all ages and stages of life. A Youth Ministry Coordinator position was added in 1998. Deb Duryee started part-time in this role, later transitioning too full-time. Pastor Reimnitz, now retired from serving as District President, began making shut-in visits to elderly and home-bound members in 1998. To assist in this visitation ministry, Rev. Bob Rowan began helping with visits in 2005.

In May 2006, Pastor Stoltenow took the call to be Senior Pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Centennial, CO. In the spring of 2007, after a self-study of the ministry needs at Zion, a call was placed for a seminary candidate to serve as Zion's next Associate Pastor. Rev. Douglas J.D. Bergelin was installed in July of 2007 as Zion's Associate Pastor. In the same year, Zion entered a formal relationship with the Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch (DBGR) to provide chaplaincy services at the Western Plains campus in Bismarck. Each week, Rev. Bergelin spent ten hours at DBGR providing spiritual care to the residents. During Pastor Bergelin's time in Bismarck, he made a trip the Holy Land, and for Holy Week 2015 Zion conducted a Seder Meal with several items that Pastor Bergelin had brought back from the Holy Land. After eight years of faithful service in Bismarck, he accepted the call to serve Saint Peter Lutheran Church, Lebanon, WI. During Rev. Bergelin's years of ministry at Zion, the ministry staff had expanded to include two part-time positions, a Director of Junior Youth Ministry and a Director of Family Ministry. With Pastor Bergelin's departure, the Director of Family Ministry position became full-time, and Kristin Nistler was installed to serve in this role in 2014.



In 2016, television screens (*pictured left*) were installed in the sanctuary to aid in the worship life of the congregation. At first, the TVs served as simple hymn boards. Later the words to hymns were added and subsequently the liturgy was placed on the screens. Presently the TV screens are used to provide illustrations and visual aids for sermons as well.

Reaching into the community, Zion partnered with Century Baptist Church and developed a mentoring program for at-risk youth at Bismarck High School. This special ministry called “Impact One” was conducted from 2017-2019.



In 2018, Zion once again joined the Seminary vicarage program. For the next six years, new vicars were placed at Zion to serve one-year internships in preparation for full-time ministry. Each vicar was required to complete an outreach project as a part of their vicarage experience. Vicar Aidan Moon's (2021-22) outreach project led to Zion starting a podcast, *Trek through the Scriptures*, (pictured left) which was followed by Vicar Jason Kohm's (2022-23) *Living the Faith* podcast. Zion

continues to produce *Living the Faith* with Pastor Marcis as host as he interviews guests on various topics related to the daily Christian life.

In January of 2020, the world started hearing about a possible worldwide pandemic called Covid-19. As the pandemic kept getting closer and closer to affecting North Dakota, Zion ordered the equipment needed to live stream the worship services online at the cost of \$5,000. The equipment arrived on March 11th. On March 13th, the governor of North Dakota ordered that all in person public worship should be paused until the danger of the pandemic passed. Zion went from in-person worship to fully online worship in one week and never missed a worship service! A Zion YouTube channel was set up, and both Sunday morning services were streamed to Facebook and YouTube. Zion continues to stream both of its Sunday morning worship services. After the pandemic, Zion continued to offer both virtual and in-person options for all meetings and Bible classes.

In 2023, Zion partnered with the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) to begin a 3-year capital fund campaign. The “Tell the Next Generation” Ministry Expansion Campaign, inspired by Psalm 78:4, was focused on making



improvements to Zion that would benefit future generations. Specific goals were to increase worship and Bible study attendance, bring on additional ministry staff, replace the south parking lot, pay off the mortgage, and upgrade the heating & cooling system. The

campaign was a huge success both spiritually and financially, with initial pledged funds of \$990,324. At the one-year mark, nearly 80% of those commitments had been fulfilled. The south parking lot (*pictured above*) was completely redone and was dedicated on September 8, 2024.



After six years of participating in the Synod's vicarage program, Zion once again decided to call a full-time Associate Pastor. Candidate Vincent J. Otto from Concordia Seminary St. Louis was ordained and installed at Zion on July 14, 2024. (*pictured left*) Pastor Otto continues Zion's partnership with the Western Plains location of the Dakota Boys and Girls Ranch,

serving as chaplain to both the residents and staff.

In February of 2025, the mortgage was fully paid off, and a formal mortgage burning took place on Palm Sunday, April 13. (*pictured right*) The heating & cooling system replacement was completed in October of 2025.



Throughout the history of Zion, the Lord has blessed the congregation with steady growth. In 1916, Zion had 130 baptized members at a time when the population of Bismarck was approximately 6,000 residents. Currently, Zion has approximately 1,100 members on her roster with the population in Bismarck being 75,000. We rejoice and give thanks to God for all the ways in which He has continually sustained Zion's ministry over the past century, and we prayerfully hope for many continued years ahead of sharing the Gospel with the community of Bismarck. To Christ alone be the glory!

The information for these Historical Notes was taken from a paper written by Irene Renz, the 1957 Sanctuary Dedication service folder, Concordia Historical Institute information, and Zion Voters' minutes



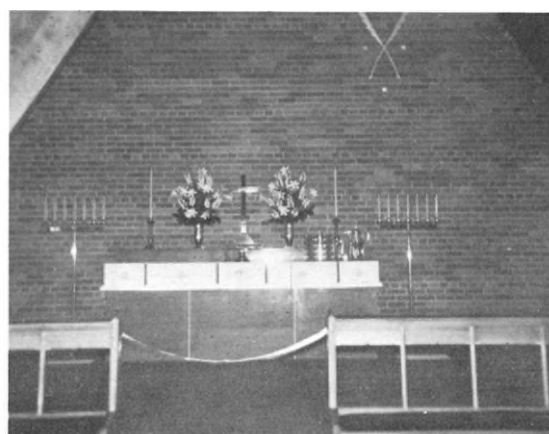
Groundbreaking April 9, 1950



Basement Dedication Sept 9, 1951



Worship in Zion Basement 1950's



Sanctuary Dedication March 1957



Zion Men's Club—May 1944



Pastor's Office—1962



Vacation Bible School



Sanctuary Construction—1957



Front of the Sanctuary—Dec 1993



Women of the Bible—1962