

Sermon 5-31-26
Pastor Ray Lorthioir
Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
100th Anniversary Sunday of Trinity Lutheran Church

Trinity History Part 1 — Them Norwegians

Today we're celebrating the 100th anniversary of this congregation. Its official incorporated name is Trinity Lutheran Church of Hempstead Gardens. In order to understand Trinity's history, we have to delve a bit into the general history of Lutheranism.

In the middle and late 1500's, Lutheranism became the official state religion of many of the independent German speaking states that existed in the Holy Roman Empire. It also became the official religion of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland — the Scandinavian countries. For a short time it was also the official religion of Slovakia. A battle was lost and Roman Catholicism was reimposed upon Slovakia. But Lutheranism survived as a minority.

Lutherans started coming to America from Germany big time in the 1700's. I don't know the truth of it, but I've heard it said that after the Revolution, English was established as the official language of the U.S. instead of German by only one vote in Congress.

In the latter half of the 1800's Lutheranism prospered in the U.S. as waves of immigration came from all the Lutheran countries. Here's one analysis of how it did so. "For Lutheran immigrants, the church wasn't just a place to worship. It was the center of ethnic and cultural identity. The church preserved the German language the Swedish traditions, the Norwegian heritage. Being Lutheran meant being part of a community that shared your background. Lutherans built schools so that children could learn in their native language. They created social organizations, mutual aid societies and cultural groups. The church was everything. This created incredibly strong Lutheran loyalty. Leaving the Lutheran Church meant leaving your entire community and cultural identity. For generations this model worked. Lutheran churches were packed. Lutheran colleges thrived. Lutheran institutions had massive influence." And this was all true up to what I consider the pivotal year of modern American history, 1968.

Our Trinity has a mother church. It's Trinity Lutheran Church located in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn on 46th Street between 4th and 5th avenues. According to a publication called "The Norwegian American," Trinity, Brooklyn had its origin as an outgrowth of the Norwegian Seaman's Church which was in Red Hook near the Brooklyn waterfront. The Seaman's Church was a small mission work that served the religious needs of the many Norwegian seamen who sailed in and out of New York harbor in the late 1800's. Over time Norwegian immigrants settled in the area. Thus, "the Norwegian Seaman's Church eventually became overcrowded with immigrants to the point that there was not enough room for the sailors, whom the church was missioned to serve. It got so bad that the church refused to give communion to non-seamen in hopes that a new church would be formed that could accommodate all the new immigrants." Trinity Lutheran Church was organized to solve this problem.

According to the congregation's website, "Trinity Lutheran Church has its roots in a religious revival that swept over Southern Norway in the late nineteenth century. Many

Scandinavians settled in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood in the 1800s because of its thriving waterfront, and Norwegians who had been influenced by Norway's spiritual revival began meeting informally for Christian fellowship. When the need to form a congregation became apparent, Trinity Norwegian Lutheran Church was organized in a rented store on the corner of 22nd Street and Third Avenue in 1890. During the following year the society became part of the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in America. English worship services were added in 1915." Trinity, Brooklyn's present building was built 1910-1917 and an educational building was added in 1950.

Now, what happened in the Roaring 1920's was that members of Trinity, Brooklyn left the city for the suburbs. With the electrification of the Long Island Railroad in 1925, a trip from West Hempstead to Brooklyn or Manhattan was reduced to 45 minutes. Therefore, some members re-settled in West Hempstead and South Hempstead (also known as North Baldwin). Enough did so that by the mid twenties a new need for religious services that catered to people of Norwegian background arose in the rural suburbs surrounding Hempstead. Therefore, lay members of Trinity, Brooklyn living in the Hempstead suburbs, led by Mr. Henry Lee, petitioned the home congregation and its parent organization, The Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, to send a pastor to organize new congregations. So, Pastor Charles Crouch was sent to do so.

A history written for our Trinity's fortieth anniversary states that a Sunday School was started in the spring of 1925 along with the formation of a Ladies Aid group. Some time either in 1925 or early 1926 Pastor Crouch began conducting regular Sunday services on the spacious sun-porch of Mr. Henry Lee's residence. For about six months he was relieved by a Pastor George Wiig, but then took over again. According to the history, there was a splendid response to these services. And this was seen as an answer to the prayers of Mrs. Henry Lee that the Lord would provide for the establishment of a church in Hempstead Gardens.

The first formal steps toward organizing congregations under the auspices of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America in South Hempstead and West Hempstead were taken at a meeting held in the home of Mr. Arne Lee on Thursday, May 27th, 1926 — one hundred years ago this past Wednesday. Trinity Lutheran Church of Hempstead Gardens was legally incorporated in the State of New York on March 27th, 1927. Mr. Henry Lee donated the property on which the church now stands and ground was broken for the church in the spring of 1927. The cornerstone was laid in September. Until the basement was completed, Sunday services were held in a place called Leberthon's garage in Lakeview. When the church basement was completed and ready for occupancy, it was dedicated on February 12th, 1928. On June 1st, 1928 Pastor J.O. Valtison was installed as the first resident pastor of Trinity. His three years of leadership saw the new congregation take on definite form and progress steadily along all lines. He was followed by Pastor Kenneth R. Torvik, during whose time the church sanctuary was completed. It was dedicated as a temple of God on Palm Sunday, March 20th, 1932 at what is described as an impressive ceremony officiated by the Synod president, Pastor J.A. Aasgaard. A 16mm movie of the event shows that the houses across the street from the church had not yet been built.

Trinity is located halfway down a triangular block that is widest on Hempstead Avenue. In 1929, the Lee family sold a landlocked parcel of land right behind the church to the Mathisen family. Part of the deal was that a right of way was created to Chestnut Street through the church property so that the Mathisen family would have access to their

property. This is the present parking lot of the church. The Mathisens built a home and a small upholstery shop on the property in 1929. But it was a cumbersome arrangement. In the church records there is record of all kinds of friction between the Mathisens and the church.

The next pastor was J.L. Ranum who began his ministry in May 1938. His work enabled the Hempstead Parish which consisted of Trinity and First Lutheran Church of South Hempstead to become self-supporting in 1939 so that mission aid from the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America was ended. In 1941 the Hempstead Parish was split. First Lutheran became Bethlehem Lutheran Church of North Baldwin with its own pastor.

In 1942 the Lee family donated to the church the parcel of land on Chestnut Street adjacent to the church. This is where the tall oak trees still stand today. All the property was consolidated into one parcel.

The late 1930's saw a surge in the population of West Hempstead and the surrounding areas as farmland was converted to developments of single family homes. By 1940 Sunday School enrollment reached 189 with a congregational membership of 275. World War II and its aftermath only increased the development of the area.

In 1943, Pastor Ranum made the decision to serve his country in the world war by becoming a chaplain in the United States Army. In his place Pastor Arndt L. Halvorson was installed in May 1944. The results of a general spiritual awakening were reflected in the further growth of church membership during the war years. Also, the war years intensified the migration of city dwellers to Nassau county so that it became a true suburb of New York City.

Pastor Halvorson resigned in March of 1946 and Pastor Ranum, newly discharged from the army, took over again in April of 1946. In the same year, the congregation bought an adjacent parcel of property on Locust Street so that church property went through the middle of the block from one side to the other.

The post-war building expansion in West Hempstead and the surrounding areas began to over-tax the existing Sunday School facilities during the next three years. Every square inch of the church was used for Sunday School. Enrollment reached almost 400 children by 1950. I know a man who lives in Pennsylvania who told me that his kindergarten Sunday School class met in the boiler room. As he put it, the heat of the boiler room made the threat of hell a reality.

Because of the building surge and the post-war baby boom, attempts were made to build a new Sunday School building onto the rear of the church. There was only one problem — the Mathisen property. The Mathisens refused to sell and resisted the offer to move their house and shop onto the Locust Street property. A great deal of frustration resulted. Pastor Ranum resigned in the summer of 1949. He was followed by Pastor Ralph Tellefsen who was installed in November of 1949. During this period of time, the congregation bought a home at 274 Spruce Street, two blocks from the church, as the parsonage for the pastor. Also, the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America changed its name to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Various changes to the altar area of the church were made for the celebration of the 25th anniversary in 1951.

Pastor Tellefsen resigned in September of 1953 and Pastor Harry R. Baker was installed in December of that year. Something else happened in 1953 that all these years later has had profound demographic influence on West Hempstead. An orthodox Jewish congregation was founded.

Pastor Baker inherited the Sunday School crisis which was acute at this point. And since no accommodations could be made with the Mathisens, the decision was made to go around them. Thus, in 1955, ground was broken for an education building standing separate from the church on the Locust Street property on the other side of the Mathisen's house. It was dedicated on April 15, 1956. The new building was complete with a full industrial style kitchen, a stage, a large parish hall and ample classroom space. It served the needs of the baby boom generation and the generation just after — Generation X.

Trinity records show that the high point of the congregation was reached in 1958. Average Sunday attendance at two services was just over 200 people. In that year, copies of the new Service Book and Hymnal — the red hymnal — were purchased in anticipation of a merger of national Lutheran bodies. That merger took place on January 1, 1961 and Trinity became part of the organization that was called The American Lutheran Church. In 1963 the present stained glass windows were created, installed and dedicated after a campaign to gather funds from members and organizations of the congregation.

In his 1960 annual report, Pastor Baker revealed that demographic research being conducted on Long Island showed that Protestant people of northern European background were being replaced with Roman Catholic people of Irish, Polish and Italian background. And true to this research, Trinity began a long slow decline from its 1958 high point.

In 1966 Mr. Mathisen died. His heirs sold the property to the church that year. From that point forward the little 1929 bungalow at 8 Trinity Court was rented to various members of the congregation in return for being on-site caretakers of the property. The pastors continued to live in the parsonage, two blocks away.

After 20 years of service, Pastor Baker resigned in 1973. He was followed by Pastor Dan Olson who served until 1982. In 1979 Trinity purchased the new hymnal that had been created to be used by all Lutherans in the U.S., The Lutheran Book of Worship. This hymnal was not well received and caused division in the congregation.

Pastor Ed Nervig served the congregation in 1982 and 83. From what I was told, he had an alcohol problem. During this period people drifted away to other congregations and finally the leadership took action and the congregation voted him out. The congregation had no pastor during 1984, and the leadership was not pleased with the pastoral candidates being recommended by the national leadership.

In 1984 the church decided to sell the parsonage on Spruce Street. The caretaker family living at 8 Trinity Court moved out. And the money from the sale was used to refurbish the house and create a dormer with two bedrooms and a bath. The work was completed in the spring of 1985 and 8 Trinity Court became the new parsonage. We'll continue the story next week.

But let's finish today by looking over the spiritual history of the congregation. As we saw, Trinity in Brooklyn claims that it has its roots in the religious revival that swept over Norway in the late 19th century. And this was an outgrowth of an early 19th century revival begun by a Norwegian Lutheran layman named Nielsen Hauge.

In the wake of the Reformation and the religious wars of the 1500's and 1600's, Europe had settled down into an understanding that the religion of the royal family of each country was the state religion of that land. Norway was part of Denmark until 1814 when it became part of Sweden. Both Denmark and Sweden were Lutheran lands with a state church supported by the crown, national taxes and national law.

But what happens when the church becomes institutionalized? Very often a spiritual slumber covers the land. And this is true everywhere. For, as human beings we are confronted by all the cares of this world, the passions and desires of our own hearts and we strongly resist considering what our fate will be after death. Nevertheless, God never lets His Church slumber. Somewhere, someplace He stirs certain hearts with His spiritual realities found in Scripture. This happened throughout the Lutheran lands in the 1700's and 1800's with a general movement known as Pietism. Pietism stresses the reality of all things spiritual in the daily life of the Christian, and the necessity of every lay person to experience the powerful grace of God through Jesus Christ to deliver from unbelief, unrepentant sin, and the power of the devil.

Wherever Pietism takes hold, people become passionate about living the Christian life. Historically, this passion often came in conflict with institutional church life. This was true in the Norwegian revivals. But eventually Pietism found a home in the institutional Norwegian church. Therefore, when Norwegian immigrants came to the U.S. in the late 1800's and early 1900's pietistic zeal often came with them. Apparently that was the case at the mother church, Trinity, Brooklyn and it overflowed here to the daughter church, Trinity, West Hempstead.

Here in West Hempstead, there is a Christian Missionary Alliance church building on Morton Ave. It now has a Haitian congregation. But when I first came in 1985, I got to know the pastor there. He told me that their congregation was actually an outgrowth of Trinity. When Trinity was being organized, apparently there were Norwegian people who were not content with the formality of the Lutheran mass and Lutheran traditions and so formed that congregation. That's the zeal power of Pietism.

Although Trinity has always utilized the Lutheran mass for worship, it is historically what is called "low church," not utilizing the many rituals of a high mass and using music with a definite pietistic flavor. For instance, in 1971 the Sunday School raised the funds to present the congregation with the green Favorite Hymns of Praise hymnal in the pew racks. It contains pietistic music from the Baptist and Evangelical tradition that I was unfamiliar with until I came here.

As housing was built in West Hempstead in the 1940's and the population grew, Trinity's original Norwegian flavor was diluted with many other European nationalities. It's Lutheran flavor remained, but since there are not many Protestant churches in West Hempstead, people from other denominational backgrounds also began to attend. However, the pietistic tradition remained. There were small group adult bible studies led by the pastors. And trained lay leaders taught the Bethel Bible Series. In general, the people of Trinity were "Bible believing people."

During the 1960's and 70's a second wave of Pentecostal style revival known as the Charismatic Renewal influenced members of mainline congregations across the country. In Nassau County two congregations of the American Lutheran Church that Trinity was part of at that time were powerfully influenced by this renewal, one in North Massapequa and the other in East Meadow. Trinity was also influenced but not to the same extent. Unfortunately, a false prophet became the lead pastor in Massapequa in the late 1970's and led the two congregations into becoming a quasi-Jewish cult. A few people at Trinity were also pulled into this teaching. Fortunately, the congregation itself was not. However, there was charismatic influence at Trinity in the 1970's, especially among the young people.

It was during this time that Trinity sent two men into the ministry. Jim Minor was a photographer, who with his wife, Eleanor, lived in Stewart Manor. Jim felt called to the ministry as a second career. He and Eleanor left for Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Pastor Jim Minor was eventually called to Calvary Lutheran Church in St. Paul. He became influential as a leader against the liberal theology that was sweeping the Lutheran churches in the 1980's and helped form The American Association of Lutheran Churches to which Trinity currently belongs.

The other was a young man named Bill Terjesen, older brother of our drummer. When I first came to Trinity, Pastor Terjesen was pastoring a congregation in Cedarhurst and we became friends. He had been leader of the youth group at Trinity in the 70's and told me stories of that time. After high school, he and a few others from the congregation were prompted to enroll in a Pentecostal bible college down south. They didn't last there. But Bill went on to college and then Luther Seminary. In those years the seminary was teaching liberal theology about Scripture. I had been taught the same. Therefore, from 1985 through 1987 as the merger that became the liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was being formed, we found our way back to the doctrine that had characterized the American Lutheran Church when it was formed in 1960 — that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God. But more to that story next week.

One last thing. There is a difference between what is called Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism. Both Orthodoxy and Pietism stand on the work of Christ. Both teach that those who truly belong to Christ are to behave and live righteously in this world. The difference is that Pietism requires that believers have certain experiences with the Lord. Orthodoxy does not. So there is a strong tension between the two.

I know that many of you here have had significant experiences with the Lord — some of you on a more regular basis than others. But, if you notice, we don't require that everyone have this or that experience. Instead, we preach and teach the Word of God without pressure. God's Truth has a way of convincing our hearts. And Lord Holy Spirit has His time schedule for everyone who hears the Word. That's why we're patient. But in the current culture of skepticism and immorality, our definite goal is that people be convinced of Yahweh's reality and all of what knowledge of His reality brings: awareness of sin, faith in how Jesus has conquered sin for us, and that this life is not the main event of life, eternity is. Hearts that humbly look forward to a totally righteous eternity with their Creator Father who loves them greatly influence the present age for good. May it be so with us. Amen.