

# The History of Trinity Lutheran Church of Blooming Prairie, Minnesota

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First written in 1999 for the 125th Anniversary book, Faith of Our Fathers.

Revised in 2018 to commemorate the closing of  
Trinity Lutheran Church after over 144 years of ministry.

What we now know as Trinity Lutheran Church began under the name “Straight River Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church” in the spring of 1874. The early work which laid the foundation for Trinity’s founding was done in large part by Rev. Claus L. Clausen. He was a Danish lay minister called to serve the first Norwegian Lutheran church in America at Muskego, Wisconsin in 1843. He was ordained at Racine County, Wisconsin that same year and founded many churches in southern Wisconsin. In the summer of 1852 he left Wisconsin with a group of Norwegian and Danish immigrants who together founded the community of Saint Ansgar, Iowa. From Saint Ansgar, Clausen worked to the point of exhaustion to spread the Gospel among the inhabitants of this region.



Among his mission congregants were the Danish inhabitants west and northwest of Blooming Prairie, Minnesota. Clausen’s work in this area began as early as the mid 1860’s, but the first documented pastoral act was that of the baptism of Nis Clausen Thimsen, the son of Nis and Johanne Thimsen on June 3, 1871 in Blooming Prairie.

Rev. Clausen’s health was always a limiting factor for him. In 1872 he left for Richmond, Virginia to find some much-needed rest. He spent time in Philadelphia as well during his 5 years on the East Coast. His rest was short-lived, however, as he found himself again ministering to congregations in both of these cities.

During Rev. Clausen’s absence, Rev. Paul G. Østby, a Norwegian carried on the mission work in Southern Minnesota. Rev. Østby’s responsibilities were immense. There were times that he served ten organized congregations simultaneously, not to mention the difficult work of starting new congregations! It is hard to imagine the many miles that a country preacher of that era had to endure and all that with only a horse and buggy. There is mention made in the records of Rev. Ole C. Schonhovd of Houston, Minnesota assisting him in 1877.



During this time Straight River church was affiliated with “Conferentsen for den norske-dansk evangelisk-lutherske Kirke i Amerika” (The Conference for the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), also known simply as “The Conference”. During the annual convention of The Conference, June 10-18, 1874 at Fort Howard, Wisconsin, Straight River Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church is mentioned for the first time. It was at this meeting that Rev. Østby submitted the congregation’s application for admittance into The Conference. The membership that was reported was 22 baptized members, 13 being confirmed adults.

The first place of regularly held church services was Steele County School District 38 also known as Straight River schoolhouse, located on section 29 of Summit township 2 miles east of Ellendale next to the Straight River. The school was a log structure built in 1864. The first documented congregational business meeting was held on October 11, 1877 with Pastor Østby as chairman.

In 1877 Rev. Clausen returned from his time on the East Coast to settle in Blooming Prairie. He attempted to serve five congregations from there. These were Blooming Prairie, Red Oak Grove, Grand Meadow, Austin and Straight River. This all proved to be too much for the exhausted pastor, so in 1879 he enlisted the help of Rev. Svein Olsen Strand of Blooming Prairie as associate pastor. Pastors Clausen and Strand worked together until Clausen retired to Austin, Minnesota in 1885. Rev. Clausen died in 1892 while visiting a son in Poulsbo, Washington. He is buried at Oakwood Cemetery in Austin.



In 1878, Søren Petersen offered to donate land on section 9 of Blooming Prairie Township for the construction of a schoolhouse. This became Steele County School District 47 and in 1879, the new home of what was now known as “Brorson Danish-Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church”. The old schoolhouse now rests on the Donovan farm south of Byron. It has been wonderfully preserved and remains just as you would remember it. The congregation’s new name was in honor of the famous Danish bishop and hymn writer Hans Adolf Brorson (1694 – 1764). Among the old favorites that he penned are: “Behold a Host, Arrayed in White” (Den store hvide Flok vi see), “Your Little Ones, Dear Lord” (Her kommer dine Arme Små), and “I See Thee Standing, Lamb of God” (Jeg seer dig, søde Lam, at ståe). He is credited with writing no less than 82 hymns and poems in all!

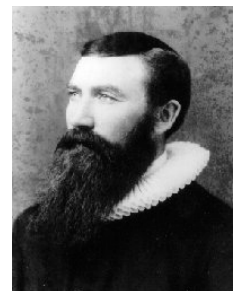


At the March 29th congregational meeting of 1887 it was decided that a separate church building should be build. The new church would be 20 by 30 feet and 12 feet high with 8 windows, according to the minutes of the meeting. The funds were enlisted and construction took place during the summer of 1887. The tower, steeple, chancel, sacristy, balcony and basement had all been added in later years. The plan was to have the church completed by the first of August. There is no indication that construction was delayed, therefore the first church service in the new sanctuary very likely occurred on Sunday, August 7, 1887. Brorson Danish-Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church finally had a home of its own!



Trinity Lutheran Church, Bixby, Mnn.

By 1887 the membership of Brorson was up to 68 baptized members, 32 of these being confirmed adults. Pastor Strand continued to serve Brorson through the end of 1888. On January 1, 1889, Rev. Gottlieb Bender Christiansen came to serve Brorson Church. With his arrival Brorson became a member congregation in “Det Danske Evangeliske Lutherske Kirkesamfund I Amerika” (The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church Association in America) also known as “The Blair Church.” The Blair Church was founded at Argo, Nebraska in 1884, with its headquarters in Blair, Nebraska. Pastor Christiansen’s time



with Brorson was cut short when he was called to be the second president of Trinity Seminary at Blair in 1890. Although just getting settled into his position at Brorson, he could not pass up the honor of overseeing the synod's seminary.



In 1890 Rev. Niels Søren Nielsen accepted the call to serve Brorson Church. Rev. and Mrs. Nielsen and their small son, Aron, made their home in Owatonna. He served four congregations. These were Brorson, Norsk-Dansk in Owatonna, Lolland near Lemond, and Daniæ near East Prairie. In 1892 Pastor Nielsen moved on to Waupaca, Wisconsin, and Rev. Johannes Pedersen Naarup replaced him. Pastors Nielsen and Naarup were both members of the first class of Trinity Seminary in 1884.



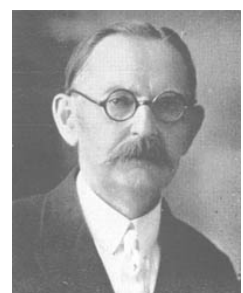
As Brorson grew, various improvements were made to the building and property. It was resolved at the July 19, 1893 meeting of the congregation that a steeple would be constructed on the church. It was to be 8 by 8 by 24 feet with a 12-foot spire. No action was taken at that time regarding the addition of a bell to the steeple, and to this day no bell has ever been added to the church's steeple. There was a resolution passed at the December 26, 1893 meeting to separate from the other congregations so Brorson could call a pastor on their own, however this never came to fruition. Pastor Naarup continued to serve the congregation until he moved to Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1896.

That same year Brorson had the great honor of again being served by Rev. G. B. Christiansen. This term was also short lived as Rev. Christiansen was soon called to be the first president of the newly formed "United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church". The UDELIC was organized at Minneapolis on October 1, 1896 from the merger of the Danish Association of 1884 and the Danish North Church of 1894. Again Brorson Church was called upon to sacrifice her pastor to a much larger calling. The synod dropped the word "Danish" in 1946.

Rev. Christiansen wrote a book entitled Recollections of Our Church Work which was published posthumously in 1930. In it he mentioned his love for the Brorson congregation as follows; *"Also in St. Ansgar's near Geneva, and in Brorson Church near Blooming Prairie the Lord worked through His Spirit and His Word to the salvation of many. For a while I was about to despair of the people of Geneva. They closely resembled those of whom Stephen said, 'Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears' (Acts 7:51). Drinking, card-playing, etc., characterized them for a while. But the people at Brorson were more churchly and more receptive for the Word of God. The very first evening I preached to those people I felt distinctly that here was fertile soil for the 'good seed,' for while I preached many a tear stole its way down the cheeks of listeners. Nor did it take long before an awakening came here, too, bringing salvation to many."*



In 1897 Pastor Niels Peder Nielsen Lang arrived to serve Brorson Church. His time lasted until 1902 when he accepted a call to Sleepy Eye, Minnesota. Rev. Lang's daughter, Mabel Lang Bohne was an honored guest at Trinity's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in



the year 2000. Pastor Martin Theodore Jensen replaced Pastor Lang at the end of 1902. The church was continuing to experience growth. In 1905 the membership was at 90 baptized and 50 confirmed. There was a move to build a larger church that was to be 30 by 46 feet. This plan was abandoned shortly thereafter due to lack of funds. Pastor Jensen served Brorson plus four other congregations until 1909 when he moved on to Webster Grove, Missouri. During Jensen's pastorate the membership reached a maximum of 134 baptized and 58 confirmed all worshipping in the crowded little church.



In 1909 Rev. Mikkel Olsen Block replaced Pastor Jensen. He was installed at Brorson on November 7, 1909. He lived in Ellendale and served three congregations, Brorson, Saint Ansgar in Summit Township, and Godthaab of Geneva. At the May 20, 1911 meeting the decision was made to add a basement under the church. This was presumably accomplished shortly thereafter. Pastor Block served Brorson until he moved to Racine, Wisconsin in 1913. Pastor Block's difficult upbringing in Denmark must have had a profound effect on his decision to enter the ministry. He was born in 1862 at the small village of Stouby in Stouby Parish of Vejle County, Denmark. By the time he was only 8 years old, his father was a prisoner in the Vridsløselille Prison near Copenhagen. He was ordained into the Methodist Church in Denmark and emigrated to the US in 1892. He worked with the Norwegian-Danish Methodist Church in America. In 1908 he returned to Denmark to visit family and do some preaching. In 1909 he again traveled to America and was ordained into the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran church.



Rev. Hans Peter Kristian Hansen followed Pastor Block in 1913. His responsibilities included the three previous congregations plus First Lutheran in Ellendale. He moved on to Graettinger, Iowa in 1918. His successor was Rev. Eduard Møller Nielsen from Michigan. Rev. Nielsen served three of the congregations until 1920 when he moved on to Sleepy Eye.



After a brief vacancy Rev. Andreas Nielsen came to serve the three churches. He was an impressive looking young man of 33 years when he came to Brorson, but not long after that his strength faded due to a bout with encephalitis. He gave up his call to Saint Ansgar Church in 1923 to cut down on his workload, and then he resigned from Brorson and Godthaab in 1924 and moved to Nebraska. In 1925, at the age of only 37 he retired from active ministry. He was never to regain his strength and died at the Eben-Ezer Home in Brush, Colorado in 1950. During Pastor Nielsen's time at Brorson the move toward introducing more English into the church activities was increasing. The July 19, 1921 congregational meeting minutes are the first to be recorded in English. By 1922 the services were a combination of Danish and English. The council unanimously adopted the weekly envelope system in October of 1921. Female members over the age of 21 were allowed to vote on church resolutions as of January 1923.





It was unanimously agreed at the December 1924 meeting to separate from the Geneva congregation and join with Our Savior's in Owatonna. Rev. Hans Andreas Svendsen ended a period of vacancy in 1925. He served through 1929 then moved to Hutchinson, Minnesota and was soon after elected president of the Minnesota District of the UDELIC. Pastor Svendsen was the first native born American to serve the congregation. In 1929 Rev. Jens Harry Thomsen, a newly ordained seminary graduate, accepted the call to Brorson. He was a highly motivated young pastor and responsible for some amount of spiritual renewal at Brorson. Pastor Thomsen passed away on December 29, 2001 at the ripe old age of 101 at the hospital in Atlantic, Iowa. He is buried at Elk Horn, Iowa. His was a long and fruitful life in the service of the Lord.



Not even the Church was spared from the ravages of the Great Depression. During the 1930's there were times that Brorson ended the year in the red. There were numerous pleas to raise money to carry on the work of the Church, but times were very hard and few people had any money to spare. Rev. Thomsen served in these difficult times until 1932 when he moved on to Luck, Wisconsin. In 1933, Rev. Sigurd D. Petersen arrived to carry on the difficult task of ministry during those lean years. At the November 19, 1935 annual meeting Helene Petersen (Thorager) was elected to the position of organist to replace Pearl Ashley. Helene played organ almost every Sunday for over 65 years! She passed away in 2009 at the age of 91.



It was during Pastor Petersen's term that Brorson reached its highest membership ever. The church had grown to 208 baptized members with 145 of those being confirmed adults. In November 1937 it was decided that electric lights would be added to the church. The proceeds from an oyster supper would be used to help pay for the wiring. Rev. Petersen served Brorson until 1938 when he moved to Kenmare, North Dakota. Rev. Christian Emil Bertelsen, the last native born Dane to serve the congregation, filled the vacancy later that year. In April 1939 it was decided to tear down the old stable that had been used to house horses during services in the old days. Pastor Bertelsen was a very energetic man and he did not consider himself too important to help the men tear down the old stable. He did, however, get their attention when he joined them for a beer after the work was done! He also took on the job of mowing the church lawn a few summers.



The congregation had grown considerably and the little church was bursting at the seams. The issues surrounding either expanding the church or moving were beginning to be debated again by 1940. At the April 23, 1940 meeting of the council there was a motion to change the name of the church from Brorson to something with a wider appeal beyond the Danish community. Some of the names that were



nominated were: First Lutheran Church, Community Lutheran Church, American Lutheran Church, Trinity Lutheran Church and Little White Church. Trinity Lutheran Church won over American Lutheran Church 9 votes to 6. It is not known how many votes for Little White Church there would have been.

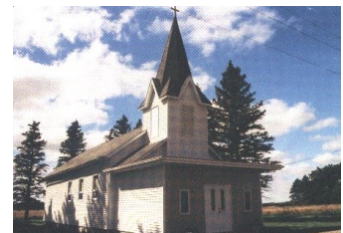
World War II was raging by 1942 and Trinity Lutheran was able to help out with the war effort in various small ways. It was decided in December 1942 to have a church supper to raise money so Blooming Prairie Times subscriptions could be purchased for each of the church's young men who were in the armed services.

At a special business meeting on October 8, 1946 Rev. Bertelsen made a strong appeal that the congregation should move to Bixby. "For the furtherance of the Kingdom of God, and interest of the people of Bixby and for the welfare of Trinity Lutheran Congregation, I hereby move that we relocate in Bixby as soon as circumstances permit," was his impassioned appeal to the members. A straw vote was taken and the motion failed 6 votes for to 19 against. This did not, however, dampen Pastor Bertelsen's enthusiasm for the idea of moving the congregation to Bixby. His resolve was strengthened to the point that he declared he would dig the basement by hand and haul the fill with a wheelbarrow if need be! The emotions surrounding this issue heated up, and at the annual meeting in December another vote was called, as some felt the October vote to be unfair. This time the motion passed 24 to 21. At a January 1947 council meeting the county attorney discussed the legalities of the vote that was taken in October. It was decided that a two-thirds majority would be needed to effect the move to Bixby. This vote was taken at a special congregational meeting on February 10, 1947. The resolution failed 25 to 7. This was effectively the end of the Bixby move issue. Rev. Bertelsen's resignation was accepted in September 1947 and he moved to Rutland, Iowa.



Rev. Theodore Marcus Hansen began his work with Trinity Lutheran and Our Savior's of Owatonna in February 1948. He was in the latter years of a very impressive career. He had been president of the UELC Wisconsin and Western Canada districts and was president of Dana College and Trinity Seminary in Blair from 1925 to 1929. Trinity was indeed fortunate to have procured the services of such an educated and experienced pastor. A special meeting was held in June 1948 to discuss extensive remodeling and enlargement of the existing church building. The proposal was

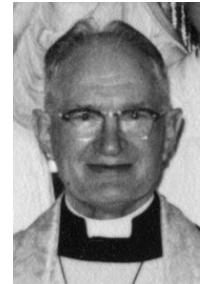
received favorably by the members. On May 27, 1949 the remodeling plan was approved and construction was completed in the summer of 1951. A Dedication Festival was held the evening of August 26, 1951 with UELC Minnesota District president N. B. Hansen attending and UELC president Hans C. Jersild officiating. Trinity Lutheran Church had a new look and more space to carry on the work of God's Kingdom through the last half of the 20th and into the 21st century.



Pastor Hansen served Trinity until 1951 and then he moved on to Winnipeg, Canada. After a period of vacancy a new graduate from Trinity Seminary, Rev. Norlan Lewis Hanson, came to serve Trinity. His youth and vigor brought a breath of fresh air to the small congregation. It was obvious early on that he was destined to be a great

servant in the Lord's work. He continued to serve Trinity admirably until 1956 when he moved on to Aurora, Colorado. Trinity was honored to have Rev. Hanson and his wife Alice at our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 2000. He passed away in Oregon, Wisconsin in 2012.

After Pastor Hanson's departure Trinity had great difficulty attracting a pastor to minister to the congregants. For the next nine years two retired pastors acting in long-term interim capacities served Trinity. The first of these was Rev. Frank Albert Berg of Beloit, Wisconsin. He was with the United Lutheran Church in America. He was 68 years old when he came to Trinity, but his age did not limit his ability to minister effectively. He was very active and endearing to the members. His energy and enthusiasm made it hard to believe that he was functioning in an interim capacity.



Pastor Berg returned to Beloit in 1961. He was followed in 1962 by Rev. Olin Calmer Fjelstad of Owatonna, Minnesota. Pastor Fjelstad had been with the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church before the merger that created the American Lutheran Church on January 1, 1961. The American Lutheran Church brought together the UELC of 1896, the ALC of 1930 and the ELC of 1917. Trinity was a charter member of this new church body. Pastor Fjelstad too was 68 years old at the time of his arrival at Trinity. He did not let his age slow him down either. Although having a more traditional inclination than Rev. Berg, he was respected and loved by the whole congregation. During Pastor Fjelstad's time with us, the membership rose to a respectable 167 baptized and 103 confirmed adult members, the second highest peak in the church's membership. Rev. Fjelstad served until 1965 when he did shorter and less frequent interim pastorates in the area. His widow, Mrs. Zillah Fjelstad, passed away on June 24, 2001 in her home in Owatonna at the age of 107! It seems that long life is often the reward for those who have served Trinity Lutheran.

Trinity was again without a pastor and not sure what to do. Should they call another long term interim pastor or should they join another parish in a joint call? The decision was made to join with Aurora Lutheran Church of rural Owatonna in the calling of a pastor. This call was answered by a young man from Velva, North Dakota named Rev. Charles Irwin Wilson. He was only four years out of seminary, but already a respected member of the clergy. The joint venture with Aurora proved to be a harmonious one, and it continues to this day. Pastor Wilson worked with the two congregations until 1970 when he, his wife, Naomi and family, moved to Spring Grove, Minnesota. Rev. Wilson shared a special memory of his time at Trinity, "One of the high points in my ministry at Trinity was at the Baptism font on May 14, 1967. Our son Erik was the blessed one. Baptism for each child was very special to me because it is the best sermon in action. The heart of Baptism is God's rich grace that equips each person to be ministers." Rev. and Mrs. Wilson were also among the honored guest at the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. He passed away in 2014 in Luverne, Minnesota.



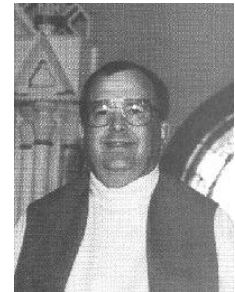
Trinity and Aurora set to the task again of calling a pastor to shepherd their respective flocks. Rev. Allan M. Ness took up this call in 1971. He had just finished a two-year study sabbatical after serving a congregation in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He and his wife Rosalie and children were much loved by the



congregation. He was a tireless minister of the Gospel and preached the Good News regardless of how it was received. He was also active in the lives of the congregation. One of his favorite diversions was driving tractor for some of the farmers in the congregations. The Ness family moved on to Viroqua, Wisconsin in 1978. Rev. and Mrs. Ness were honored guests at the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

After a short period of vacancy, bridged by retired interim Pastor Fred Jacobsen, of Alden, Minnesota, Trinity and Aurora were blessed to receive Rev. Paul Edwin Nelson as their pastor. Rev. Jacobsen was a native born Dane from Viborg, Denmark and emigrated to the US in 1926. He spoke with a classic Danish brogue. His preaching style was unorthodox. He refused to stay in the pulpit during his sermons. Once he threatened to run up and down the aisle while preaching, but decided since Trinity wasn't his parish he had better not do that. Wouldn't it have been an eye opener if he had!

Pastor Nelson, his wife JoAnn, and their two small daughters Jerianne and Jessica arrived from Fountain, Minnesota in 1979. Not long after arriving they gave birth to a son, Joel. They served Trinity and Aurora for over 30, holding the record as the longest serving pastorate in Trinity's history. Nine years was the longest any other pastor had served. Paul and JoAnn live in Owatonna, Minnesota.



During Pastor Paul's time with us, Trinity became a part of the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) on January 1, 1988. The ELCA was formed as a totally new church body, incorporating many old rival synods into a unified church with over 8 million members in the U.S. The creation of the ELCA brought together the two old Danish churches. These were the AELC of 1872 and the UELC of 1896, the so-called "Happy Danes" and the "Sad Danes." The major differences between the two Danish churches were more about liberal versus conservative interpretation of scripture and Biblical infallibility. The UELC was of the more conservative, literal persuasion. The old differences have all but disappeared since the difficult days of the 1890's.

Pastor Paul was the joy of the congregation. He was always willing to share his time and culinary talents. His exuberant personality always added an extra flair to the annual Æbleskiver Suppers, making the heat and smoke of æbleskiver baking much less noticeable. We were indeed blessed to be the beneficiaries of 31 years of Pastor Paul's service.

Trinity has had a long tradition of initiating new seminary graduates. This tradition returned to Trinity in the calling of Rev. Jonathan Davis and his wife Lauren. He was raised in Rochester, Minnesota and graduated from Luther Seminary in 2011. Jonathan's youthful enthusiasm was warmly received by the members of Aurora and Trinity. He sang the liturgy with a beautiful voice that was loved by all. Jonathan and Lauren's first child Elliott was born during their time here. Pastor John served Trinity and Aurora with immense talent that is remembered with fondness. He was destined for greatness, and in 2015 he accepted a call to Saint John's Lutheran in Northfield, Minnesota.





In keeping with the aforementioned tradition of breaking in new seminary graduates, Trinity and Aurora called Rev. Stephanie Wood in 2015. Stephanie has served Trinity with passion and commitment for the last three years. She is a joyful, energetic, and highly regarded presence in the life of the congregation. We thank Stephanie for being the last but certainly not least among the long line of pastors who have blessed Trinity Lutheran Church with their many gifts over these last 144 plus years.



That is Trinity Lutheran Church's history in a nutshell. If everything were written it would fill a large book, so much has been left out for the sake of brevity. God has blessed Trinity over the years, not with large numbers or a big building, but through treasured bonds with family and friends all sharing in the joy of the Good News. We do not grieve the end of Trinity Lutheran Church. We celebrate the life that this congregation has lived. Like an old friend whose time has come, we now must let Trinity go. We love this place and we love the many memories that have been created here. It is our prayer that God would continue to bless the members Trinity Lutheran, past and present. To God be the glory for the things He has done.

To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:  
A time to be born, a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
A time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time of war, and a time of peace.

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8