Brief History
of the United Church of Jesus Christ
and the St. Paul’s Congregation
in Eyota, Minnesota, USA

To understand how the congregations in The United States of America were founded and how they are organized it is important to know that religion and church were always and are still today only and exclusively private matters in America. The Americans with origin from Europe are mostly evangelical Christians.

While in the protestant German and European countries the sovereign was also head of the church (like it is in European monarchies up to the present day) the Catholic Church all around the world is ruled by the strict hierarchy of the Vatican.

In the New World, there were no sovereigns like in the Old World and the public authority was and is strictly secular. According to the way, the American authorities see their constitution religion and church is a man’s private thing. That is why there could never exist a religious hierarchy like the immigrants from Europe knew it. It was very new founded settlement’s proper thing whether and how to organize religious life. The “Little Evangelic Catechism” edited in the first years of the 20th century by the German Evangelical Synod of North America says:

“In the 20th of the past century (that is 19th century) the trek of German immigrants started to Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and to the states people called in those days “the far west”. – (...) But with bitter yearning they missed religious care. In fact, there were pastors enough, but a lot of them were dishonest men and lived in permanent struggle, dispute, and discord. They divided the Christian community into different denominations and sects and only had consensus in keeping the Evangelical Church they grew up with in Germany as “wrong religious” and blasphemed and condemned their old original religion. They did not accept the name “Evangelical Church” how the regional churches in Prussia and other countries in Germany were named but they chose names for their own being biased as they were.( ... )

The evangelical Christians grew tired of this behaviour and longed more and more for a church being as similar as possible under the existing circumstances to the German Evangelical Church in name, confession, and service.

This urgent need was the reason for the foundation of the Evangelical Synod of North-America. At the invitation of Pastor Louis Ernst Nollau on October 15, 1840, six evangelical pastors who were delegated by German evangelical missionary societies assembled at the church of Gravois Settlement in St. Louis County, Missouri, to found the “German Evangelical Church Association of the West”. From this nucleus, some years later rose the “German Evangelical Synod of North-America. ( ... )“
From the initiative of pastors, however, but nevertheless private persons raised the roof of an organisation under which religious life of the first German congregations in North America could flourish. This organisation gave religious guidelines to its members as this example shows:

“The German Evangelical Synod of North-America is part of the Evangelical Church as that community who keeps the books of the Holy Bible as there are the New and the Old Testament as the Lord’s words and for the only and unmistakable guideline of faith and life; who accepts the interpretations of the Holy Bible as written in the symbolic documents of the Lutheran and Reformed Church which are chiefly: the Augsburg Confession, the Catechism of Martin Luther, and the Heidelberg Catechism, as far as these are concurring; but in points of difference the German Evangelical Synod of North-America will accord only to the respective excerpts from the Holy Bible and will claim the freedom of conscience as it is use in the Evangelical Church.”

All evangelical churches founded by Germans could join this new organisation if they wanted to.

The roots of the German Evangelical St.-Paul’s Congregation in Eyota are to be found in 1867. Robert Weise, an Evangelical-Lutheran pastor, sermonized in that year for the local farmers and their families who had settled north of Eyota. On January 10, 1867, the heads of eight families met and made the decision to found a parish community. These families were: Jakob and Elisabeth Hermann; Johann Gottlieb and Christina Schellhammer; Peter and Elisabeth Scherer; Carl Hermann and Katharina Bierbaum; Daniel and Charlotte Hanenberger; Carl and Doris Schmidt; Jacob and Amelia Flechsenhaar; Johann Hermann and Kathrina Stickfort.

The new parish would hire Pastor August Ludwig Schmidt from Lewiston to celebrate every four weeks a service. The first was held on January 26, 1868, in the house of Jacob Flechsenhaar. The text for this first service in the history of St. Paul’s is to be found in the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter 8, 23-27. The sermon was entitled: „The Christian Life – A Journey with Jesus Christ, Through the Sea of the World“. 

On March 2, 1869, it was unanimously voted to build a church. A parcel of land in Viola Township was donated by Johann Hermann Stickfort, which was to be used for the church building, the parsonage, garden, and cemetery. On May 28, 1869, the cornerstone of the new church war laid, which contained a Lutheran Catechism, the Gospel of St. John, a brief history of the church, a Lutheran newspaper clipping and a brief review of the previous 15 years since Carl Hermann Bierbaum first settled in this area.

On July 25, 1869, the congregation dedicated their new house of worship to God’s service. It was an unpretentious wooden building, measuring 12 feet high, 28 feet long and 18 feet wide. It was the first German Evangelical Church in Olmsted County. The congregation belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod until 1870, when it withdrew from the Synod to join the Evangelical Synod of North America.

The pastor’s salary was not fixed. It was to be a free will pledge to be given in quarterly instalments by the church treasurer. Every second Sunday he had to conduct a service. The other Sundays he could serve other churches that were without a resident pastor.

On February 26, 1871, it was resolved that the pastor should conduct school for six months and receive 20.00 $ per month. Another decision was made to build a parsonage, which was replaced in 1903, by a larger new building.

The cemetery was platted in 1870 the first recorded burial was the stillborn daughter of Mr. And Mrs. Peter Scherer on May 9, 1870. The first registered confirmation was held April 7, 1872. There were three members in the class. In 1873, there were seven members in the class. The first recorded marriage was that of August Wendland and Bertha Auguste Barz on June 1, 1873.

The annual salary for the pastor was fixed for the first time in 1873: he was given 400.00 $ per year what is 33.33 $ per month. From 1904 the salary was raised to $500 and 1908 to $600. Additionally the pastor should get from any member who had a good harvest two sacks of feed,
either oats or corn.

In 1878, planning started to build an annex to the parsonage and a new, larger church. Because the old one was no longer large enough for the growing community. Johann Stellwagen of Winona got the contract to build the new church for a sum of $2,150.00. It was voted that in the new church, the men would sit on the west side and the women and young children would sit on the east side, and the church council would occupy the front pews of the west side. This arrangement continued until approximately 1932.

In the same year 1878 the pastor’s salary of $450.00 was reduced to $400.00, due to a poor harvest. At a meeting in 1881, it was voted to stop chewing tobacco in the church. Since 1889, the collections taken up in the “Klingelbeutel” (collection bag) were used to support home and foreign missions. 1911, the Council was authorised to pay $5.00 toward the installation of a telephone in the parsonage.

Through the years, the congregation grew more and more, and the English language was generally accepted more and more. In 1915, the first English services were held once a month, in the evening, and confirmation instructions were given in both languages, German as well as English.

But the adjustment to the use of English was difficult as indicated by a decision on January 4, 1916, which stated that people who only understood English could take part in church services and school and donated toward the pastor’s salary, but they could have no voting rights in the church business meeting, have no part in the church property and were not expected to pay for any new building. (Editor’s note: The intent of this paragraph is unclear. The translation from German to English creating the question) AEM

The decision was made to begin a Sunday School the first Sunday after Easter in 1919, one-half hour before the service and it was to include an English class. A year later, it was agreed to have Sunday School each Sunday in both languages. On the fourth Sunday morning of each month, the worship service would be conducted in the English language, since 1930 additionally on every second Sunday of each month. In 1932 the last confirmation class was instructed in German.

In 1934, the Evangelical Synod of North America and the Reformed Church united to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church and St. Paul’s Church became a member of the new denomination.

The German language was pushed back more and more. It was in 1935 that there was a worship service in German only once a month. This year was also the last that the minutes of the Council meetings and congregation meetings were written in German language. Nevertheless, the congregation refused to send a call to Rev. J. C. Kluffmann because many of the members thought he was not proficient enough in the German language. The secretary was instructed to invite Rev. John G. Siegle of Brillion, Wisconsin for a trial sermon and because he could speak German fluently, he became the new pastor. At the meeting on June 8, 1946, it was voted to discontinue the German services, with no dissenting vote cast. But not before 1954 the congregation’s Constitution and Bylaws were translated in the English language.

The year of 1948 brought some important changes in the life of the church. Women, aged 21 and over, were given the right to vote at business meetings. (Since the year of 1952 all members aged 18 and more have voting rights.) It was also decided to practise “open communion”, meaning anyone who was confirmed or a member in good standing if this or another church could partake of the Lord’s Supper whenever services were conducted.

In 1968, having the 100th anniversary the congregation counted 248 confirmed members and 93 baptised members under confirmation age. The 100th anniversary of the church building was held on October 8, 1978.

The year 1992 marked St. Paul’s 125th year of existence. For this reason one of the feast days, April 26th, was celebrated as “German Sunday”. The focus of that day was the congregation’s German heritage and parts of the worship service were conducted in German language.
exhibition showed a lot of beautiful antiques, books, and documents written in German coming from the private belongings of the families. It was emphasised that the German language had been used in the church for 47 years; the transition from German to English took 32 years, and for the last 46 years, English is the only language used.

The jubilee was also reason to open the cornerstone and to examine its contents. The first papers to be removed were hand-written and dated 1933, stating who was present at the previous opening of the cornerstone. Also in the cornerstone, there were religious publications of 1933, when the basement was built, German religious newspapers, dated 1878, and a German Catechism, and a set of hand-written pages that gave a history of the area and a list of the members in 1878.

A survey of the congregation’s members in the jubilee year 1992 specifies today as in former days nearly only German names and some Swedish and very few English names. I think in 2006 there is no difference. So it is not wrong to say that this congregation founded in 1867 by German immigrants clearly aware of their German roots – you only must have a look to the members list. You find there people named Arendt and Bernhardt, Bierbaum and Buchholz; Dietrich, Fehlhafer, Hagedorn, Hammel and Heins; Ihrke and Jensen, Koch, Merchlewitz, Möhnke and Neumann; Pankow and Reinicke, Schmidt and Schössler, Schuman, Siegle and Treichel, Uthke and von Wald. You find no Behnken anymore but you find their descendants.

It is another good step on the way of tradition that Pastor Heinz Behnken sermonized in German when we celebrated together the Behnken jubilee-day on August 27, 2006, in St. Paul’s Church, Eyota.
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