

Anniversary Dinner – May 18, 2014
By Judy LeGath

In this 165th anniversary year, we are tempted to pause for a moment and take a good look at our dear Salem Lutheran Church, and when we have done this, we have identified so much that gives us reason to celebrate. Our spirit-filled worship life (including inspiring musical offerings); our opportunities for religious education for members of all ages; opportunities for Christian service, both here in our own community as well as in areas far beyond Catonsville; our strong financial position; and perhaps most precious of all, our genuine love and concern for each other combine to make us a truly blessed community.

So how did this happen? How is it that we find ourselves in such a favorable position today? Clearly many factors have contributed to this, some of which have been far beyond our control. But we do know that from its beginning, Salem has been fortunate to have leaders and members who have been secure in their faith, have met current needs, and have been open to make changes and adjustments that have assured a strong future for our congregation. This is our history, the heritage that has brought us here today.

The story of our founding by a group of local German immigrant farmers is by now a rather familiar one to us. Having left Germany to move beyond the unstable political and economic conditions of the 1830s and 1840s, they did not leave behind their love of God or their reverence for their Lutheran heritage. Having no Lutheran church to attend here, they worshipped at the newly formed St. Timothy's Episcopal Church. They missed their own traditional German language worship and were encouraged by an itinerant Lutheran missionary, Carl Frederick Heyer, to form their own church. Following the advice of Father Heyer (as he was affectionately known), they met on September 30, 1849 and organized the German Evangelical Lutheran Salem Congregation.

The early life of the church was filled with much activity. Their first task was to build a house of worship. They purchased a lot on Ingleside Avenue, and members of the congregation joined in the work of constructing the stone building, which was dedicated on Sunday, June 16, 1850. Soon a decision was made to use the churchyard as a graveyard, and to replace the schoolhouse that had been on the property at the time of purchase. They hired a teacher who instructed in both English and German and had as an additional duty ringing the school bell.

Salem's first pastor was Charles A. Brockman. Popular at first, he fell out of favor with some in the congregation, possibly due to emotional stress coming from the death of his wife and two children over a three-year period. He was succeeded by Dr. George W. Ebeling in 1854.

Dr. Ebeling's pastorate included steady growth and significant change. By the end of the 19th century, Salem's membership had doubled from its 1849 beginning, and the congregation looked beyond its original German ethnic orientation. As early as 1858, Sunday afternoon English language services were offered, in 1895 Sunday School instruction in English only was initiated, and at Dr. Ebeling's death in 1901, all worship in German was discontinued. The development of Frederick Road as the community center of activity was also apparent to the congregation. In 1901 Salem began to hold Sunday evening services in English at Library Hall, a meeting and

multipurpose facility on Frederick Road (located approximately where the medical supply store is today).

Dr. Ebeling was succeeded by Dr. Martin Luther Enders, whose time with us saw Salem's move to Frederick Road. Our new church home was an impressive addition to the development that was taking place in downtown Catonsville. Designed by the architectural firm of Owens and Sisco, the new building was constructed of Port Deposit granite in the Norman-Gothic style and was dedicated on Sunday, October 18, 1903. The cost of the entire project, including land acquisition, was \$26,100. Salem member Charles Mattfeldt wrote an article for a Lutheran publication, describing the new building in glowing detail. He concluded his article with the comment, "The church has a bright and glorious future before it." We certainly can't argue with that.

Pastor Enders left Salem in 1910 to accept a new call and was succeeded by Dr. John Culler Bowers, whose long pastorate ended with his retirement in 1947. He initiated numerous building projects including the construction of a parsonage on Newberg Avenue in 1911, a new Sunday School addition in 1917, and digging out of the church basement to provide space for a kitchen and meeting rooms. He also stressed the value of enhancing the worship space, and through his leadership Salem purchased a mosaic reredos for the chancel, installed a new Moeller organ in 1929, created a center isle, installed a brass and marble communion rail, and added a number of stained glass windows. During Pastor Bowers' time, Salem served as a community center for its members, where a vast number of organizations offered opportunities for service and fellowship.

Pastor Wilbur Newby succeeded Pastor Bowers in 1947. Two years later, Salem celebrated its 100th anniversary with appropriate projects and events, including a ceremonial cake cutting by Pastor Newby and Pastor Emeritus Bowers as well as the sale of the commemorative plates that still are displayed in many of your homes today.

The post WWII period was one of rapid growth with membership rising to its peak. Salem's physical plant was challenged by the need for greater educational and meeting space. Salem recognized the advantage of a building project. After considering an expansion plan in 1949 that was never carried out, Salem constructed a new parish education facility, dedicated on October 23, 1955.

Pastor Newby left Salem in 1960 and was succeeded by Pastor G. Paul Lottich. His years at Salem were characterized by changes in society that led to changes in church ministry. Women were now serving on the Church Council, and lay assistants were taking a greater part in Sunday worship. Salem members were less likely to be involved in the various church groups (many of which ceased to exist) and more likely to assist with efforts such as Meals on Wheels or after school tutoring. Salem operated a paid kindergarten that transitioned to a day care center.

Like today, there was a growing need for parking since many Salem members now came to church from greater distances. In 1964 Salem tore down the parsonage and purchased a strip of land to its west. Together these areas became our exiting parking lot.

After Pastor Lottich's departure in 1976, a call was extended to Pastor G. Edward Whetstone. It is truly difficult to try to analyze current history, and Pastor Ed's 32 years of ministry with us is more the story of where we are now, not what happened in the past. Of course, it would not be difficult to compile an extensive listing of the good things that happened at Salem during those years. Certainly the welcoming of Pastor Dave to Salem would be high on that list. But we should focus on the major renovation project of the 1990s as a significant advance in the life of this congregation as well as a prime example of Salem's history of responding to the need for change. Appropriately titled "Building Together on our Heritage for our Third Century" the project addressed areas of congregational life that required improvement, namely a more welcoming entry from our parking lot, greater accessibility throughout the building, more flexible meeting and classroom space, and an expanded narthex that could provide greater fellowship. We all benefit from this major undertaking each time we enter Salem Lutheran Church.

In 1974, Dr. Edward Orser, professor of American Studies at UMBC and a member of of Salem then and now, wrote a history of the church as a 125th anniversary project, which is available on our website. In concluding, Ed pointed out that our church's Christian ministry has taken differing forms in various periods of its history, and that change has not always been easy. He concluded by writing "...what is impressive in examining the record of Salem's 125-year ministry is its resilience in adapting the nature and character of that ministry to new times and new conditions. The challenge for the future, as for the past, is to be able to hold true to the basic commitment to Christian ministry while maintaining an openness to the possibility for reformation and renewal." Those words are as true today as they were 40 years ago. We can say to each other and to ourselves, "A VERY HAPPY ANNIVERSARY".