

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST JAMES LUTHERAN CHURCH

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St. James Lutheran Church was founded by a small group of 29 people mostly Scandinavian, in December 1923. It wasn't until 1927 that the actual building of the church was begun. Meanwhile, the congregation assembled across the street in the old fire house, which is now the Church of God building. For \$20, the Men's League purchased the cornerstone, which was laid in May 1927. According to Erhardt Olsen, who was about 13 at the time, the foundation for the church was dug by Tom and Ed Brennan's team of horses. The architect and contractor was Mr. George Schmal Senior, who also hand-carved the altar and wall panel behind the altar. Almost everyone in those days helped with the construction. The church was dedicated July 29, 1928. After several pastors had ministered to the congregation, Pastor Herbert was called in 1931. It was under his direction that the parsonage was built. The parsonage was constructed in 1935 using a kit form from Sears & Roebuck Company. It cost \$3000, but ran over budget by \$400. Pastor Herbert retired in December of 1959 on his 50th ordination anniversary, after 29 years of service to St. James.

My memories begin in 1960 when my father, Pastor Albert Abel, received the call to St. James. It was February 1960, when my sister, Ruth and I, now 13 years old, first saw the parsonage and church in St. James with our parents. We were here that winter day to view not only the church, but also our new home. My first thoughts, after coming from Queens, were that this is really the country- no tall buildings, a few houses, and small farms within the area with several stores down Lake Avenue, the hub of the town. To me, both the house and church looked more than 100 years old with its dark wooden cedar shakes, large maple trees surrounding the church, a row of pine trees along the side of the parsonage, a large property behind the house and garage that seemed to be falling apart!

As I walked up the three steps to the entrance of the church, I was met inside by a long, creaking staircase that led upstairs to the open narthex. As I stood in the narthex, my eyes were drawn upward toward the ceiling with its huge beams in the rafters. As I looked toward the front, I saw a large hand carved dark wooden altar, with a similarly carved panel behind it. Above the altar was the beautiful Gethsemane stained glass window with "Glory to God on High" written above it in gold lettering. To the left was the pipe organ with pews in front where the choir sat, facing the pulpit. I remember sitting in those pews and singing in the choir, wearing the black cassock with the starched white surplis and black beanie on my

head. Whenever the weather was really hot, the varnish on the pews softened. The kids in the choir would look at each other as each person tried to get up. We tried to hold our laughter at the sound of the surplus, ripping from the varnished pews. We would even try to see who could get the largest “brown spot” in one sitting.

As you opened the door behind the pulpit and walked down the staircase, you could either walk across the path to the parsonage or use one of the two small bathrooms on the left. If you turned to the right, you would be entering the stage. However, you could also walk straight ahead down more stairs and you were now in the main basement with its high ceiling and small kitchen in the room to the side. This basement was where the ladies had their dinners and the Walter League held their square dances—the only form of dancing allowed in the Missouri Synod in those days. The Walter League teens had to create their own activities which wasn't easy to do with just bowling, roller skating, swimming down at Little Africa during the summer, or traveling to NYC for the annual Walter League boat trip up the Hudson to Bear Mountain for the day. As a teen, school and church were the major parts of our lives. The Smithhaven Mall wasn't built yet, and you traveled to Huntington or NYC to do major shopping. When the mall was completed, it was a major boom to this area and felt like civilization had finally come to St. James.

The house – yes, the parsonage. Our trip here in 1960 was to see where my family would be living for the next several years. Though it was smaller than our house in Queens, it would be sufficient. Both my parents grew up in parsonages next door to a church, and knew exactly what life would be like for us. My mom had already seen the house several weeks earlier, made several requests for work to be done on the house, which was completed by the time we arrived. My sister and I ran upstairs to see our new room. We would have to manage sleeping in the front bedroom with all our furniture, some of it had to be moved into the large closet. My parents had the middle room and my brother, Bert, had the back bedroom. We survived those years with just one bathroom, but that was typical of that time. It wasn't long before we moved in, leaving Queens to meet new friends like the Hohmanns and the Olsens –Sandy was the one who introduced me to her horses and hamsters. Erhardt did the landscaping of the church while Charlie Hohmann Sr. worked on our lawn mower at his Wood's machine shop.

My father, quickly, started to work by visiting members, checking out local businesses, and speaking with other local church pastors. With the population growing in St. James, it wasn't long before many new people became members. One new member, Ed Hoffmann, joined and together with other council members,

like Charlie Hohmann Senior and Erhardt Olsen, made decisions that ultimately changed the look of the church. It was in 1963 that ground was broken for the new addition, and the renovations of the church began.

First, the basement received a new look with a lower ceiling, paint and lots of folding chairs for the Sunday services. The church office was temporarily housed in the parsonage basement, where lots of people were constantly streaming into our house throughout the day that year. Then the front entrance of the church was completely changed, with the addition of the large stone staircase outside leading up to the columns, and red doors to the inside narthex. Next, the large addition was added to the back of the church which added the library room, church office above it (which later became the choir room), a sacristy and altar guild room. Downstairs, a new kitchen, boiler room, and bathrooms were added. After the inside and outside were painted just the right colors, the new furniture – the gift of many people – was added to finish the new look of the inside of the church, transforming it into a beautiful, white colonial church.

My family enjoyed our life here until my father became physically unable to walk. His Padgett's Disease had finally made his life so difficult, that he had to have surgery. In 1968, he retired from St. James and ordained ministry to live in West Islip. I was just finishing up my college years at Wagner College to become a teacher. Our family returned a year later to St. James in June 1969, where I was married here at St. James by my father, uncle and my father's best friend – triple blessing!!

After marriage, we moved out of the area until we eventually bought our present house. We returned to St. James Lutheran Church since I always knew that my heart, my life, and faith were tied to this community-I was at home again. Larry and I knew that our children needed to experience this same love, community and passion to the ministry of God that I once had. Our faith in this church and community has never ceased to increase our love and desire for having Christ in our lives. I thank God for St James Lutheran church, a community where I have fond memories of my parents and siblings. A place where I raised my children and the place that Larry and I are honored to call our HOME. Thank you.