

History of St. Matthew Lutheran Church of Sandy Hill

By Pastor Kris Brower

Plans for a church began in 1887 as a mission congregation at the Little Rocky community. Church councilmen of the mission group, F.F. Goeking, Franz Fischer, G. Mier, and F. Schwarze. Rev. O. Samuel, conducted Sunday afternoon services. On February 6, 1888, steps were taken toward a more definite organization and the adoption of a constitution was completed on July 10, 1888.

Following a congregational meeting on May 25, 1891, it was decided to move to the present location, and a 10 acre tract of land was bought from Tom C. Clay and the first church was built. According to the *Lutherischer Gemeinde-Bote fuer Texas* newsletter in September 1891, Pr. O. Samuel, together with Pr. C. Weiss of Victoria, laid the cornerstone of the new church on July 12, 1891. The church was first known as the Evangelical Lutheran St. Matthew Church at Sandy Hill.

Another article in the newsletter of December 1, 1891 reported that the new church was dedicated on Sunday, October 4, 1891. So the church was built in less than 3 months! The article stated, "After Pastor O. Samuel, in a brief address, had laid the importance of this day upon the hearts of the assembled festive guests, a member of the building committee presented the key to the pastor of the congregation. The procession into the church was accompanied by the ringing of the bell. Following the Rite of Dedication by the Pastors O. Samuel, F. Gerstmann of Frelsburg, and S. T. Traubel of Salem, Pastor F. Gerstmann provided the sermon on the basis of Psalm 84. In the afternoon, Pastor S. T. Traubel based his sermon on Matthew 9:1-8. In conclusion, Pastor O. Samuel preached, with Revelation 22:1-5 as his text." The original handwritten newsletter above still exists in the church record book.

Building committee members included August Randermann, Christian Goeking, and Theodore Spitzer. The first building was just to the south and west of the present one.

Sandy Hill is at the intersection of Sandy Hill Road and Farm to Market Road 2621, nine miles west of the Brazos River and eight miles northeast of Brenham in northeastern Washington County. A hill, with an elevation of 343 feet, lies on Hardeman Branch near Little Rocky Creek. The community was founded by German immigrants and developed in the late 19th century. The population of Sandy Hill recovered from a Great Depression low of ten in 1936 to an estimated fifty by 1945. It's remained fifty through 2000. The community's main economic activity is ranching.

St. Matthew Lutheran Congregation of Sandy Hill, Washington County, Texas, officially adopted its first constitution on May 26, 1892. Charter members were Pastor Schaaf, A. Randermann, Christian Goeking, W. Wieghat, A. Seeker, H. Blumberg, C. Kettler, F. Fathauer, F. Goeking, Henirich Seeker, Fritz Haarmier, William Stegemueller, H. Wiehorn, C. H. Kettler, H. Dierking, W. Rosenbaum, H. Bohne, F. Lindemann, F. Grage, H. Lohmeyer, Sr., W. Peter, O. Geissler, H. Lohmeyer, W. Meier, W. Ellermann, H. Hackstedt, W. Polhmeier, John Prah, and Alex Kohler.

In 1892, Pastor George Kreth accepted the call to St. Matthew as pastor and teacher. Included in his salary was housing, so it was decided to build the parsonage in 1892. During his term, a church organ was acquired and the first Sunday School was established.

The church built a school in 1894 and the pastors also served as teachers. The first school stood between the site of the original church and the current one. Later, during the pastorate of Renutus

Fiedler, three acres of land across the road to the east from the church property was purchased by the community and the school building was moved to that site. Pastor Fiedler continued in his service as pastor and teacher of the public school for ten years. The school served many generations until 1952 when it joined the Brenham Independent School District.

In 1919, Pastor and Mrs. George C. Czerkus organized the "Freuen Verein", the women's organization, established to serve with good works locally and in the church at-large. Its purpose was also for Christian Fellowship and to study God's work each month. The women's organization continues to place emphasis on Bible study and serving the church in all areas of congregational life.

Pastor Czerkus also called into being the first youth organization, the Luther League.

In August 1915, St. Matthew suffered a tragic loss. The severe inland coastal storm of that year completely demolished the St. Matthew Church building with only the baptismal font and the bell being salvaged. Worship services were held in the school house. It was immediately voted to erect a new building. The new Church built higher on the hill than the one demolished by the hurricane, started in October and was dedicated six weeks later on December 6, 1915.

Records show that the new church was to be built of wood, 16 ft. standards to be used, and 18 ft. height in bow-height ceiling. Bevel siding was to be used outside the church. The cornerstone of the church was also rebuilt. In late 1991, a covered entrance at the front of the church was completed.

A Parish Hall was completed during the term of Pastor Rudolph Becker (1936-1940). This added space allowed for the expansion of Sunday School classes, meetings of organizations and kitchen space for use by the congregation for its social and recreational activities. According to folks who were members at that time, spiritual plays were performed by a group from the congregation, and they would take some of their plays to other churches. In 1940 the church, parish hall and parsonage were wired for electricity as power lines were extended into this area.

Under Pastor Becker, Sunday School classes were introduced to be held regularly every Sunday morning. This practice has continued to the present day.

In 1942, the congregation voted to become a member of the American Lutheran Church which merged again to become "The American Lutheran" in 1960. In 1943, the new American Lutheran Church hymnals were bought. The merger of 1960 presented another new hymnal, "The Service Book and Hymnal" which also was adopted by the congregation, and commonly referred to as "The Red Hymnal."

A Lutheran Brotherhood men's organization was organized under the leadership of Pastor W. C. Poehlmann and remained active for many years.

Pastor A. M. Fiedler came to Sandy Hill in February 1948 and served until 1954. During this time he revised and translated the St. Matthew German Constitution into English, which was adopted by the congregation. It was during Pastor Fiedler's influence on St. Matthew that John Schwartz, Jr. decided to study ministry.

Pastor H. C. Ziehe was instrumental in building the education center, a series of classrooms linking the church and parish hall into a single unit by means of full length connecting hallways. "The Center" was dedicated on Easter Sunday, March 29, 1959.

On May 26, 1957, St. Matthew celebrated its 65th Anniversary of the founding of the congregation. The 75th was celebrated on May 28, 1967 and the 90th on May 23, 1982. May 24, 1992 was the celebration of St. Matthew's 100th anniversary. The 125th anniversary was celebrated on May 21, 2017 with over 200 people present, including some former pastors and district representatives from NALC and LCMC.

Pastor Leon Knitt accepted the call to St. Matthew in 1963. He endeared himself to all, and especially to the aged and confined. He was also greatly interested in youth and education.

In 1963, St. Matthew had the first woman, Mrs. Ben (Margaret) Heidemann, to serve on a District Mission Committee. She was elected by the Southern District of the ALC and served for three years.

In the 1960's St Matthew and Immanuel Lutheran both needed a new pastor. In August 1965, provisions were completed to establish a dual Parish with Rev. Bill Norman guiding. Since then, the congregations have shared a pastor, coordinated their worship schedules, confirmation, and youth programs.

After serving his intern training at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Brenham, Pastor Dale F. Cerny expressed interest in returning to the Washington County area and thus accepted the call to serve the dual parish beginning in August 1969. In 1970 improvements to the interior of the sanctuary included new padded pews, tile floors and carpet, as well as tile floors in the kitchen and Parish Hall. Further improvements were made later to the beautiful but aging stained glass windows by reinforcement.

St. Matthew has generously responded to several church-wide mission appeals. In 1974-1975, the United Mission Appeal of the ALC was initiated. St. Matthew members, under the leadership of Pastor Dale Cerny and dedicated team captains and workers, generously subscribed to a final goal of \$10,875.50.

Pastor Lauren Endahl started serving the dual Parish in April 1977. The congregation learned a new liturgy from the Lutheran Book of Worship (the Green Hymnal), purchased in 1977. A major improvement of the church buildings in 1978 was the addition of central heat and air conditioning made possible by the Memorial Fund.

Beginning in March of 1981, The American Lutheran Church launched a consolidated Seminary Appeal for funds among its congregations to help strengthen its various seminaries and their curricula and to renovate and update educational facilities. Pastor Rudy Kelling provided the overall leadership for this appeal in St. Matthew, in which members responded with an overwhelming commitment of \$31,500.

In 1985, "Good Neighbor Sunday" began under the leadership of Pastor Kelling. This event invites former members and friends in the community to worship and share in a covered dish meal in October.

In 1987, three church bodies, the American Lutheran Church, The Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran (AELC) voted to form one new church body, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Our constitution was revised and officially adopted as members of this newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on October 30, 1988.

The stage in the Parish Hall was removed and a glass display case installed in 1988. Trophies, memorabilia and historical references were displayed there.

Also, in 1988, the first burial in the new section of the cemetery took place. The rules were changed to simplify future plot usage and maintenance.

Following the retirement of Pastor Rudy Kelling in July 1991, the Rev. Jon Siemsgluz began serving St. Matthew on August 1, 1991. He came to Sandy Hill from Redeemer Lutheran Church (LCMS) of Baytown, Texas. Prior to that, he had served Grace Lutheran Church (LCMS) of Brenham for eighteen years.

The congregation voted to remodel the kitchen in 2000 - 2001. New cabinets & appliances make it an ideal place for hosting dinners and other events.

In January 2011, the congregation voted to leave the ELCA and to join with the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). Immanuel Lutheran chose to remain in the ELCA, and Pr. Jim Abbott chose to stay with the ELCA as well. Thus, the dual parish arrangement was dissolved, and St. Matthew issued a call for their own pastor. After a comprehensive call process, Pr. Kris Brower was called by the congregation. He came to us from All Saints Lutheran Church in Arlington, TX, and began full time ministry at St. Matthew on February 15, 2012. In April 2012, the congregation voted to also join the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). In 2019, the congregation chose to dissolve their affiliation with the LCMC and are now Affiliated solely with the NALC.

Having completed his theological education, Pr. Brower was ordained and installed as pastor of St. Matthew on June 10, 2012 by Bishop John Bradosky, head of the North American Lutheran Church. After the service, the congregation and a number of visitors enjoyed a meal and a lengthy question and answer session with Bp. Bradosky.

During Pr. Brower's service, he further organized and digitized the church history and cemetery records, computerized and backed up all key documents and pictures, updated the church library, created a website and social media page for the church, helped launch an electronic newsletter, and worked to modernize and organize all church and member information and reporting. In the process, he discovered that a number of confirmation class pictures were missing from the "wall", presumably due to the destruction of the original church building, and was able to develop class listings for all those missing years and get them posted on the wall as well.

A new privacy fence was erected across the back of the cemetery in September 2013. The cost was covered by a list of donors from the congregation.

That same year, the inside of the sanctuary was completely repainted with a lighter color, the old wall fans taken down, and new flood lights installed to make it brighter.

On June 9, 2014, lightning struck the steeple, disabling the phones, sound system, and organ. A committee was appointed to research alternative brands, models, and costs, and to make a recommendation to the congregation. A special congregational meeting was held on August 24, 2014 to vote on whether or not to purchase the recommended new Phoenix organ. Because all the money for the new organ had been already amassed through private donations, memorial funds and insurance, and these funds were specifically designated to purchase a new organ, the purchase was approved, and the organ was ordered.

The new Pheonix electronic organ was received and installed, voiced and made ready just in time to be played for the first time publicly on Christmas Eve, Dec 24, 2014.

The Sunday School rooms were refurbished, and electrical service and lighting updated in the fall of 2015. Also, the round stained glass window that used to adorn the bell tower for many years was discovered in a barn. It was in pretty bad shape, but because of its history, the council voted to have it restored and put into a panel that could be hung in the church. The result was that a stained glass panel was made with the circular window at its center, and that panel now hangs in the overflow area of the church.

A completely new constitution was approved at the duly called semi-annual congregational meeting in October 2016, and a few minor amendments were reviewed and approved by the annual congregational meeting in February 2017. Notable changes were to the parent church affiliations, membership definitions and classifications, and position descriptions for council positions.

Various improvements and repairs were made around the building so it would be fresh, clean and beautiful for the celebration of our 125th Anniversary held on May 21, 2017. New carpeting was added on the front entrances, trees were trimmed, new blinds replaced the old ones, curtains were cleaned, new exterior door handles and locks were installed, a storage shed was built and insulated, bulletin boards were consolidated, new decor was hung on the walls in the hall and parish hall, a panel listing the names of confirmation classes whose pictures were lost when the original church blew down, and other minor details.

In 2018, we added a new deck in back, installed our first satellite internet access, repaired foundations and drainage, replaced old single pane windows, painted, began recording and pod casting sermons, and generally improved the property. We continued computerizing and backing up church information and history. Linda Brower served as the national chairperson of the Women of the North American Lutheran Church from Aug 2017 to Aug 2018. Prior to that, she had been the national vice-chair for two years.

Our Pastors, 1892 - Present

G.P.A. Schaaf	1892 - 1893
George Kreth	1893 - 1895
Renatus Fiedler	1896 - 1906
N. Wittengel	1907 - 1907
Albert Fuenning	1907 - 1912
George Czerkus	1912 - 1935
Rudolph Becker	1936 - 1940
W. C. Poehlmann	1941 - 1947

A. M. Fiedler 1948 - 1954
H. C. Ziehe 1955 - 1962
Leon Knitt 1963 - 1965
William Norman 1966 - 1968
Dale Cerny 1969 - 1976
Lauren Endahl 1977 - 1980
Rudy A. Kelling 1980 – 1991
Jon Siemsglusz 1991 - 2002
James Abbott 2003 - 2010
Kris Brower 2012 - present