

195 Years of Faithfulness at Zion
The Rev. Mark Sherwindt, Pastor
Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
Christ the King Sunday: November 22, 2009

What is the significance of reaching the momentous occasion of our 195th birthday? It seems like a day and a week in our life as a congregation just like any other. Time marches on, and we have come to take it for granted that Zion will be here just as we were last week, and the week before that, without interruption for ten thousand, one hundred, and forty such Sundays, and more, since we were formed earlier in the year on June 14th, 1814. So, that's ten thousand, one hundred, and sixty four consecutive Sundays of worship here in this congregational family we know as Zion Lutheran Church.

It's not just that we're still alive after all these years, although that is no small feat, nor anything we should take for granted. Not many congregations in the ELCA, or in any denomination for that matter are around to celebrate 195 years of Christian ministry. Some of this is due to dumb luck for those that make it to 195, or to bad luck for those that don't. Demographically speaking, congregations located in urban settings and country churches located in rural pockets of America have experienced a disproportionate share of closings and consolidations. Zion was planted in a rural setting when we began, and we have wound up enjoying life in a well-situated suburban setting for a good long while now. On the other hand, our neighbors down the road in Canton have begun to feel the pinch of bad demographics.

But beside the dumb luck of a good location, Zion has done exceptional ministry over the years and across the centuries. In the 1860s, under the direction of Pastor Samuel Baechler, Zion established our Sunday School ministry. In the 1940's, under the direction of Pastor Paul Daneker, Vacation Bible School began with a vision for serving our community. Then, with Pastors LaFontaine and Ruth, we formed our Altar Guild, Brownie and Boy Scout troops, an Acolyte Corps, cooperative commitments with St. Luke's Lutheran Community and the North Canton Ministerial Association. From a small rural parish, sharing our pastor, at one time or another, with Emmanuel in Hartville, St. Jacob on Mudbrook, Good Hope in Zoarville, and St. John in Canal Fulton, in the 1980s under Pastor Kurt Meuschke's leadership, Zion grew to have over 1,000 members, with average worship attendance exceeding 350 on a weekly basis.

The community of North Canton has struggled more recently with the closing of the Hoover Company; but even in this regard, our many strengths as a community and our many strengths as a congregation have continued to shine through the transitional challenges we face. We're not what we once were, but we are what we have always been, a faithful family of families, with deep roots in our community and high hopes for what God is calling us to do and to be. There are many measures by which our strengths have shined across the generations. Our founding was a part of ground-breaking boldness in

arriving in the Ohio Valley early in America's revolutionary period. Stark County played a central role in America's westward expansion, along with the challenges of enduring the major wars our nation has fought. Initiatives in ministry, efficiencies in organization, effectiveness in strategies of outreach have been a part in Zion's long and storied history.

When it comes to lifting up the present, we have just experienced some of our most generous years on record. We're proud of the ministry we've built with Zion's Food Pantry and Clothing Closet, both in terms of the dollars we've donated and the hours we've spent volunteering. It's been personally satisfying and deeply gratifying to know that we're making a difference in reaching out to persons in need. Recently, an accident opened the door for us to assist with some catastrophic relief for folks right here in our congregational family, and all will agree that Zion's generosity has been truly humbling.

We've had five successive years of balanced budgets, along with exceptional support for important property projects, including the replacement of our old boiler with a new heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning system. Our savings at Merrill Lynch took a hit with the recent financial melt-down; but the truth is that we still have more money in the bank than has ever been the case for our community here at Zion. We have been good stewards of the community God has given us and good at stewardship, too. It is with deep gratitude to God that we take great pride in the history that is ours, the ministry we've done, and the church family we've become. One-hundred-and-ninety-five years and counting: may God be praised; and may God's people prosper with the gifts God has given and the love we have been called to share!

It's been a long run from 1814 to today. Here's what Henry Holl had to say about us back in 1912 with a poem he entitled *The Old Zion Church*.

*Away from town, two miles, or more,
there stood the church I did adore.
Yes, I can say it without fear
that was Old Zion Church, so dear.*

*Good people came from everywhere
to services of worship there;
and humble members, with song and prayer,
quite often took communion there.*

*To serve the Lord, through dust and snow,
both large and small were sure to go;
oft in that church, all gathered there,
they raised their voice in fervent prayer.*

*Reemsnyder, Kreighbaum, Roush and Holl;
Boettler, Miller, Sheets, Bach, and Strohl ...*

*Bender, Schneider, Holtz, and Bair;
Smith, Harter, Pepple and Shook were there.
These dear old friends were often heard
serving the Lord through Luther's word.*

The names have changed, but the mission lives on. So, what does 195 years of faithful service have to say about our future at Zion? Does our long past guarantee a future? In this regard the answer is clear and sure. It is not our past but God's promise that secures our future. The key to where we're going is not found in tracing where we've been, but in practicing the skills that helped get us here. That's part of what Pastor Jim Lutz had to say with his greeting twenty years ago in the brochure we produced when we celebrated our 175th Anniversary. "We are here because of those who were before us." Yes, that is very true; but "in the beginning was God, the creator and sustainer of all that we are. God created faith in generations of Christian people who by their committed service made it possible for us to be here. They nurtured our faith and built this place" – and the place before this on West Maple Street, and the place before that on Pittsburg Road, and the place before that, the historic log church we shared with what is now Zion United Church of Christ, on the grounds of what is presently North Canton Cemetery.

Pastor Lutz continues, "An anniversary involves looking back ... but looking back is never enough. We must also look around us now and recognize that God continues to create and strengthen our faith and service. With the help of the Holy Spirit, our commitment helps nurture the faith of the next generation, and our service continues to help build the church" – not a building, but a mission to serve, and a movement for Christ. Those who celebrated the first anniversary of Zion probably did not envision these many anniversaries to follow; but they knew the promise – God's promise to Zion and Christ's promise to the Church.

The Festival of Christ the King Sunday is the opportunity to pray for the arrival of God's kingdom, when the beginning comes full circle and reaches its end, God's aim, our purpose. *Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!* That's the prayer that has been expressed by generations of Christians reaching all the way back to the day when Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. That was the moment that set the church looking forward to the day Christ would return as Lord of lords and King of kings. That is the end of history, God's aim for the Church and all of creation.

We cannot predict how many more years Zion will celebrate the life God gives us; but we certainly share with those who have gone before, faith in God's faithfulness to the promises He had made, to Zion and the Church. With our one-hundred-and-ninety-fifth birthday, we stand firm in our belief that our faithful God will continue to create a faithful people to sustain the life of a faithful church, a church committed to lifting up the Gospel, to living the love God gives and offering the service that love inspires ... all to God's glory ... and in Jesus' name. Amen

CELEBRATING ANNIVERSARIES IN THE CANTON-MASSILLON CONFERENCE

The Festival of Christ the King Sunday, November 22, 2009

<i>Name and Location of Congregation</i>	<i>Years since Founding</i>
Abiding Savior, Alliance	49
Advent, Uniontown (Consolidation)	30
St. John, Uniontown	176
Grace, Hartville	158
Canton City Lutheran Parish (Consolidation)	1
Bethel, Canton	84
First, Canton	199
Trinity, Canton	171
Christ, Massillon	48
Faith, Massillon	117
Good Shepherd, Canton	55
Holy Trinity, North Canton	195
Holy Trinity, Massillon	183
Israel, Paris	196
Kountze Memorial, Louisville	165
Martin Luther, Canton (Closed at 165)	
Peace, Canton	116
St. Jacob on Mudbrook	194
St. Jacob – State Road	162
St. John, Canal Fulton	182
St. John, New Franklin	167
St. Paul, Alliance	144
St. Paul, Massillon	145
St. Paul, Minerva	156
St. Stephen Martyr, Canton	42
Trinity, Sebring	96
Zion, Raff Road, Canton	114
Zion, North Canton	195

This pocket of Lutheranism in Northeast Ohio is unique in counting among its numbers so many congregations that are closing in on their bicentennial anniversaries, with many more well over the centennial mark. First Lutheran in Canton was the first, and now has been consolidated with two others in downtown Canton, Bethel and Trinity. Zion and Holy Trinity were next, with common connections to the itinerant missionary work of Pastor Johannes Stauch (John Stough), whose preparatory work from 1806 to 1814 set the foundation for our first Pastor, Anton Weaver (1814–1826). Pastor J.J. Fast then served Zion for the next thirty years (1827–1857). That was Zion's firm foundation of a strong beginning. We look forward to what will await us with the celebration of our bicentennial anniversary on June 14, 2014, just five short years away. Thanks be to God!