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THE HISTORY OF LUTHERANISM IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

Trinity Lutheran Church, Alamosa, Colorado, began its history in 1919 with the organization of the congregation. And yet, much material from the time prior to this organization indicates that Lutheranism had a long-standing history in the San Luis Valley. The following sketch is gathered from a number of sources that have traced the history of Lutheranism in Colorado and in Alamosa. (Found and retyped here in January, 2019).

In the year 1872, the Rev. J. Hilgendorf made a missionary exploratory tour from Omaha, Nebraska into Colorado and organized St. John's congregation in Denver and Hope Congregation at Westcliffe. In January, 1873, candidate H. Brammer was ordained as pastor of St. John's Church in Denver. He was the first resident Lutheran pastor in Colorado. On September 7, 1873, candidate H. W. Hoemann was ordained pastor of the congregation in Westcliffe.

In the early fall of 1874, Reverend Hoemann made an expeditionary trip to the San Luis Valley. In 1870, a colony of Germans had settled at Del Norte. Reverend Hoemann heard of these Germans and contacted them in order to arrange for a service. He made the necessary arrangements and started out from Blumenau (the southern portion of the Wet Mountain Valley). He lacked transportation and was too poor to purchase a horse. A friend took pity on him and gave him a horse—a Mexican bronco! The horse was 'locoed' according to the sources and required breaking each time the missionary mounted the animal. Yet, the missionary began his journey south along the Muddy Creek to Gardner and then across the Sangre De Cristo Range through Mosca Pass into the San Luis Valley.

Night overtook him in the region of the San Luis Lakes. He unsaddled his horse, let it graze, and sat beside the animal all night to keep howling coyotes from attacking it. The next morning the pastor rode westward to Del Norte. During the afternoon he contacted his missionary prospects and invited them to the service which was to be held in the evening. When evening came, none of the German 'prospects' came. Several English-speaking individuals came and the missionary delivered a German sermon to the English hearers. The next morning he returned to the Wet Mountain Valley, supposedly disgusted.

This episode ended the first phase of Lutheranism in the San Luis Valley, apparently without results. Not one of the would-be Lutherans in later years returned permanently to the Lutheran Church.

In 1897 and 1898, two staunch Lutheran families migrated into the Valley. These two families may be considered pioneers of Lutheranism in the San Luis Valley and forefathers of Modern Lutheranism. They were Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Schulz and Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Quiram. The Schulzes were from Texas and Mr. and Mrs. Quiram were from Minnesota. These two families soon found one another and came together every Sunday and conducted services in their homes. Mr. Quiram had brought a book of sermons with him and from this they read. They sang hymns, prayed together, and studied Lutheran's Small Catechism. Another Lutheran family, Christensen by name and from Texas, attended services with them.

These Lutheran families wished to have an established church and the service of a Lutheran pastor. It so happened that a medicine peddler, a supposed Lutheran, plied his way regularly

between the San Luis Valley and the Wet Mountain Valley over the government road through Mosca Pass. Stopping at these Lutheran homes in the Valley and peddling his wares to them, he learned that they were Lutherans who were accustomed to going to church every Sunday. The medicine peddler remarked: "There is a Lutheran congregation in the Wet Mountain Valley, and every time I'm there I sell goods to the Lutheran minister. The next time I see him, I'll tell him of you folks."

Not many weeks after, a letter came from Reverend Joseph Oesch in Westcliffe. The pastor stated that he would be coming with the medicine peddler to minister to the families. The service was arranged to take place on Friday, September 22, 1899, in the home of Mr. C. H. Schulz, who lived 2 miles south and one mile west of Center. According to arrangements, the medicine peddler was to bring Reverend Oesch along and to leave him at the home of Mr. Lorenz Haller who lived on a farm three miles northeast of Mosca, and from there Mr. Schulz was to get the pastor and take him to his home where the service was to be held. On the way over Mosca Pass, however, during the noon luncheon, the pastor and the peddler got into a religious argument in which the pastor got the upper hand. Angered on account of this argument, the peddler did not stop to deliver the pastor at the home of Mr. Haller, but took him into Mosca and told no one about the incident. Mr. Schulz awaited the pastor's arrival at Mr. Haller's home and Reverend Oesch waited in Mosca for Mr. Schulz. Reverend Oesch, tired from waiting in Mosca, had a chance to ride to Monte Vista and accepted the offer. Mr. Schulz, tired of waiting at Mr. Haller's home, returned to his own home and reported "No pastor came." The congregation disbanded and went home.

About seven o'clock that evening a knock was heard at the Schulz's home. "Hello, does Mr. Schluz live here?" "Who are you?" "I'm Reverend Oesch from Westcliffe. Are services arranged?" "The people were here and went home." Reverend Oesch then asked whether the people could not be called back. Horseback riders were sent out and from a radius of eleven miles, the people again gathered in the Schulz home. At twelve midnight, the service began. Reverend Oesch conducted the service, preached a sermon, baptized a child, and administered the Lord's Supper. At two o'clock the service was ended. About forty people attended this service. The people still remained in conversation while Mrs. Schulz prepared breakfast. When Saturday morning dawned and the sun rose over Mount Blanca, the meeting adjourned and all went home. After the experience, Reverend Oesch said to Mr. Schulz, "I've had many a strange experience in my life, but never had I conducted a service in the hours after midnight."

Reverend Oesch visited and served the Lutherans again in May, 1900. The group numbered about five families. Reading services in several homes were the order of worship. At intervals, this procedure was changed and highlighted with visits from pastors in the vicinity: Reverend Enge in Westcliffe; Reverend Schmelzer in Durango; and Reverend Luessenhop in Colorado Springs.

In the fall of 1888, the Kansas District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod organized. Colorado was included in the Kansas District. In 1900, the Kansas District Mission Board decided to send a missionary into the San Luis Valley. The first pastor to be sent was Mr. C. W. Fickweiler, a vicar from the St. Louis Seminary. He arrived in Monte Vista on December 1, 1901. Besides preaching regularly in Monte Vista and Granger, he also opened a Christian Day School with 7 children. In the spring of 1902 he confirmed 5 of them. In September, 1902, he resumed his studies at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

Next came Reverend Eisele, the first ordained resident pastor in the San Luis Valley. Reverend Eisele served the congregation at Monte Vista from the fall of 1904 to the summer of 1906.

Reverend P. B. Fritsche followed Reverend Eisele. This pastor gathered what could be organized into a Lutheran congregation. Besides preaching at Monte Vista, the minister served Mount Pleasant, Del Norte, Granger, and Cotton Creek. Having accepted a call to Orlando Oklahoma, he preached his farewell sermon on May 30, 1909.

Reverend Fritsche was succeeded by another vicar, Mr. O. Renner, who served from July 1909 to July 1910. On August 25, 1910, Reverend Martin L. Mueller arrived. Between 1910 and 1914 the pastor served Monte Vista, Granger, Center Mosca and Cotton Creek via bicycle. In 1915 Alamosa was added to the preaching stations. In October 1919 the congregation was received into membership with the Missouri Synod during the Kansas District's convention in Alma, Kansas. This brings us up to January 19, 1919, when Trinity Lutheran Church marked the beginning of Lutheranism in Alamosa, Colorado.

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(Now we come to the first 50 years of history for Trinity written by Dr. William T. Meyer in 1969).

Dr. William T. Meyer, distinguished Professor of Psychology at Adams State and respected member of TLC in 1969, wrote a history of the first 50 years of Trinity Lutheran Church in Alamosa. He did the first 20 years from carefully preserved recordings. The last 30 years he relied mostly on his own memory. Years covered are from 1919 to 1969.

TLC was born of faith, trust, and hope - faith in the One True God, trust in His protecting arms, and hope that the tiny flock might grow and become a blessing to many. During her 50 years of grace, Trinity has realized these ideals in numerous ways. Faith in the Triune God has been awakened and nurtured by conscientious instruction and preaching of the saving Gospel and the regular use of the Sacraments. Without confidence that the Lord would provide, the congregation could easily have fallen apart when memberships were declining, vacancies occurred, or the financial problems were quite discouraging. Hope is never ending; and, though progress at times seemed slow, the backward look over half of a century sees untold numbers whose lives have been affected by the very existence of Trinity. May these three – faith, trust, and hope – remain the watchwords of the future!

It was on January 19, 1919, that George Graf, Otto A. Hiller, Ed Meier, Carl N. Petersen, Dye Petersen, and Otto F. Zottman, under the guidance of the Reverend Martin L. Mueller, then pastor of St. Peter's congregation in Monte Vista, associated themselves as charter members of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church. The organization meeting was held in the Seventh Day Adventist Church on the southeast corner of Main Street and Edison Avenue. In fact, Pastor Mueller and his predecessors had already been conducting services in Alamosa for several years.

Although none of the charter subscribers remain as active members at the time of the anniversary, several strands of historical continuity persist. Mrs. George Graf is still a communicant member, though her husband is deceased. Carl A. Petersen, a young lad at the time of organization, has carried on the work of his late father and elder brother by his able leadership in various offices and by his volunteer work in keeping buildings and grounds in order. His grandchildren mark the fourth generation of Petersens who have participated in the activities of Trinity. Mrs. Gail Sloan, the former Gertrude Mueller, daughter of the founding pastor, and her family now hold membership in the church in Alamosa and are devoted contributors to the spiritual and physical welfare of the congregation. The building in which the organization was established is now vacant but still standing in the same location.

Even before formal organization, Pastor Mueller held services in the Adventist Church. The minutes of February 8, 1920, show a disbursement of \$24.00 for church rent. One Mission Festival service was held in a new barn on the ranch of Carl N. Petersen. Some parishioners remember that services for a time were held in city hall as verified by a resolution of January 2, 1922, expressing thanks to the City Council for free use of these facilities. The city hall was then located on Sixth Street between the Walsh and Victoria Hotels. The building has since been razed.

The year 1922 was an eventful one. At the April meeting, it was resolved to purchase the Roman Catholic Chapel, then located on the block where the Post Office and Catholic Church are now, for "no more than \$1,000.00" and to move it to a site to be purchased. This resolution was carried out during that summer when the building was relocated at Fourth Street and Alamosa Avenue. Carl Petersen, who helped, described the four-block move as a difficult one. An early tractor was used for motive power, the rollers repeatedly bogged down in the sandy street, and equipment failure caused numerous delays. This building remained the church home and sanctuary for 39 years until the beautiful modern house of worship at Monterey and El Rio Drive was dedicated on January 15, 1961.

During this same year of 1922, the congregation was incorporated under the laws of Colorado. The congregation called the first resident pastor, the Reverend George A. Koch, who was installed during the dedication service on August 27. The resignation of Pastor Mueller was accepted and Mr. Hiller was asked to "attend to the coal bin."

Mr. O. A. Hiller and his devoted wife must have been inspiring leaders during those early days. He accepted numerous responsibilities, serving as treasurer for many years, chairman of the building committee, as president, and as long-time deacon. On occasion, he also led the singing by playing the organ. Mrs. Hiller was a charter member of Ladies Aid and an active participant until she retired to Denver after her husband's death. One daughter is a pastor's wife, and two sons have entered the ministry in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The influence of the family was felt once more when Rev. Carl Hiller, serving as Executive Secretary of the Colorado District, revived the spirits of the congregation during a vacancy, strongly encouraged the move to proceed with construction of a new church, and suggested that a call be extended to Pastor Norman Heimsoth.

Mr. Hiller was a strong proponent for a Christian day school. During the pastorate of Pastor Henry Niermann, a school was conducted with assistance of the Mission Board, from 1940 until 1948, in a room constructed as an annex to the church building. The construction was financed with a loan for about \$1000.00 from the Church Extension Fund. This loan and debt

on the parsonage were eventually paid off with a munificent gift from Christian Wuertele, a retired shoemaker, who truly lived up to his given name.

During the existence of the school, Pastor Niermann, Mr. Paul Ebel, Mr. A. Weber, Mr. John Kober, a Mr. Ocken, Mrs. John Casper, and Miss Dora Gohr served as teachers. The school was discontinued when the number of children attending declined, and some financial exigencies developed.

Mr. George Graf was a lifelong employee of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. As a member of Trinity, he held office as chairman, trustee, and elder. The minutes reveal a continuous succession of services. He arranged for building an adobe garage at the old parsonage; found a plasterer to repair stucco; contacted the city administration on municipal matters, and arranged for the preparation of the name plate over the door of the old church to identify it. So the list goes on and on, but let this suffice to show his continued faithfulness. He was the last active charter member to go to his eternal reward, passing on in 1967.

Nine called pastors and one vicar have served Trinity Congregation with several others serving during vacancies. Founding Pastor Mueller carried the responsibility from 1915 to 1922 and frequently returned to minister to the fledgling flock, especially on Thanksgiving Day. His last sermon was preached here. He pointed to the many signs of the Last Days, but felt that a period of grace would be permitted for repentance and greater missionary effort to spread the Gospel by every available means, especially by means of the press and the air waves. When he was greeting the congregation after the service, he said to the writer, "That was my last sermon." Shortly afterward his Saviour called him Home.

Pastor Koch, from 1922 to 1926, was the first resident pastor. This period seems to have been one of healthy growth in membership. The records of the church list a number of additions of voters and communicants, among them Carl and Edna Petersen, Louise Hiller, Alvena Petersen, and John, Elisa, Marie, and Emma Knoop. Co-operations with Monte Vista continued, especially in joint mission festivals and church picnics.

Candidate P. Reetz remained only from the fall of 1926 until April, 1927. His successor was the Reverend Walter Brott, whose acceptance was announced on July 17. At the next meeting, it was voted to pay his freight and traveling expenses of \$28.65. Early in 1928, the house adjacent to the church on the south was purchased from Mr. Levi Wilhelm for the sum of \$3,600.00. The purchase price included 2,000 adobe bricks to be delivered and some painting to be done. The Mission Board assisted by promising \$30.00 a month for five years. George Graf was instructed to see to construction of an adobe garage and coal shed.

A tradition during this period was a Lutheran Reunion, apparently Valley-wide. One year it was held at the Arrowhead Lodge on the south slopes of Mt. Blanca. A first mention was also made of a Walther League, when it was asked to take on responsibility for the Christmas tree and treats. For a while, Pastor Brott conducted monthly services in Blanca. In August, 1930, use of the church was offered to the Alamosa schools. This probably was when the local high school burned.

An altar was purchased from the Episcopal Church for \$10.00. Though the exact date is uncertain, German services were entirely discontinued some time in the late 1920s. The final \$200.00 of indebtedness for the church building was paid in 1931, and the congregation's

share of the pastor's salary was raised to \$900.00 per year. In January, 1933, the congregation resolved to become self-supporting immediately, if at all possible. In the July 1934 treasurer's report, the effects of the economic depression appear to have had an impact. The holder of the note for parsonage indebtedness had been asked earlier to forego principal payments, and there were unpaid bills amounting to \$81.50 with only \$4.70 in the treasury. In September, 1934, Rev. Brott received and accepted a call to Sterling, Colorado.

The call to the Reverend Henry Niermann of Stoneham in eastern Colorado was approved on November 18, 1934, and stressed five points: (1) mission need and possibility in Alamosa; (2) active participation in young people's and Walther League work; (3) establishment of mission stations south, east and north of Alamosa; (4) work toward starting a Christian Day School; and (5) active work in the Lutheran Hospital. Pastor Nierman must have arrived late that year, for his presence is noted in the annual meeting minutes of January, 1935.

It was a difficult time, for the inroads of the economic depression had affected most of the parishioners and the entire synod. How the pastor and his family existed on a \$75.00 per month salary was a mystery of anyone thinking in 1969 terms. Needless to say, even in the late 1930s it must have caused worry and crises in the parsonage household. By 1948, the salary was barely double the \$75.00. World War II also brought with it many cares and worries. The "service flag" showed four stars, one of which represented Paul Nielson who gave his life for his country on the battlefields of western Europe. The missal stand on the altar was presented by his family in his memory and that of his mother.

In spite of these troubled times, Pastor Niermann strove valiantly to fulfill the charges outlined in his call. His deepest satisfaction and later, greatest disappointment, undoubtedly was the opening of the Christian Day School and its demise some years later.

A Walther League was very active for a while with at least 24 members, and made many contributions to the spiritual and social life of the youth, but because of a dearth of young people in the congregation, especially after 1940, it declined.

Mission activities in neighboring communities consisted of canvassing and preaching in various communities of the San Luis Valley and ministering to the scattered Lutheran families. At the hospital, Pastor Niermann gave comfort and spiritual sustenance to patients needing and seeking his services. For many years he served as member and secretary of the Lutheran Hospital Association, and for a while he was acting administrator during a vacancy in that position. It was with sadness in their hearts that the congregation bid farewell to its long-time Pastor, Henry Niermann, and his family on June 3, 1949.

Early in September, 1949, the congregation rejoiced that the Reverend Wilbur Klattenhoff, from Greenleaf, Kansas, had accepted the call to Trinity and would arrive by the end of the month. The official installation by Pastor Carl Hiller took place on October 2, and he and his family were welcomed by a social gathering after the service.

Pastor Klattenhoff enthusiastically began his work by canvassing most of the west end of Alamosa to State Street and by promoting an information class. Radio broadcasts and newspaper advertising were inaugurated. New life flowed into the congregation after the let-down during the vacancy.

Vacation Bible School had an average attendance of 50, and under the direction of Elton

Reese, the Sunday School grew with more lay teachers participating. The crumbling sidewalk in front of the church was repaired and numerous other property improvements undertaken. For several years, Easter sunrise services were held at the drive-in theater. Parishioners may recall one frigid morning when snow covered the ground and the choir sang from a flatbed truck. Another event that many parishioners will recall (perhaps with groans) was the tape-recorded service during the absence of the pastor and the vacancy in Monte Vista. The Walther League was revived when the youth group applied for membership in the international organization.

During the tenure of Pastor Klattenhoff, the congregation was repeatedly disturbed and even discouraged by the unending succession of calls he received to other congregations. Therefore, it was perhaps not unexpected that he should feel constrained to accept when another call was tendered by a congregation in Carlsbad, New Mexico. If the congregation had foreseen at that time that nearly three years would pass before another ordained pastor arrived, their sorrow at having Pastor Klattenhoff leave would undoubtedly have been much deeper. Sad farewells were said to the pastor and his family late in June, 1953.

During the long interval of numerous unsuccessful calls, the Reverend William Schultz served as vacancy pastor, and many reading services were conducted by lay members. (*This note added at time of writing, 2018: One of our members in attendance at the time, recalls that some hoped Mr. Reese would read the sermons because he read faster than Dr. Meyer!*).

The difficulties of this interim period were relieved when Mr. John Sorensen was assigned to Trinity for one year beginning in June, 1954. Vicar Sorensen revived the regular Sunday bulletin. During this period, five more unsuccessful calls were issued. Responding to the sixth call, the Reverend George G. Gesell of St. Thomas, North Dakota, accepted. Pastor Gesell was installed the evening of March 4, 1956, and a welcoming reception was held. Because Monte Vista was without a pastor, his responsibilities immediately doubled. This situation has existed many times throughout the past 50 years. At the beginning, St. Peter's of Monte Vista nurtured the daughter congregation in Alamosa, and then in turn, the daughter assisted the mother church.

Whereas local exigencies had previously prevented the congregation from supporting Synodical efforts, conditions improved to the extent that a letter of commendation for 1956 was received from the District Executive Secretary. With a generous assist from Miles Acheson, James Gray, and Ove Nielsen, central heating was installed in the church, and the old oil stove, whose popping noises had been of much concern to worshipers, could be retired.

After Pastor Gesell left in January, 1959, District President Herbert Hellbusch and Executive Secretary Rev. Carl Hiller met with the voters assembly. Among other things, they suggested calling a pastor who would also serve as chaplain at the Lutheran Hospital and for Adams State College students. They also recommended that the possibility of building a new church and parish hall be investigated, and, if possible, carried out with all dispatch. It was somewhat before this time that Miles Acheson had created interest in a new church by bringing a box of toy construction bricks to a family gathering of members, and suggesting that each one assume responsibility for purchasing some real bricks for a new church home. The idea had strong support from Elton Reese, Herman Wuckert and his family, and many others. An unusually able building committee consisting of Elton Reese, Chairman, Don Wuckert, Fritz Hammarstrom, James Gray, and Sam Snyder was appointed.