

150 years for the Church at the Crossroads

1872 to 2022

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church is celebrating its sesquicentennial, 150 years as a congregation. A group of German Lutherans worshiping in homes, school houses and an occasional store front, extended a call to a Lutheran pastor, Reverend Christian Wilke, in February of 1872. In September of that year a resolution was passed to buy three lots and build a church at what is now the corner of Gilbert and Main Street in Charles City, the crossroads of two bustling roads. That small white church, finished and dedicated in 1873, was the first of three churches that would stand in that spot. The language spoken in the church was German and that remained in effect until the 1930s.

It took ten years to pay off the debt that was incurred to build that first building, but at the 10th anniversary the congregation's thank offering liquidated its debt and had enough to purchase its first organ and other church furnishings and ornaments. In 1879, the Reverend E.H. Caselmann was called to be the new pastor. Under his guidance a school was built and more lots were purchased for future expansion. In early 1893 it was decided to build a new church, which was built in the shape of a cross and dedicated in September 1893. It is noted in the church history that a German brass band was on hand as well as several Lutheran pastors who took part in the celebration. The number of people present that day overwhelmed the church sanctuary with some members having to stand and to spill over to the outside of the building. The offering that day paid off all debt for the church.

Reverend Caselmann lead the congregation through 38 years and several renovations. When he died in 1918, he left his estate to the congregation to build the final church that would stand in its present location. Several delays caused the congregation to delay building until 1924. Parts of the previous church were actually dismantled and sold to complete the cost of the church building which was known as the Caselmann Memorial. There is currently a plaque in the back of the sanctuary commemorating Caselmann's dedication and contribution to St. John.

Many wonderful pastors have been at the helm of St. John and have led the congregation through more celebrations and some hardship, such as when the tornado hit the town and in later years when some devastating floods caused our parish hall to feed hundreds of people in service to the community. Additions to the building over the years including the Parish Hall, kitchen, Sunday school and office areas and the Narthex and Annex attached to the original sanctuary of the church, have enhanced and modernized the ministry and its outreach. The current pastor at St. John, Russ Leeper, has spearheaded the most recent additions to the church by bringing it into the current digital age with sound, video and live streaming video of the church service on YouTube. This is an addition to the audio over KCHA radio and the local access channel that have been going on for many years.

St. John is excited to celebrate this wonderful heritage and invite the community to worship with us and attend any or all of the special events that will be coming in 2022. One of the first things the community will note when driving by the church are the banners that will be displayed all year at the corners of the church property. Some of the anticipated events range from the simple display of historical documents, pictures and interesting items to Wartburg and Luther musical groups, a gospel group leading the service, an old-fashioned Easter Sunday and other monthly mini-celebrations. The culmination of the year will take place in October with a large celebration, dinner and Bountiful Harvest and Heritage Craft Fair. St. John looks forward to sharing our year long celebration with the community. Our church is open to any and all that wish to attend.

Janet Petefish, 150th Anniversary Committee