

Bethania has given glory to God for over 125 years

By Kevin Reich

Bethania Free Lutheran Church sits atop a knoll approximately eight miles west of Newfolden. It is the same site the original log church sat when it was built in 1887.

The current church was built about one mile west of its present location in 1904. In 1940, it was moved east to its present location where the cemetery has been located since 1885.

In December 1997, the congregation of Bethania voted to discontinue regular worship services. This action has not dampened the spirit of those who have close ties to the church as special services are held at the church at least two times annually.

Bethania Norsk Evangelisk Luthersk Menighed (Bethania Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation) was organized March 27, 1884 at the Gullick Wedme home in West Valley Township, Marshall County, Minn. There were 14 charter members. Pastor Christian Saugstad temporarily served as pastor until 1885 on a free-of-charge offering amounting to \$43. The congregation was originally affiliated with the Norwegian Danish Conference.

When it was decided to build the log church each member was to furnish 92 feet of good sound logs. The church was built at a cost of \$1,050. There was a cellar under the church where a wood stove was placed. The floor boards were laid one inch apart to allow the heat from the stove to rise up into the seating area. In 1888, it was decided that tobacco could no longer be spit onto the floor.

In 1890, each member gave 25 cents to be used for building a barn to house the pastor's horses. The barn was completed in 1892. During this time, the congregation became part of the United Norwegian Church. From 1893 to 1897 Bethania was an independent congregation. In 1895, it was decided that no member enter a saloon or get drunk. If anyone did, they had to go through a church kirketugt (reprimand).

In 1897, Bethania became affiliated with the newly organized Lutheran Free Church and remained so until 1962. When the current church was built, it was located west of its present location as land had been donated at that site. In 1907, a new barn was built at that site along with an outhouse.

In 1912, services began in English, alternating with Norwegian. In 1917, the pastor's salary was increased from \$125 to \$150 annually. In 1925, discussions began as to whether to put a basement under the church where it stood or to move it back to the cemetery location. Due to an estimated cost of \$1,200, the basement was put on hold.

The painting "The Good Shepherd" was completed by William Windahl in 1929. Fifteen years after the initial discussion, a basement was built at the church's present site and the church was moved. In 1941, the altar, altar rail, pulpit and pastor's chair were built by Ludvig Lofgren. The church bell was given by Ole E. Hjelle in 1947 in memory of the pioneers. It was pur-



Bethania Free Lutheran Church sits atop a knoll west of Newfolden with its bell tower and steeple visible for many miles. The church was built in 1904 one mile west of its current location and moved to this site in 1940. Bethania recently celebrated 125 years of "Giving Glory to God" as it was organized in 1884.

chased from a company in Troy, N.Y. at a cost of \$800.

A "bright spot" in Bethania's history was in 1949 when the lights came on with electricity supplied by Red Lake Electric Cooperative.

Over a period of seven years, from 1955 to 1961, Bethania Congregation voted three times on a possible merger of several church bodies and all three times it failed. This led to Bethania becoming an independent congregation again in 1962, at which time the Church Constitution was rewritten in English. In 1963, Bethania joined the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations as a charter member.

In 1980, a large donation was willed to Bethania by Ida Johnson. It was used for church improvements, an addition which included an enlarged

entry, bathrooms and an outdoor basement entry. A well was drilled for water supply.

As with any congregation, Bethania's Ladies Aid has played an active and important role in the life of the church. Their first donation was made in 1893 for Bible School in the amount of \$10.

Over the years, many donations have been made to the church including a piano in 1958 and an electric organ in 1975. The work of the ladies has provided ministry beyond the walls of the church as they have made numerous donations to mission work, Christian education, Women's Missionary Federation and many other programs and projects.

The Ladies Aid at Bethania remains active today meeting monthly for Bible Study.

A favorite verse of the Ladies Aid is Col. 3:17, "And whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

For many years, "Trumpet of Truth", a devotional radio service has been broadcast over KTRF Radio of Thief River Falls. The radio broadcast was originally shared with Bethania, Hegland Lutheran Church of Strandquist and Westaker Free Lutheran Church of Newfolden. It is currently sponsored by Bethania and Westaker.

In the past, Bethania has also had association with other neighboring churches including Alma of Argyle and Bethlehem, Folden and Bethesda all of Newfolden. Bethania and Bethesda had joint Luther League and Sunday School programs for a number of years.

Sons of Bethania congregation who entered the ministry are Clemmence Dyrud, Amos Dyrud, David Rokke, Ralph Rokke and Philip Rokke. Philip Rokke currently serves as pastor at Hegland and Westaker.

The last pastor to serve full-time at Bethania, until regular services were discontinued in 1998, was LeRoy Flickinger. He currently resides in Thief River Falls.

For the past 11 years, special services have continued at Bethania at least two times annually. The most recent service was Sept. 20, when Bethania celebrated 125 years of giving glory to God. The next scheduled service is Jan. 3.

Bethania still remains a member of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations. The church and cemetery are overseen by the cemetery association. Association officers are: Rev. Dennis Gray, chairperson; Gail Bjorgaard, secretary; Sharon Bring, treasurer; Rodney Liedberg, sexton; Jim Engelsrud; Gerald Hanson; and Milo Windahl.

A sustaining Bible verse for Bethania over the years has been Romans 11:36, "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things; to whom be the glory forever."

As Bethania sits atop the knoll, its bell tower and steeple can be seen for many a mile. For more than 125 years, the congregation's ministry has carried for many a mile. May Bethania's sight and ministry continue "Giving Glory to God."



Bethania's brass bell was donated by Ole E. Hjelle in 1946 in memory of pioneers of the community. It was removed from the bell tower in 2003 and placed at the entrance of Bethania's cemetery. Some of the tombstones in the cemetery are inscribed with the Norwegian words, "Fran jordens strid till himlens frid." The phrase translates to, "from earth's struggles to heaven's peace."



In 1941, Ludvig Lofgren built the altar, altar rail, pulpit and pastor's chair that adorn Bethania Free Lutheran Church, rural Newfolden. The altar picture was added in 1947 in memory of Orville Strandberg and Harlan Engelsrud whom both had been killed in action during World War II in 1945. It was painted by August Klegstad.



Pictured are many of the attendees at Bethania Free Lutheran Church's 125th anniversary celebration. Even though it has been more than 10 years since regular services have been held at Bethania, special services are held at least twice annually with the next scheduled service to be Jan. 3, 2010.