

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HOMECOMING

St. Paul Lutheran Church, 1950 Salisbury Highway, Statesville usually celebrates Homecoming the second Sunday in September each year but it will be quite different this year.

The church was founded in 1840, twenty-one years earlier than the start of the Civil War and before railroads had even come to Iredell County. Twenty-two Lutherans, led by their pastor Benjamin Arey, organized the congregation. Some of the founders were immigrants who fled Germany when Lutherans were being persecuted by Roman Catholics. Land was bought from Andrew Rickert, and, according to court house records, Jacob Lentz and Charles Barringer paid \$5.00 for 24 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres about a mile west of the present church building, the site of St. Paul's current cemetery. Founding members built a 40 x 60 foot structure from hand-hewn timbers and framing.

In 1885 the congregation desired a new location due to the proximity of the railroad line, and the present two acre site was donated to St. Paul by Mr. & Mrs. J. W. Bost and J. A. Bost. According to church narrative, the building was dismantled, the pieces numbered, loaded onto wagons, then reconstructed on the land just east of the current sanctuary. That structure stood unaltered for the next 65 years. Then, under the leadership of Rev. W. H. Dutton, the building was relocated farther from the highway on the same lot with new underpinning and landscaping. A new metal roof and electricity were installed. Six new Sunday School rooms were also added to the rear of the original structure at a cost of \$1,400.

In 1950 Dr. W. B. Aull was called from retirement at the age of 80 to become supply pastor; three months later he became the full time pastor. He and his wife lived in Landis. They packed their lunch and came to Statesville practically every weekday to attend to church business and visit the members of St. Paul. During the seven years of his ministry, membership increased by 100% and benevolence by 500%. The Aulls deeded 8 more lots of adjacent land to the church to be used for expansion. In 1953 the Aull Educational Building was completed.

A pump organ had been used for many years in worship. That organ was believed to date back to the original church site. When an electronic organ was later obtained, the old organ was no longer needed due to limited space. The organ was adopted by Walter and Doris Gibson, devoted members of the congregation, and

they moved it to their home where it resided for many years. After their deaths, it found a new home with Marie Gibson Deal, sister of Mr. Gibson.

In 1968 the congregation had outgrown the little frame church that used to house the organ. Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Paul L. Conrad, St. Paul built a new sanctuary costing \$76,950, a large expenditure for the small rural congregation. Nonetheless, the congregation was again debt-free by 1983. After its completion, a member asked Mrs. Deal if she would sell the organ back to the church. She said she loved it too much and did not want to part with it.

Later the beloved organ was in possession of Delores Brown of the Asheville area, daughter of Mrs. Deal. Recently Mrs. Brown decided the organ should finally be returned to its original home. She called the current pastor, Paul St. Clair, and asked if the church would like to reclaim it. Of course, the congregation was elated, and Mrs. Brown graciously gifted it to the church. The pastor and Glenn Cooke, a very devoted member of the church, traveled to the Asheville area and transported the organ back to Statesville.

This is the 180th anniversary of the founding of the church. Due to COVID-19 there cannot be a large assembly as would be fitting. Worship will be virtual and can be accessed online at Facebook @ Saint Paul ELCA. The treasured organ is now back home, even though home looks quite different from where it started its service. Joining the current pipe organ and piano, the little pump organ has a prominent place in the sanctuary and will be played on special occasions. Welcome home, old friend!

Our members say, “We are small in number but large in love, and are happy to have the little antique organ back home to help us worship God.”