



175th Anniversary Moment

“He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23)

GERMAN TO ENGLISH: A CONGREGATION EVOLVES

When First Saint Paul’s was formed, the membership was comprised of Germans who had settled in Chicago. The Germanic character—and language—of First Saint Paul’s continued through the end of the century and into the next, as the wave of German immigrants continued to come to Chicago.

As noted in a previous Anniversary Moment, an English Sunday School was established in 1910, the same year that the congregation moved to LaSalle and Goethe. This indicates that many of the congregation members, or at least their children, were comfortable in English, as were the neighborhood children they hoped to reach. English services seem to have started at some point in the 1910’s, expanding after the arrival of Pastor Kowert in 1917, who was known for his preaching skills in English. World War I had presented serious challenges to German-speaking congregations in America, which helped propel the move toward English. Despite these changes, copies of the *St. Paulus Nachrichten* (the “St. Paul News”) of 1914 and 1918 are still published primarily in German.

What followed was a “transition” period, during which worship services—as well as church publications—were conducted in both languages. The December 1935 *Messenger*, for example, lists a 9:45 German service and an 11:00 English service. In that same issue, a “Holiday Calendar” is printed in English, but Pastor Kowert also writes a separate article in German about “Weihnachten 1935 / Neujahrsfest 1936, including “Ein Weihnachtslied” (a Christmas song) for the German-speaking members. For several decades, Sundays featured an early German service, followed by an English service (with Sunday School held during the German service). Gradually the number of German-language worshipers declined, but they still desired a German service—even if they could speak English—because it provided a cultural link to their German heritage.

In the early 1950s, the German service was conducted by Rev. Herman Keinath, a professor at Concordia. The March 1950 *Messenger* notes a plan to substitute an early English service for the German on the second Sunday of the month. At about the same time, the executive secretary of the Northern Illinois District commented, “Forget about securing guest [speakers] in German. They are scarcer than silver dollars in Chicago.” The “end” of German services was inevitable, yet it happened fairly suddenly when Rev. Keinath, in March 1952, took ill and was advised by his doctor to cancel all work activities. With only temporary preaching assistance available from St. Luke’s, the FSP voters decided that the last Sunday of May would be the final German service.

Over time, the culture and language of FSP parishioners has evolved, but the commitment to the truth of the Gospel remains. One of our “daughter” congregations, St. Matthew, has seen the language of worship change twice, from German to English and then to Spanish, yet God’s grace, unchanging, continues to be proclaimed.