



175th Anniversary Moment

“He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10.23)

WHY “FIRST”?

After organizing as Lutheran congregation in 1846—and then choosing not to join the new “Missouri Synod” in 1847—the small but growing St. Paul’s church faced a congregational crisis in 1848. Simmering theological differences boiled over. The result was a congregational split that added the moniker “First” to our church’s name, as we became “Erste Evangelish-Lutherische St. Paulus-Gemeinde,” or “First Saint Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church.”

The division occurred when a group of Reformed-leaning members lobbied to amend the church constitution at a meeting on April 9, 1848. The constitution contained one “unalterable” article: namely, that the “Symbolical Books” of the Lutheran confessions must be subscribed to by any minister of the congregation. Those members who wanted a “union” church (one of more “generic” Protestantism) proposed amending this article.

Pastor Selle (in a memoir published by the Concordia Historical Institute in 1935) declared that these members expressed “resentment against the preaching of the Cross” and rejected the “distinctive doctrines of the Lutheran Church.” Selle also asserted that these members wanted only “the preaching of a crude morality.” When the constitutional amendment was proposed, Pastor Selle stated that “everyone who would vote for such changes would cease to be a member of the German Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul’s Church in Chicago.”

Of the fifty members present, 46 voted for the amendment. Pastor Selle left the meeting, and the remaining four members followed him to his home. The next day, however, the entire confirmation class of 16 students vowed faithfulness to the Lutheran church, and they were confirmed the following Sunday. Soon some additional former members returned. The “majority” group, however, was granted ownership of the church building, so the Lutheran “remnant” held worship services in the Cook County courthouse auditorium. But trusting God’s faithfulness, this group started plans for a new church building.