

# Christianity on Stonington

By John Hager

## Celebrating over 100 years of Worship and Churches

The worship of God came instilled in the strong bodies and hearts of Stonington's earliest settlers. They came in boats over the shining water or bundled in sleighs across the ice covered expanse of Little Bay de Noc. They beheld the limestone cliffs, the tall trees. They knew that with their opportunities came backbreaking work, isolation and a constant struggle against an imposing wilderness.

They worshiped in their homes, barns, newly built schools and meeting halls. Services were conducted by visiting clergy from Escanaba and Gladstone- once a month. The clergy stayed overnight in welcoming homes, the offerings went to the hardy individuals that made the journey to lead them in worship. In the early winter or spring when the bay was icing or the ice was breaking up, no boat or sleigh could cross, the settlers were on their own for services.

Two ethnic groups formed the majority of the Stonington population: Norwegian- Danish and Swedish. They spoke different languages, clung to their ethnic customs and came from Scandinavian countries that had major conflicts dating from the Napoleonic Wars in 1814 and continued through 1906 when Norway gained its independence from Sweden. At the turn of the century, on Stonington it was decided that it would be best for all if they had separate churches.

(The immigration of Norwegian and Swedish settlers to the United States is impressive. Only the Irish had a higher rate per capita. From 1825 to 1925, 800,000 Norwegians immigrated to North

America- a third of Norway's population. During that same period 1.3 million Swedish came- enough that Sweden passed progressive laws to help keep their people at home.)

As each church began to organize, women played a very key role- as they do today. The raising of money and the focus needed to create two churches came from highly active women's groups. The church building funds were organized and led by the Ladies Aid Societies.



**Trinity Lutheran Church  
circa 1912 on the left and  
Bethel Church on the  
right**

The Swedish church was organized in August 24, 1904: named the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church- later to be named the Bethel Lutheran Church. It was completed in 1906 and was the first church on Stonington. The beautiful church featured stained glass windows obtained from the Second Bethany Church of Escanaba which was torn down in 1912. Bethel added a tower in 1915 and completed construction in 1926 with a kitchen and dining hall added at the rear of the building. It also had stable facilities for horses in the early days. The wonderfully crafted church used kerosene lamps suspended over the pews and was heated by a large wood stove. On Friday, June 11, 1954 summer bible school had dismissed just before noon with the prospect of an evening service where the children would perform for their parents. All were in high spirits looking forward to a fun evening and later in the year to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

church's organization. That afternoon a powerful summer storm came over the eastern horizon and the church was struck by lightning. Oscar Carlson, living next to the church, heard the strike and saw the spire was on fire. He rushed in to rescue the cross, candle sticks and missal stand. When firefighters and other citizens arrived they saved everything they could carry as the flames enveloped the building. Today, 59 years later, all that is left at the 106 year old site is the stone part of its foundation with trees growing inside it. You see the kitchen and dining area which had a stone foundation. It is the back of the main church which had a wood foundation and faced west toward the bay and the old Stonington road. The site can be seen west of County Road 513, a little less than a mile south of the present township hall.

The Norwegian church – sometimes called the Norwegian-Danish Free Church, later became the Trinity Lutheran Church, began in a meeting on February 10, 1910 in the old south school house. A prospective sight was discussed- Peder Pedersen and Andrew Nygaard would subsequently approach land owner Isaac Stephenson who kindly donated the land for the church. Lumber was cut from the local woods and sawed at the Thorsen-Pedersen sawmill. The hard work of the masons and carpenters was matched by the Ladies Aid Society who, with the help of many parishioners and businesses provided funds to the building committee. The first services were held on October 12, 1913, with the official dedication on October 26 of 1913. The Church complex grew to include a thirteen stall horse stable and a parish hall located on the west and north sides of our present parking lot.

On April 24, 1942 Trinity was set afire by an arsonist. With just a dug well and firefighting help many miles away, the structure burned to the ground. Brave people risked



**Trinity Parish Hall**

smoke and flames to rescue the beautiful altar we see today along with many other items.

With resilience strong in their pioneering spirit, the members of Trinity remodeled and enlarged their parish hall for their church

at winter trees were again cut for a new church, later the logs were sawed at Semer Thorsen's mill. World War Two put a stop to further construction because of a lack of men and materials. When the war ended, construction began and a new Trinity Church was built on the original site by many of the same people that built the first church, now aided by their sons and daughters. Once again Peder Pedersen was at the forefront of effort and organization. He contacted Carl Norman- a Chicago contractor who had a cabin on Stonington, who in turn had Adolph Hanson- a Chicago church architect, draw up plans. Both men donated their services. The construction was led by master carpenter Ole Carlson with Gust Nelson and Magnus Jacobsen as his helpers. The Ladies Aid Society again produced meals, ran fundraising events and again brought about monetary miracles. Trinity also took a mortgage which was paid off and ceremonially burned in 1956. Peder Pedersen held the paper as it burned, Semer Thorsen held the dish to catch the ashes- a happy and fitting tribute to these two Trustees who gave a life time of dedication to our church.

The first service in the new church was July 4, 1948.

Trinity and Bethel Churches held separate services for 6 years. When Bethel burned in 1954, a problem and opportunity for both congregations became clear. Trinity had a fine structure but had issues with minister coverage. Bethel had solid support with available clergy. The size of both congregations and the expense and availability of two clergy each week was compounded by the problems the Bethel folk had meeting in a school. Little elementary desks were not made for adult Swedes. Money was tight at the Bethel's Augustana Synod. Building a new Bethel Church just was not in the cards.

Reasonableness broke out! The "-sen and -son" surname endings of their fathers became less important than a loving and satisfying worship service. The practicality of the two church groups becoming one was very clear. A very hard part of the process was the document each Bethel member had to sign to close their church. With that page of Stonington church history turned- most of the Bethel members joined Trinity, with some going to services in Rapid River.

The Trinity joining of Stonington Lutherans was a harbinger of the ecumenical movement that would follow on a national level. The Lutheran Church of America, LCA, merged with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, ELCA.

Trinity Lutheran Church- a white beacon of Christianity, today stands tall and strong on the limestone cliff of Stonington: its walls were twice built with wood cut by its members, it was built with volunteer labor, and it is full of the love and the pride of a job well done. It is a symbol of 100 years of Christian tradition and of the loving, caring people of Stonington who made homes in a wilderness and made a church for the greater worship of God.



**Trinity Lutheran Church today**

One Hundred Years of Trinity's Congregational Leaders

O. C. Dahlager 1913-1920

L. B. Saterson 1920-1926

K. K. Knutsen 1926-1937

L. R. Lund 1937-1950

Phillip Engdahl 1948-1949

Maynard Hansen 1949-1950

Johannes Ringstad 1950-1956

Wilbert Johnson 1950-1958

John DeBoer 1956-1959

Herb Carlmark 1957-1962

Gordon Thorpe 1960-1965

George Olson 1962-1972

Ted Grandquist 1972-1980

Sidney Jones 1980-1981

Marilyn Riedel 1981-1983

Dan Kangas 1983-1984

Rick Lawrence 1984-1988

Dave Hueter 1988-1998

Julie Fiske 1999-2003

Sam Johnson 2004-2006

Dave Mason 2006-2009\*

Diane Srutowski 2011- to present

\*Trinity has been fortunate to have many able people at our pulpit in the leadership gap between Dave Mason and Diane Srutowski. They include:

Sue Sundstrom Young, Nora Smith, Steve Gauger, Norm Lund, Jonathan Schmidt, Kris Ertl, Dean Peterson, Ingmar Levin, Bruce Thorsen. In previous years Clifford Peterson was a wonderful guest pastor.

### Addendum

Many significant people were not mentioned. Their gifts of money, pews, organs, and most importantly- time and energy are found in other histories and in the hearts of their friends.

Hans Bonefeld was a very key figure in the Church's and Stonington's history. Coming from Denmark as a child, he and his family are woven into the fabric of Escanaba and Stonington.

Many of the early settlers and subsequent Stonington families had English backgrounds. To name a few: Capt. Stratton and his large family, Charles Beggs, John Champ, and Arthur Smith.

The Skaug Brothers donated the beautiful altars to both churches- that may be why they looked so much alike.

The written data and records used were augmented with dozens of personal interviews. We hope we have done accurate work.