

Bethel United Methodist Church History continues

Rev. Mann arrived in the spring of 1844 and by fall the German Creek Methodist Church (named after a nearby stream) was organized. The next year construction began on a 16' X 18' house of worship. It was built of round logs, chinked with mud and was protected by a clap board roof. Rev. Mann remained to shepherd this flock of immigrants for two years.

By 1846, Iowa was admitted to the union as the twenty-ninth state. Iowa was sparsely populated and by no means wealthy. At that time, if all the money in the state had been divided equally among its citizens, each person would have had about a dollar and eighty cents! Despite this fact, the members of the German Creek Methodist Church were supporting a ministry of camp meetings and welcoming many new members into their fold. The congregation grew so rapidly that a new building was needed. This building was located just southwest of the present church near the old cemetery. It measured 20' X 24' and boasted board floors, a nicely hewn log frame, a board ceiling, and a shingled roof.

While the German immigrants of Iowa exhibited by far the greatest numbers and diversity in occupations, most who settled around the Harper area were farmers. During the post Civil War era, many changes in agriculture resulted, affecting most of the members of the Bethel congregation. However, they continued to be faithful servants and their numbers increased until it became necessary to expand their meeting house once again. The present structure was erected in 1866. The building was warmed on cold winter days with a wood stove and illuminated with oil lamps.

These walls have witnessed renovations, remodels and spiritual renewals throughout the years, but they still stand strong. The doors have never closed. The members still worship the same God who delivered the Hebrews from Egyptian rule and thousands of years later safely delivered a group of German settlers far from their homeland to a land of new opportunities, prosperity and religious freedoms.

After the turn of the century, the German migration declined. Public schools were springing up in rural communities and the English language used there became more prevalent with younger generations. Second and third generations born in America preferred to use the English language and thus the use of the German language started to diminish. Sometime around this era, English was adopted for all worship services at Bethel.

Following WW II, Bethel continued to be a buzz of activity. Vacation Bible School was a highlight of every child's summer. The Ladies Aid never passed an opportunity to reach out through mission work and supporting families within the congregation. Sunday school was a year around opportunity to witness and bring young souls to Christ. Family pot lucks and cookouts provided plenty of time for socializing with friends and neighbors. Christmas programs brought together and bonded the family of believers every Christmas Eve.

Many changes have affected our congregation throughout the years, but by the grace of God all have been a growing experience. During the early 1900's Bethel shared a minister with a Methodist congregation in Harper. This association continued until the middle of the century when the Harper congregation dispersed. For a time the church was joined with the Delta United Methodist Church. Later, in 1966, Bethel was re-assigned to sharing a charge with the Keota United Methodist Church. In 1973 a Yokefield Parish was established that included the Keota Presbyterian Church, the Keota Wesley United Methodist Church, and Bethel. Three years ago (2011), the Yokefield was dissolved and the Bethel Church petitioned the Iowa Conference to become independent and received a quarter time minister. Since that time, the congregation has increased the minister to half-time status.

From oil lamps to LED lights, from wood to gas heat, from a log cabin home to a structure three times the size of the original church , from an outhouse to indoor plumbing, from German to English, one thing remains; our God is sovereign!!!! We pray the hearts of all who pass through our doors are touched by a God of love and mercy.

It would be impossible to name everyone who has influenced the ministry of this church's 170 year history. Our debt of gratitude goes to the charter members who courageously stepped forward in faith to bond as a group of believers who dedicated their infinitely limited financial resources to sponsor a minister and build a house of worship. The ripples of their witness continue to lap at our heels today and encourage and challenge us to be that light for all to see. We do have a story to tell to the nations! So "go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you!" Our heritage marches on for Him! Hallelujah!



*Bethel United Methodist Church History
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