

History



Our Early History

The dream of erecting the church building that now stands on the corner of 12th Avenue and 14th Street, Altoona, remained only a dream for many years before becoming the imposing reality for which we celebrate this 100th Anniversary in 1996. Countless difficulties and discouragements were encountered through several years of planning for a new building. Then on February 11, 1896, The Rev. Dr. Michael W. Hamma, the pastor at that time (1896-1898), invited eight or ten of the most prominent members of the congregation to confer with him privately on this matter. By the close of that meeting it had been determined that the existing church property could be sold for \$40,000, and enough money was pledged by those present to assure the financial feasibility of building a new structure. Thus, the First Lutheran Church that we admire and cherish today came into being.

The raising of congregational monies for building the new church actually began much earlier, on June 1, 1891. By September 1, 1895, member pledges toward the project totaled \$25,252, leaving only \$19,000 yet to be raised. By May 1896, the valuable property on Eleventh Avenue between 14th and 15th Streets, on a lot sized 100 feet by 110 feet, was sold. The site for the new building on the corner of 12th Avenue



and 14th Street, a 100 by 120-foot lot acquired during the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Elias D. Weigle (1887-1895), was prepared for construction.

The formal ground breaking for the new building was held on April 3, 1896. Since the ladies of the congregation had been primarily instrumental in soliciting and acquiring support for the building program, they were given the honor of actually breaking the soil. A silver-plated pick and shovel, still displayed in the church today, was presented to the Ladies' Aid Society as a memento of the occasion. It is said that the Logan Band played hymn tunes as the

ceremony progressed; a young boy of the congregation wheeled away some of the freshly broken soil in a miniature wheelbarrow; then Pastor Hamma dismissed the gathering with a benediction just before a snow squall burst over the scene.

The 1896 Cornerstone

Excavation for the cellar of the new church began on May 19, 1896, followed in only a few weeks by the laying of the cornerstone on July 18th. The day was favored with pleasant weather for the ceremony, which began at 3:00 p.m., with a large assemblage of members of the congregation and their friends. Lutheran clergymen from throughout the city participated in the readings from Scripture and in offering prayer. Pastor Hamma praised his congregation for its faith and enthusiastic determination in its unyielding labor to bring the building project to that day in the short span of only six years. An offering amounting to \$150 in additional contributions was collected. (That was a sizable offering, considering that 5¢ to 25¢ per person was a common contribution at most church services in those days.)

After singing a hymn, the cornerstone was cemented into place by masons. Floral offerings made by six young boys and six young girls from the Sunday School were laid upon it, and the president of the Ladies' Aid Society laid a sheaf of wheat on the flowers. Then everyone joined in singing the Doxology and the festivities



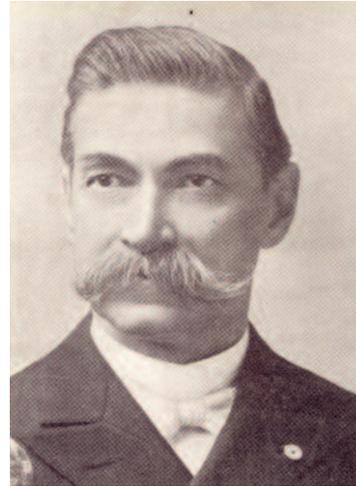
ended as the pastor pronounced a benediction. The sealed copper box placed into the hollow of the 1896 cornerstone contains the following items:

- The Holy Bible
- The Book of Worship
- The Report of the Synod, 1895
- The daily newspapers of Altoona, July 18, 1896
- Periodicals of the Lutheran Church – The Observer, the World Evangelist, and the Luther League Review, The Lutheran Almanac, 1896
- Coins bearing the date 1853 (the only items surviving from the 11th Avenue church cornerstone)
- U. S. coinage, 1896 – \$1, 50¢, 25¢, 10¢, 5¢, and 1¢
- The Report of the Sunday School, 1896
- The Program for laying the 1896 cornerstone
- A paper listing the names of the following:
 - The President & Vice President of the United States

- The Governor of Pennsylvania
- The Mayor of Altoona
- Present & past officers of the church
- Members of the Women's Home & Foreign Missionary Society
- Members of the Ladies' Aid Society
- Members of the Mission Band
- Members of the Children's Society
- Members of the King's Sons
- Members of the Luther League
- Members of the Building Committees
- The architects who designed the new church
- The builder of the new church

The First Lutheran congregation continued to meet in its 11th Avenue church building until Memorial Day, December 27, 1896, the day of its formal leave-taking from that building. The last Lord's Day morning service celebrated in the old building was held during the regular Sunday morning worship hour; it was long remembered for its "unusual impressiveness" and Pastor Hamma's "able and instructive sermon."

Then at 2:15 p.m., the Sunday School met to say farewell under the leadership of its superintendent. Speakers included two former superintendents, whose addresses merited a hearty Chautauqua salute (the boisterous waving of handkerchiefs). Letters from other former superintendents were read and brief but appropriate remarks were made by the assistant



superintendent and the pastor. These many reminiscences clearly conveyed a sense of sadness at leaving familiar surroundings mingled with hopeful anticipation of expanded opportunities for the Sunday School in its new facility. After singing "God Be With You Till We Meet Again," the audience was dismissed.

Finally, in an evening service attended by a more-than-capacity crowd of church members and friends, the last regular meeting in the old church began. The service consisted principally of further reminiscences and historical addresses made by members of the congregation, Scripture reading, hymn singing, and a brief sermon by Pastor Hamma entitled "Bidding Farewell." After a warm gesture of appreciation for the pastor's leadership in bringing the building project to completion (a form of ovation in which the entire congregation respectfully rose in body), a hymn was sung, the benediction was said and First Evangelical Lutheran Church on 11th Avenue, Altoona, closed its doors for the last time.

The 1897 Opening

On the first Sunday of the new year, January 3, 1897, a jubilant congregation gathered for the first time in the newly-erected church. All the meetings on that day were held in the Sunday School rooms. The decorations alone demonstrated a poignant expression of the collective gratitude of the members of First Church for God's blessing of their efforts in bringing their building project to fruition.

"A canopy made of strips of delicately-tinted paper, hundreds in number, was erected over the room. The outer border of the canopy was decorated with thousands of little green leaves, while the iron pillars were covered with paper and garlanded with vines and roses from top to bottom. In front three large panels were erected, one on the left bearing the date '1846,' while the one on the right bore the date '1896.' The central panel in the rear of the altar was made entirely of vines and carnations, and was in itself a work of art. Roses and sweet peas were used in the side panels. A large floral wreath, made by Mother Way, adorned the altar."

No record is available for the worship attendance on that first day in the new building, but the titles of both the morning and evening sermon are known: "What Mean Ye By These Stones?" and "So Teach Us to Number Our Days That We May Apply Our Hearts unto Wisdom." The Sunday School's celebration was held in the afternoon. Including officers and teachers, there were 700 members in attendance. Without a

doubt, for many members of the congregation who gathered to celebrate that wonderful day in this church's history, January 3, 1897, was one of the truly monumental days of their lives.

The services of dedication encompassed an entire weekend of festivities, Friday evening through Monday evening, May 21-24, 1897. The guest speakers included two former pastors, The Rev. Dr. Milton J. Firey (1883-1886) and The Rev. Dr. E. D. Weigle. The chief dedicatory services were held on the Lord's Day, May 23rd, with Pastor Hamma presiding at the Act of Dedication in the evening service. To grasp the sense of fellowship and thanksgiving that must certainly been apparent in the congregation that day, consider the following description of the afternoon gathering of the Sunday School:

"At 2:15 o'clock the Sabbath school convened in the Sunday school room in charge of the superintendent, George W. Curfman. After the school was called to order and the necessary class work done, the choir sang 'When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder,' when the school proceeded to the main auditorium. Singing and addresses were made by the Lutheran ministers of the city, as well as the visiting clergymen. The Primary department sang several selections. At this point of the exercises, T. B. Patton, of Huntingdon, a former superintendent of the school, stepped forward, when four little girls advancing, to the sweet strains of music, unveiled a beautiful Italian marble baptismal font, bearing the following inscription:

'IN HONOR OF
REV. M. W. HAMMA, D. D. AND WIFE.
PRESENTED BY THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.'

Mr. Patton then presented, in pleasing manner, the font to the church in behalf of the school in honor of Dr. Hamma and wife. Dr. Hamma accepted the gift in an appreciative manner. The exercises closed, all joining in singing 'God Be With You Till We Meet Again,' and the benediction pronounced."

The total cost of the new church building was \$90,000. The mortgage covering this cost was burned in an appropriate ceremony on March 2, 1902, during the pastorate of The Rev. Oliver C. Roth (1898-1908).

Timeless Treasures

The preeminent architectural style of the 1896 church building (approximately one half of the structure known as First Evangelical Lutheran Church today) is Gothic, with its pointed arches, graceful outlines and lofty spire, pointing like the finger of faith always heavenward. The roof line of the building is simple, although the exterior denotes a Latin cross shaped plan. Most of the interior is comprised of two large rectangular assembly halls: The main floor worship space, accented with an elliptical vaulted ceiling and a horseshoe shaped gallery, and the lower level Festal Hall (Sunday School room) with kitchen and toilet facilities. The building's steel superstructure and its substantive Ohio buff stone veneer certainly make this church one of

the most permanent structures in Altoona. Charles M. Robinson and M. V. Hughes, both of Altoona, were the architect and the builder contracted to design and create this house of worship and learning that has helped to influence the faith of thousands of believers over the past one hundred years.

One enters the main floor of the church by way of a wide stone staircase of ten steps leading from the avenue to the main entrance, a triple set of double doors set into pointed stone arches, and through a narrow vestibule into the nave. Of the magnificent treasures housed in this building, the first catches the eye immediately upon entering the nave in the sumptuous feast of art and color that are the priceless stained glass windows of this church.

All the windows were produced in the studios of Redding, Baird & Company of Boston, and they were installed here in 1897. The various scenes depicted in stained glass were personally chosen by Pastor Hamma. The sixteen primary panels include the Lutheran reformers and prominent events in the earthly life of Jesus Christ in historic order.

Included among the presentations in stained glass are:

- 1) "Martin Luther," adapted from the sculptured monument at Worms.
- 2) "The Virgin Mary," adapted from Murillo's painting "The Assumption."
- 3) "The Nativity of Our Lord," adapted from a famous Renaissance painting.

- 4) "Journey into Egypt," adapted from the painting by Furst.
- 5) "The Boy Jesus Teaching in the Temple," adapted from the painting by Hoffman.
- 6) "The Baptism of Our Lord," a semi-original composition.
- 7) "Jesus Walking on Water," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 8) "The Raising of Lazarus," a semi-original composition.
- 9) "Jesus Praying in Gethsemane," adapted from the painting by Hoffman.
- 10) "Jesus before Pilate," adapted from the painting by Munkacsy.
- 11) "Jesus Bearing the Cross," a semi-original composition.
- 12) "The Resurrection of Our Lord," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 13) "The Walk to Emmaus," adapted from the painting by Plockhurst.
- 14) "The Ascension of Our Lord," adapted from the painting by Bierman.
- 15) "The Gate of Heaven," an original composition in both its subject and all its essential details by Pastor Michael W. Hama.
- 16) "Philip Melanchthon," an original portrait.

Much of the glass utilized to create the religious scenes and portraits noted above is of the layered variety known to artisans in stained glass as "drapery glass." As it was originally produced in Belgium, "drapery glass" is believed to have been heated to around 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Pigments were "puddled"



into the heated glass with charcoal sticks. Varying intensities of the same color were achieved after the glass cooled by layering two or more pieces of the glass face-to-face, thereby deepening the tone. This type of stained glass was especially used for the creation of effective skylines and the delicately contrasting tones and shadings in the garments worn by biblical figures or portrait subjects.

The last two panels noted above do not appear today in their original locations. "The Gate of Heaven" panel is now located where the "Philip Melanchthon" panel originally appeared. The "Melanchthon" panel was removed during a 1949 renovation project and later relocated inside the lower 14th Street entrance to the Festal Hall (Sunday School chapel), where it remains today.



In 1949, as part of a major renovation of the worship space of the church, all the stained glass windows were removed and disassembled, with each piece of glass being cleaned and resealed, resulting in the complete restoration of each window to its original condition. Yet, another 41 years would pass by before steps would be taken to assure the proper protection of these beautiful windows. The reason for this was undoubtedly the high cost of accomplishing the task, not willful neglect.

Finally in 1991, hoping to safeguard to the fullest possible extent the irreplaceable works of art that are theirs in this church's stained glass windows, the First Lutheran congregation contracted with Phillips Stained Glass Studio, Inc., Canonsburg, to clean and seal each window behind customized Plexiglas storm shields. Most of the work, including the construction of each individually fitted iodized frame, was done on site. The job began early in the spring of that year and was not finished until late fall, at a total cost of \$60,000.

Always A Work In Progress

As the following historical sketch clearly reveals, First Lutheran Church, Altoona, has been in an almost constant state of repair, renovation, improvement, or expansion since the day of its initial completion in 1897.

In 1904, extensive alterations were made to the building and a magnificent three-manual Pilcher pipe organ was installed in the chancel. These improvements cost about \$7,500. During that same year, a parsonage was erected beside the church on 12th Avenue at a cost of about \$6,500.

Major repairs were made to the slate and copper trimmed church roof in 1911, early in the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Marion Justus Kline (1908-1934). Excavation was completed to build the Henry Baker room below the Festal Hall (Sunday School room) and the heating system was enlarged and improved. The interior of the church was redecorated in buff and tan, and the furniture and woodwork were cleaned and revarnished. The cost of these renovations was about \$2,300.

In 1919, a new lighting system was installed and the interior of the church was redecorated in white and ivory. The cost was \$4,000. Early in the nineteen-twenties, the stairway from the main Sunday School lobby and Festal Hall to the upper 14th Street entrance was erected. Then in 1926, the interior of the church was again redecorated, new lights were installed again,

and other minor improvements were made at a cost of \$5,100.

The congregation undertook its first major expansion of the church facility in 1927, with the erection of a new Sunday School building behind the parsonage and extending along the alley.

To accommodate the new addition, a new and expanded heating system was installed.

The total cost of this building project was \$24,700.

In 1936, early in the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. Luke H. Rhoads (1933-1950), the Pilcher pipe organ was cleaned and totally restored. A church office was set up and furnished, and the entire interior of the church was rededicated. After many years of seemingly endless building debts, the 1936 rededication marked the clearing of all such indebtedness after paying the immediate costs of \$2,300.

In 1938 and 1939, new carpets were laid in the nave and chancel and in the rooms of the Sunday School. New cushions were obtained for the church pews and all the woodwork was cleaned and revarnished. Wood-simulated covers were placed over all the radiators, railing draperies were hung in the chancel, and new indirect lighting fixtures were installed over the chancel. Exterior improvements at that time included a complete renewal of the copper trim on the church roof. The total cost of this two-year program was \$20,000.

1942 saw yet another routine redecoration of the church's interior at a cost of \$2,600. A special fund was established in 1943 for the eventual replacement of the aging pipe organ and a radical renovation of the chancel.

In June 1949, that major renovation of the chancel and sanctuary was begun. For the third time since the day of the church's dedication in 1897, the chancel was dismantled and removed. The renovation that took its place was a complete one, involving the entire front of the worship space of the church. At the same time, the large Pilcher pipe organ, after 50 years of service, was removed and sold to a Pittsburgh firm of organ rebuilders. The dedication of the new chancel, appearing as it does to this day, was held on Sunday, March 12, 1950. Then only a little more than two months later, on May 21, 1950, a service of dedication was celebrated for what must surely be considered another of the magnificent treasures housed in this church building, the great Aeolian-Skinner organ, widely considered to be one of the finest pipe organs in the Alleghenies.

The congregation undertook a major construction project in 1970 and 1971, during the pastorate of The Rev. Dr. F. William Brandt (1959-1973), when the 1896 church was more than doubled in size by the addition of the Educational Building. This \$500,000 structure adjoins the original church building on 12th Avenue and extends to and along the back alley. The ground breaking ceremony was held on April 12, 1970. The lot of ground located next to the church's property on

its south line, occupied by the Winter's Warehouse, was acquired in July; the warehouse was demolished in August; and the cornerstone for the new structure was laid on September 27th. Actual construction of the new addition progressed quickly and the First Lutheran Educational Building was dedicated to the glory of God on July 25, 1971.

The sealed copper box placed into the hollow of the 1970 cornerstone contains the following items:

- The Holy Bible
- The (Red) Service Book and Hymnal
- The First Lutheran Yearbook, 1969 (Annual Report)
- The First Lutheran News, September 1970
- The bulletins for The Ground Breaking, April 12th, and The Laying of the Cornerstone, September 27, 1970
- A microfilm of the Construction Specifications
- A listing of everyone involved in planning for the construction of the Educational Building
- A few coins

Upon This Foundation

Thus far, we have noted two of the magnificent treasures housed in this building that we call First Evangelical Lutheran Church, Altoona: 1) the wonderful depictions of Lutheran reformers and biblical themes in stained glass dating from 1897, and 2) the splendid three-manual, thirty-rank Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ installed in

1950. This church's greatest and most precious treasure, however – the one without which the church building would never have been erected, and the one which gives this congregation its primary cause for gathering here at 12th Avenue and 14th Street today – is the Holy Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, transmitted by Holy Scripture, to which the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions bear witness, is indeed this church's finest treasure, for by its regular and faithful proclamation and by the ministration of Christ's Sacraments, the Holy Spirit works in this place to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship.

In short, the Gospel of Jesus Christ holds the root of our being and reveals this world's only hope of knowing the wholeness of life that God wills for his creation. We who are this Lutheran congregation know that God comes to us in his Word and Sacraments. Through this Gospel, we hear about God's love for us and his forgiveness in Jesus Christ; it reveals to us the abundant life God desires to give us and what he expects of us. In grateful response to this Good News, we come together in this church building as a worshipping faith community, gathering regularly around this Gospel to confess our needs, to celebrate God's saving presence in Jesus Christ, to open ourselves to his creative Word, and to dedicate our lives to his service.

Upon this foundation and toward these ends, throughout the past one hundred years of its history the First Evangelical Lutheran congregation of Altoona has sought to utilize this

wonderful church facility as the center for the daily conduct of its ministry. Today, may we who are the recipients of this heritage and legacy of faithfulness mark this milestone year of 1996 with the personal rededication of ourselves to this church's mission of lifting up the Gospel in Word and Sacrament so that all people may find hope and salvation in Jesus Christ, for the glory of almighty God, the Father, the (+) Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A Devastating Fire

On September 11, 1997, an electrical malfunction occurred inside a janitor's closet starting a fire just hours after Pastor Fred Romig had secured the entire building following a photo session for a parish directory.

The fire smoldered, creeping unnoticed into the walls and floors until a ceiling fell, setting off a burglar alarm that summoned police. "When they came to check, they saw the smoke coming out," said Pete Seilhamer, superintendent for Leonard S. Fiore Inc., the local contractor for the restoration designed by Hayes Large Architects, Altoona.

From the outside, the church never showed any signs of damage, except for makeshift ramps that workers use to move supplies up the stone stairs. "The place is built like a fort," Pastor Romig observed. Standing near the cornerstone that was laid on July 18, 1896, he pointed out that the stone walls are 23-inches thick, topped by a sturdy slate roof.

But a look at the inside instantly revealed that Romig had to find modern craftsmen who were capable of restoring old-world craftsmanship.

A Fairfield, Iowa, company he found on the Internet restored art-quality stained glass bearing images of Bible stories. The original stained glass was the work of artisans who had worked at the famed Tiffany glass studios in Philadelphia.

While the fire caused extensive damage to the lower chapel level, the damage to the sanctuary level was not as "apparent," Romig said. Fire had crept under the floor and up into the pipe organ, one he says would be "considered among the crown jewels of pipe organs built in the 19th century."

Emery Brothers, the company that usually serviced the organ, handled repairs to the console and one rank of pipes that were destroyed. Forty other ranks of pipes were not harmed by the fire, Romig said.

Once the damage was stripped away, one could stand in the crawl space and look up 67-feet to the arches three levels above.

The main goal in the restoration process was to maintain the architectural integrity of the church and incorporate features that met modern building requirements.

Seating capacity was reduced from 700 to 500, but allows for a larger reception area in the back. The original sloped, theater-style floor is

now level, but that's better for people who suffer equilibrium problems.

When the church was built in 1896, it's not likely that anyone thought of handicap access, air conditioning, modern heating and plumbing or a sprinkler system to douse fires – all things that were included in the restoration.

Many of the church's features have been re-arranged because of the fire. The lowest of three levels – once a social hall – is now a basement. The chapel level includes the social hall, child-care area, brides' room, kitchen and storage areas.

The backdrop of the chapel is three arched windows taken from inside the main entrance and backlighted to give the appearance of sun shining through. The altar is one from the church's original construction that's been in storage for the better part of the last half-century.

"Trying to put the building back in such a way that people would recognize that they are at First Lutheran Church was a very complicated process," Romig said.

In addition to talented and cooperative craftspeople, he said he had the support of congregation members including the building committee, property committee and church council under the leadership of Sandra Kurtz, Larry Bowers and Robert Houseman, respectively.

More than three years after the fire that destroyed the sanctuary of the First Evangelical Lutheran Church, members of the congregation dedicated their restored church on Sunday, October 15, 2000.

"Today was a day long in coming, but the results were well worth waiting for," said the Reverend Gregory R. Pile, Bishop of the Allegheny Synod. "You, the people of First Lutheran, have chosen to arise from a devastating fire, choosing not to leave but to stay."

Both Pile and the Reverend Fred Romig said the fire could have signaled the demise of the 104-year-old First Lutheran community.

"You are here today in a reconstructed and refurbished building because there is no other God who can save like this," Pile said.

Romig said completion of the restoration project gave him an overwhelming sense of relief.

"A seemingly impossible and mind boggling task has been accomplished," Romig said. "It gives me a sense of satisfaction beyond words. With God's help and blessing that which we were called to do is basically being completed."

The day also was important to members of the congregation.

"It is a step forward into the future. It means we have gone through some tough times," said Steve Ellis, a fifth generation member of the church and member of the congregation council.

“It seemed like a long road, but we persevered and look forward to using the building to reach out to the community.”

“Today is a brand new beginning for many people,” said Bob Houseman, congregation council president. “Many of us were in shock the day it happened, but we knew if we kept our faith, we would rebuild it. With God’s help, we accomplished that.”

The Rev. Robert Mazur, pastor of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, congratulated his Lutheran brothers.

“This is an historic moment for you. You have opened wide the doors to Christ; that is indeed what you are doing,” Mazur said. “May we do our best to promote unity in the name of Christ. His resurrection has made us one.”

Houseman praised Hayes Large Architects and Leonard S. Fiore Inc., general contractor, for their work in bringing the church back to life.

“They did a great job. They went the extra mile for our parish,” Houseman said.

The church’s renowned stained-glass windows were restored, as was the 4,000 pipe 34-rank Aeolian-Skinner pipe organ.

It is among the crown jewels of organs built in this country in the last century.

“It has a better sound than it ever had due to

state of the art circuitry used in the console,” Romig said.

One of the goals was to maintain the architectural integrity of the church, and that was accomplished, Ellis said.

“If you hadn’t been here for 40 years, you would still say it is still First Lutheran,” Ellis said.

Pastors Who Have Served In This Church Building Since 1896

The Rev. Michael W. Hamma, DD, LLD
January 1, 1896 - July 1, 1898

The Rev. Oliver C. Roth, DD
July 1, 1898 - April 30, 1908

The Rev. Marion Justus Kline, DD
June 1, 1908 - September 29, 1934

The Rev. Luke H. Rhoads, DD
September 1, 1933 - January 31, 1935
February 1, 1935 - November 15, 1950

The Rev. Cedric W. Tilberg, STM
June 1, 1951 - August 31, 1958

The Rev. J. Richard Fisher, BD
June 1, 1952 - December 8, 1953

The Rev. Eugene R. McVicker, BD
July 1, 1954 - November 15, 1956

The Rev. Carl H. Greenawald, BD
June 10, 1957 - November 5, 1959

The Rev. F. William Brandt, DD
December 1, 1959 - August 31, 1973

The Rev. Robert A. Willauer, BD
January 1, 1963 - August 29, 1966

The Rev. Alfred A. Ambrose, BD
June 15, 1967 - October 31, 1968

The Rev. Glenn L. Stahl, BD
November 18, 1973 - June 30, 1984

The Rev. Paul W. Smeltz, BD
July 1, 1976 - June 30, 1978

The Rev. Roy A. Steward, JR., M. DIV.
February 17, 1985 - December 31, 1991

The Rev. Fred L. Romig, M. DIV.
April 1, 1993 - 2008

The Rev. Thomas Ekstrand
March 2009 - September 2013

The Rev. Dr. Barry Folmar
June 29, 2014 - present

Sources

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