

The E.L.S. Churches of Winnebago County, Iowa, Tim Erickson

Excerpts from an article written for the "Oak Leaves," the ELS Historical Society newsletter.

In the early years of the reorganized synod from 1918 there were seven congregations in Winnebago County. **Lime Creek**, Lake Mills, Scarville, Center, Forest, West Prairie and Thompson. In 1949 West Prairie and Thompson merged to form Zion in Thompson. Lima Creek recently merged with Lake Mills and Somber (in Worth County to the east of Winnebago County) to form Grace in Lake Mills. So due to two mergers, there are now 5 active E.L.S. congregations in Winnebago County.

We will look at the history of these congregations beginning with the best known of them, Lime Creek, where the synod was reorganized in 1918.

The church is named after a creek. Lime Creek's headwaters begin in Minnesota to the west of Lime Creek Church. It flows south between Scarville and Lake Mills. Lime Creek used to continue on through Mason City, but now, just north of Leland it joins with another stream called Pike Run and its name changes to the Winnebago River. It then flows into the Shell Rock River (the E.L.S. congregation in Northwood, Iowa, is called "First Shell Rock") then the Cedar River to the Iowa River, which flows into the Mississippi River. Since it goes through Mason City, which was the home of Meredith Wilson, who wrote the musical "The Music Man," the name "Lime Creek" was officially changed to "Winnebago River" in 1961. The locals felt compelled to promote their "creek" to a "river." In Wilson's musical, Mason City was called River City. [An interesting aside: The Blue Earth River, which joins the Minnesota River in Mankato, also has its origins in Winnebago County, Iowa].

Early history of Lime Creek Lutheran Church

The Lime Creek church is barely in Winnebago County. It is in the northeast corner of the county, one mile south of the state line. Worth County, Iowa, is a mile to the east. As you drive on U.S. Highway 69 between Emmons, Minnesota, and Lake Mills, Iowa, one mile south of the state line you can see the church a half mile to the west.

The church dates to the beginnings of the Lutheran Church among Norwegian immigrants to Freeborn County, Minnesota and Winnebago and Worth Counties in Iowa. The first Lutheran worship service in the area was held July 20th, 1858 on the farm of Lars L. Loberg near Silver Lake. Services were held approximately four times a year and the early pastors who would come to the area were Rev. C.L. Clausen, Rev. A.C. Preus, and Rev. U. V. Koren. Soon, four congregations would come about as a result of these services: Round Prairie (this church is highly visible on the east side of Interstate 35 2 miles north of the Iowa-Minnesota state line), Silver Lake, Shell Rock, and Lime Creek.

In May of 1865, a meeting was held and a call was extended to T.A. Torgerson, a candidate of Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri to become Pastor of a parish consisting of the congregations of Lime Creek, Silver Lake, and Shell Rock. Pastor Torgerson began his ministry in the area in August of that year. As the United States was emerging from the Civil War, a theological debate of the day in the old Norwegian Synod was on the topic of slavery. At a congregational meeting in February of 1869, a majority of the Lime Creek members voted to withdraw from the Norwegian Synod.

Controversy over slavery.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, there were accusations that the Missouri Synod favored the southern cause. The controversy was over slavery, some saying that all slavery was sinful and others taking the position that some slavery was allowed, which is what we see in the Bible, cf. Philemon, and that even a Christian could be a slave owner. Missouri was a border state between North and South, and the Missouri Synod had congregations in the South, so that the synod was accused of supporting the confederate cause. In reality, Germans of Missouri were instrumental in keeping the state with the Union.

The following are some excerpts from *Grace for Grace: A Brief History of the Norwegian Synod*, published by the Lutheran Synod Book Company in 1943. This was for the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the synod in 1853 and the 25th anniversary of the reorganization in 1918. There is a chapter concerning "The Controversy Regarding Slavery" in this book

"As for slavery, since the Bible nowhere forbids it, they would not call it in itself a sinful institution nor accept the contention that a Christian could not own slaves, although they were against the institution of slavery as it appeared in America."

"Rev. C.L. Clausen held that "slavery in itself is a sinful thing because it enables a man to use his fellow-men as his property, "exercising unrestricted authority and control over them as over other property."

The Lime Creek congregation split in 1868 because of this slavery controversy which arose in the Norwegian Synod. As a result of the division within the congregation, the majority left to organize a congregation of their own, which would also become known as "Lime Creek Lutheran Church." The ELS Lime Creek congregation remained with the Norwegian Synod and the new (non-ELS) Lime Creek congregation joined the Conference of the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. In 1890 this conference merged with the Norwegian Augustana Synod (established 1870) and the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood (established 1887) to form the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America (UNLC). This church body then participated in the merger of Norwegian church bodies in 1917.

“Rev. Torgerson remained with the original Norwegian Synod congregation on the Iowa side of the state line in Norway Township until his death in 1906. This congregation is the modern-day Lime Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church and is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).”

History of Lime Creek Lutheran Church after the slavery controversy

The new (non-ELS) Lime Creek congregation joined Silver Lake in calling a Pastor in 1869. In 1874, this congregation built a house of worship on a site west of Emmons on the Minnesota side of the State Line Road, just north and west of the Lime Creek “synod” church. During the years this Lime Creek church had pastors at different times with area churches. It may be of interest to ELS readers that in 1878, Bethel Lutheran Church was organized at Vinje, Iowa, and became part of the non-ELS Lime Creek parish. Vinje is just 3 miles west of Scarville.

In 1963 Bethel extended a call to Rev. Søren S. Urberg, who was installed as the new minister. Rev. Urberg later joined the ELS by colloquy in 1996. He served Calvary in Ulen, Minnesota, and Our Savior’s in Hawley, Minnesota, and in the church of our fellowship in Avaldsnes, Norway, from 1999-2000. He died in 2022.

The (non-ELS) Lime Creek shared pastors with Mansfield Lutheran Church from 1962 until it closed in October of 1983. The Lime Creek (non-E.L.S.) cemetery remains, but the church building was moved to the Farm of Yesteryear site near Kiester, Minnesota in 2003, and a monument to the Lime Creek church was erected where the church once stood.

The ELS Lime Creek congregation began work on the present church building in 1874. It was dedicated in 1879. This historic congregation and building was the site of the meeting in 1918 where the ELS was formed as a reorganization of the old Norwegian Synod after several pastors refused to enter the merger.

1918:

There is a little booklet called “A Blessing in the Midst of the Land,” commemorating the 100th Anniversary of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church. In that booklet, Pastor Iver Johnson wrote:

“The oak trees in historic Lime Creek church yard have been witnesses to many events during the years, both sad and joyful, in the life of the congregation. But perhaps few happenings have ever been so important to all of us as that gathering which responded to an announcement printed in the church paper in April, 1918, which read:”

“Pastors and members of congregations who desire to continue in the old doctrine and practice of the Norwegian Synod, will, God willing, hold their annual meeting in the Lime Creek congregation, Pastor H. Ingebritson’s charge, June 14 and following days.”

In June 1918 13 pastors and approximately 200 members responded to this announcement and met at Lime Creek in order to reorganize the old Norwegian Synod. The details of this meeting are available in many chapters of the books of the synod’s history and in many historical articles that have been written.

We often think of the two oaks at Koshkonong, Wisconsin, under which Pastor J.W.C. Dietrichson preached in 1844. A little over 100 years later, Pastor Johnson continues in his article: “The oak trees still stand at Lime Creek. [Pastor Iver Johnson was the pastor at Lime Creek when he wrote these words.] They are taller and sturdier. The Synod lives today also, but it too has changed. It has become larger, stronger, adding proof to the Lord’s promise regarding His Word: “It shall not return unto me void . . . It shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” Is. 55, 16. The forces of nature may one day humble our oaks. But if it be our determination to ever remain faithful to God’s Word, our Synod shall have a perennial youth and vigor, for are we not reinforced by Christ promise to the Church: The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

The president of the synod, Pastor Bjug Harstad said the following words in his sermon at this 1918 convention: “The faith that the fathers fearlessly confessed in speech and writing, and which they have also embodied in our Synodical constitution and church policy, is give us by God Himself. We have a Chrit right to stand on this ground, and we cannot yield to false brethren and this for the very reason that we want to retain the freedom which the Gospel gives us. ... Let us remember and follow these words of Jeremiah the prophet: “Thus says the Lord, stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for you souls.”

There is a monument to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod’s place of reorganization, erected at the Lime Creek Church that reads as follows:

“If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed.” John 8:31.

“Here in June 1918, a number of pastors and laymen of the Norwegian Synod, who for scriptural reasons could not, in good conscience, consent to their Synod’s merger with two other Lutheran bodies, met to reorganize the Norwegian Synod of he American Evangelical Lutheran Church. (Evangelical Lutheran Synod since 1957.”

“Erected by the youth of the Iowa-Southern Minnesota circuit of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, October 1969.”

The 20 minute video showing the reenactment of this convention can be found at: <https://els.org/history/>. It is also located on the Web page of Grace Lutheran Church in Lake Mills: <https://northerniowalutherans.com/grace-lutheran-church/grace-lutheran-heritage/>.

Since 1918

The congregation hosted the synod convention again in 1927. This was also an historic convention. It was this convention that voted to take over Bethany Lutheran College.

In 1966 Lime Creek Lutheran Church became a part of a multiple congregation parish in northern Iowa. This became a five-point parish with the addition of Immanuel of Riceville, Iowa, in 1971.

Merger to form Grace

As the number of members dwindled due to a drop in the area population, membership and church attendance on Sundays also went down. An example of this is also seen in the public schools of Winnebago County, some in the county had to merge with others because of the drop in in the number of students. Even with a five-point parish in the church, it became difficult to continue serving the means of Grace. In 2024 Lime Creek merged with Lake Mills Lutheran and Somber Lutheran to form a new congregation called "Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church." Regular services have been discontinued, but the people are served with God's Word and Sacraments as member of Grace in Lake Mills.

In coming issues of Oak Leaves, we will look at the other E.L.S. congregations in Winnebago County, Iowa.