



---

# THE HERITAGE OF BETHEL CHURCH

*"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." (Hebrews 19:8)*

## OUR HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

It was in 1891 that a group of 15 Scandinavian believers organized as a congregation and called themselves "The Mission Church." A building on Fourth Street near Second Avenue North in downtown Fargo became the first meeting place for worship, and all services were conducted in Norwegian. Disaster struck Fargo in 1893, and fire destroyed the church building, along with nearly the entire downtown district. A new building was constructed seating 150 at Fourth Street and Third Avenue North. The name of the congregation was changed to "Scandinavian Congregational Church."

In 1907 Rev. Swen Wuflestad began his role as pastor. The work progressed under his leadership with a growing Sunday School and Young People's Society. In 1910 the congregation affiliated with the North Dakota Evangelical Missionary Association and changed its name to the "Scandinavian Evangelical Free Church." A new building was constructed and completed in 1922 largely through the donation of materials and volunteer labor of members. Seating capacity doubled to 300, and English became the language for the Sunday evening service.

Excellence in music has been a tradition at Bethel since the early years. One of the early musical groups was the String Band, organized in the early 1900's and continuing its ministry well into the 1940's. String Band instruments included guitars, violins, mandolins, ukuleles, the autoharp and piano. The String Band regularly visited jails, old people's homes and hospitals, and also held Saturday evening street meetings on Front Street (now Main Avenue) to provide passersby with hymns and the Gospel.

During the "Depression Years," many members again moved away from the community and the congregation became gradually smaller. Evangelistic services were held, and many heard the straightforward message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Many accepted Him, and

their lives, and the life of the little church, were changed forever. In 1933 the congregation changed its name to "Bethel Evangelical Free Church," and all services were by then conducted in the English language.

## BETHEL CONTINUES TO GROW

In the fall of 1937 Rev. Carl J. Fosmark was called to lead the congregation succeeding his brother, Palmer, who had been pastor from 1934-1936. Another brother Lloyd, would also pastor the church from 1942-1945; and Carl would return again in 1948 to pastor until 1952. Under Pastor Carl Fosmark's leadership, the membership increased and many were added to the Kingdom. In October of 1940 the congregation celebrated its 50th Anniversary. The String Band continued to provide special music for all services and also served to tie the young people to the church. The church sanctuary was remodeled and the first electric organ purchased in the late 1940's. In 1950 the congregation voted in favor of the merger of the Norwegian and Swedish branches of the Evangelical Free Church, and in October of 1951 Bethel observed its 60th Anniversary.

The congregation continued to experience growth, and in 1953 plans were being made to remodel the building again to provide for additional Sunday School rooms. The remodeling plans were halted, however, by the City of Fargo's plans for an Urban Renewal project which would include the Bethel property at Fourth Street and Third Avenue North. Reluctantly the congregation began to look for another building site where enough land could be purchased to provide for a larger building and sufficient parking space. In the late summer of 1956 property was purchased at 16th Avenue and South University Drive. In June of 1957 a tornado hit the city of Fargo during a Free Church Youth Fellowship (FCYF) meeting. The group was spared injury though many homes in the area were destroyed and ten lives were lost.

The Fourth Street building was sold to the City of Fargo in December of 1957, and plans for the new building to be erected on the property at 1602 South University Drive were approved in April of 1958. The last services were held in the Fourth Street building on Sunday, June 29, 1959; and ground-breaking took place at the new building site that same afternoon. With mixed emotions, the congregation saw the doors close for the last time on the building where for 36 years so many had been born into God's Kingdom and been nurtured in the Word. The building was demolished to make room for the new Civic Auditorium, and another chapter in Bethel's history came to an end.

## MINISTRY FROM THE CORNER OF 16TH AVE & SOUTH UNIVERSITY DRIVE

Construction began on July 1 on the fourth meeting place for the congregation. The 58' X 94' structure to be built at a cost of \$130,000 would include a sanctuary to seat 375, five Sunday School classrooms, a pastor's study, and a mothers' room on the main floor. The basement would provide a social room, ten Sunday School classrooms including a youth room, a Sunday School office, and kitchen. The pastoral staff consisted of one pastor; and the office staff a part-time secretary.

The first service at 1602 South University Drive took place on Christmas morning 1958 at 7:00 a.m. An article in the March 6, 1959, Fargo Forum boasted of a sound system that would convey music and messages from the sanctuary to the kitchen, social room, and mother's room. Bethel continued to experience growth both in church membership and Sunday School attendance in the new location under the leadership of Pastor Stanley Nelson. Now located in a residential area, many new families came to Bethel looking for a church home.

Bethel's radio ministry began in the 1950's with a program entitled "Evangelical Echoes," a cooperative effort with Moorhead Evangelical Free Church. In 1959, by mutual consent, Bethel assumed full responsibility for the program, and the name was changed to "Melodies from Bethel" which featured the Bethel choir. It was broadcast each Sunday at 12:45 p.m. on WDAY Radio directly from the sanctuary and was an "open door of outreach" to the community. For four summers Bethel's Sunday evening service was aired on KFNW Radio.

Rev. Richard H. Hess began his ministry at Bethel in February of 1969. During his ministry there was growth in many areas including church attendance, the annual missions conference and missions giving, as well as the calling of Bethel's first youth pastor. Pastor Hess remembers the most interesting, exciting, and fulfilling aspect of his ministry as Bethel's ministry to college and university students. Attendance by college students at Sunday morning services grew from 25 to 150. Pastor Hess was succeeded as pastor by Rev. Merle E. Christensen in 1974. In 1976, the South University Drive building was expanded to provide an additional 100 seats in the sanctuary, an enlarged narthex, and more Sunday School space.

Meanwhile, Bethel was reaching out far beyond Front Street. Its young people were taking the Word around the world, some going on short-term missions, some becoming career missionaries. At home, more and more students from Fargo-Moorhead colleges were attending

services. The pastoral staff was expanding: an associate pastor and a youth pastor. More home Bible studies were being held; the Sunday School for both young people and adults was growing. As Bethel's ministry continued to grow, the need for more space became evident. In October of 1979 Bethel sent out more than 65 people to begin a new ministry which would be known as "Salem Evangelical Free Church."

In October of 1979 broadcast of Bethel's Sunday morning worship service began on KFNW-FM, Fargo's Christian radio station. This broadcast brought the ministry of Bethel to homes with a 60-mile radius of Fargo. In 1980 Gary Herr became part-time worship director, where he served in this capacity for 17 years. In 1981, an interdenominational Christian day school began operation in Moorhead with Bethel as one of its three founding churches. Park Christian School continues today as an education alternative for children pre-school through grade 12.

Rev. Robert O. Page accepted the call to become Bethel's senior pastor in January of 1983. Under Pastor Page's leadership the church evolved in its thinking from a small church to a large church mentality. The leadership/organizational structure of the church was modified to fit the larger congregation of the future. In 1984 the SonShine Fellowship for senior adults was organized; and in 1985 an exciting AWANA program for Christian education and discipleship of children began.

God's blessing remained on the Bethel congregation as growth continued to demand more space.

In the spring of 1983 the General Board set a three-year goal of appointing a committee to develop a plan for growth that would take into account projected needs in the areas of worship, education, parking, and office facilities. Later that year the congregation adopted this goal and voted to form a Long-Range Planning Committee. The Committee worked for nearly a year researching various options which included starting satellite churches to reduce the number of people using the present facility, purchasing and remodeling the grocery store building adjacent to Bethel, and buying land and relocating to a larger facility. The congregation voted in 1985 to purchase eight acres of land in the Bluemont Lakes area of south Fargo and to build a new church building on this site.

Again, in 1990, as it had done eleven years earlier, the Bethel congregation sent out 55 of its own to help form the "Shiloh Evangelical Free Church" of West Fargo. In April of 1991 Pastor Page left his role as senior pastor to become Superintendent of the Midwest District of the EFCA. In April of 1992, Pastor Jim Pearson became the new senior pastor.

## BETHEL'S MINISTRY CONTINUES

In the spring of 1993, the congregation gathered on the proposed site of the new church to hold a ground breaking ceremony. On June 5, 1994, the first worship service was held at the new facility at 2702 30th Avenue South. This was a culmination of an 11 year dream for the Bethel congregation. The new building seated more than 600 in its sanctuary. There was a gym, an education wing, two kitchens, and many more opportunities for spiritual growth: Adult Bible Studies, small groups, AWANA, a rapidly growing youth group and more missions trips. In the process of blessing Bethel with this marvelous facility, God sent an extended period of attendance growth. From this growth we began to recognize the need to better emphasize disciple-building, mentoring, and deeper relationships and leadership development.

Pastor Pearson left as senior pastor in the summer of 1997. In September of 1998, the congregation voted to call Pastor Doug Anderson as the senior pastor. With the arrival of Pastor Anderson, God continued to bless the ministry by sending many new families to join the church. In January, 1999, attendance had grown to the point where the church needed to add a third morning worship service on Sunday mornings. In September of that year an additional evening service was added called "The Prism." That same year, growth brought need to expand the facility. A youth addition was added on to the west side of the gymnasium; and the parking lot was enlarged from 144 spaces to a total of 367 parking spaces. Along with growth, came the need for additional staff. In the next few years several new staff positions were filled in the areas of administration, children's ministry, missions, college, women's ministries, junior high, technology, and several more support staff positions.

In 2002 the congregation voted unanimously to expand its facilities. In October of that year, Bethel Church broke ground for a 1200+ seat sanctuary, expanded foyer, and new administrative offices. Early in 2004, the new facilities were completed, and on March 4-7 the congregation held a Dedication Celebration with Sunday, March 7, being the day the congregation held its first worship service in the new sanctuary.

As it has done for many years, Bethel continues to send and support career missionaries throughout the world, and many people, from youth to senior citizens, have participated in short-term mission trips. With all of these ministry opportunities, prayer-based leadership, a new vision, and a fresh anointing of God's Spirit, Bethel has experienced unprecedented growth. Bethel Church believes that God is calling its people to be steadfast in its purpose "to draw as

many people as possible, both locally and globally, into a personal, dynamic, reproducing relationship with Jesus Christ.”

## A NEW STRUCTURE FOR A GROWING SEASON

Following Pastor Doug’s call to a new ministry assignment in the fall of 2006, God burdened Bethel’s elders to build upon its past with eyes fixed fully on God’s purposes for the days ahead. Acknowledging the unique challenges of Bethel Church’s rapid growth, the elders and congregation initiated in 2007 a process to reorganize the ministry leadership so as to better reflect the leadership needs of a growing church family. Thus, in 2008 the congregation invited Dr. Matthew R. St. John to join the Bethel team as the church’s first Teaching Pastor, a new position partnering in concert with the newly formed Executive Pastor, a role filled by Pastor Marty Thompson, who arrived at Bethel Church in 2006. Together Pastors Marty and Matthew share the responsibility of providing directional leadership. Working within their giftedness, Pastor Matthew focuses on preaching and shepherding, while Pastor Marty oversees Bethel’s ministry staff and resourcing the ministries of Bethel Church.

These men, working with the council of elders and a very special ministry staff, seek to equip and empower the Bethel Church family to be disciplemakers who live, love, and lead like Jesus in their respective realms of influence, whether that is in a Cambodian village, a classroom in the Fargo-Moorhead community, or around the supper table at home.

*“Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to Your Name be the glory,  
because of Your love and faithfulness.”  
(Psalm 115:1)*

“The Heritage of Bethel Evangelical Free Church of Fargo North Dakota”  
2702 30th Ave S, Fargo, ND 58103  
701.232.4476

Last Modified February 2010