

## The Richland Church

As the Richland Community began its settlement in the 1860's and 1870's, the Germans who came brought with them only the barest of necessities to begin their new rural life in America. Children were educated in the home with the few books and precious time that was available. Religious services were conducted around the dining table by reading the Bible supplemented in some instances with daily lessons from volumes such as Starck's Tagliches Handbook. Early in the 1870's the Reverends E. Ernest, Max Puhl and J. G. Leib, all circuit riders, travelled through the Richland area about twice per month, holding worship services, baptizing and marrying couples in homes. The people of the community began to recognize the need for education, and in 1877 Mr. Franz Schmidt offered his own home as a place for a school and it also became the central location for Sunday worship in the community.

On Epiphany Day, January 6, 1878, under the leadership of the Rev. G. Haehnelt, the St. John German Evangelical Lutheran Church was organized. The nineteen charter members were: Franz Schmidt (president), August Dossmann (vice-president), Friedrich Wenzel, Ludwig Wenzel, August Hoherz, Michael Wenzel, Friedrich Hoherz, Henry Pfluger, P. Wm. Steger (also vice-president), Christina Pfluger, August Pfluger, Julius Kunkel, Charles Brachwitz, Fritz Sakewitz and Carl Prinz. Later in 1878 construction of a school house began. Under Pastor Haehnelt's leadership, St. John Church "instructed in the belief of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," as expressed in the Lutheran Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. He held services and preached on the fourth Sunday of each month, and on the second festive days of the church year (in the old German tradition, two days were held for each festive holy day such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, etc.). The pastor drew no salary, but received a free-will offering from the congregation each time he held services, which he recorded himself. During Pastor Haehnelt's leadership, a protokoll (record) book was begun.

In 1880, a constitution, written in German, was drawn up. Of the original charter members, only Mahlow, Steger, Dossman, F. Sakewitz, Schmidt and C. Prinz signed the constitution document.

According to records on file in the Texas General Land Office, after a surveying error was uncovered, land agents Zimpelman and Bergen filed an application for an "Original Government Grant" for 275 acres of unappropriated public land, which they had surveyed and sketched, and for which they issued a check to the Land Office for \$137.50, on August 18, 1880. Then, from the deed on file in the Travis County Courthouse, 20 acres of this land was conveyed to the trustees of the St. John Church by Zimpelman and Bergen on November 17, 1881, for \$60.00. According to a tradition, the twenty acres owned by St. John Church was given by Peter Steger, one of the charter members. There is also a tradition which speaks of a letter written by the land agents to the church trustees, explaining that they had set aside approximately twenty

acres in their plat for a church. Unfortunately, one page of an early church record book, which might very well provide the evidence that someone gave the \$60 to the church for the purchase of the land, is missing. Also missing is any evidence of the said letter from the land agents to the church. It must therefore be left to the reader to draw any further conclusions as to the original acquisition of the land owned by the church.

Church members and others in the community decided it would be good to have a state-supported school in the area. So on January 13, 1883, the congregation passed a resolution donating one acre of the church land to the state, on which a state school house was to be situated. Then on October 18<sup>th</sup> of the same year, the trustees of the church conveyed "one acre, more or less, of land for the purpose of establishing a public school." Since the original old school house could not be moved from Franz Schmidt's property to the church property, it was sold to an individual for \$140 and the money applied to the construction of a new 20-foot by 30-foot building on the church land. This building was also used as a place of worship. During the same year, a well was dug on the church property by William Mahlow. After Pastor Schroeder resigned, the congregation searched for a replacement for 18 months. The Rev. Max Puhl accepted a call to be pastor of the church on July 16, 1883. His salary was \$350 per year. However, in only three months Mr. Puhl decided he had made a wrong decision in coming to St. John Church and resigned. At that time there were 25 members of the congregation. Also in 1883, a 10' wide backroom and 8' wide gallery were added to the preacher's house.

In 1884 the congregation built a small sanctuary, constructed from the lumber of an old ranch house in the area. During the same year an underground wooden cistern was constructed. The congregation was again without a pastor for 18 months until the arrival of Pastor Pfennig.

Lack of roads in the areas was a major problem, especially in bad weather. A comment in the protokoll book, dated June 1, 1884, notes that roads to the church were nothing but trails, many times impossible to travel, and that an important decision to build roads needed to be made. Apparently there were many disagreements as to where roads should be built. Finally it was decided to build a straight road from Wilbarger Creek to the Richland School and to the pastor's house, which would then continue another six miles north. This project failed. Old records indicated that largely as a result of the conflicts and ultimate failure of the road building project, only ten members remained in the church at that time. This reflects the seriousness of the conflict, because before the ministry of Pastor Pfennig (1884-85), church membership and participation had grown considerably. The church had by now, however, acquired some debts as a result of the road project. The debts were not being paid, since so many members were becoming dissatisfied. There was talk of discontinuing the congregation

and selling the property to pay the debts. This was in 1885. However, the decision to close the church was not made. The few remaining members continued to work at holding the church together.

On February 28, 1886, it was decided to lay out a church cemetery, with 20-foot by 30-foot lots. During the same time, membership grew to 38, and plans were made for the construction of a new church building. The old building was then converted to a more livable parsonage for the resident pastor.

The Rev. E. Schroeder again became pastor and served on alternate Sundays from 1885 through 1888. Pastor H. Rhode served from November 1889 to February 1892. It was during his tenure that the first real sanctuary was completed in 1891. It was a wooden structure, costing \$1,500.50, built by a Mr. Wehring of Hutto, Texas. The building committee was William Mahlow, P.W. Steger, Wilhelm Kruegar, Gus Sakewitz and Carl Prinz. This building served the congregation for 34 years. It was damaged by a severe storm in the early 1920's, which caused it to be pushed off its blocks. Extensive repairs had to be made in order that it could continue to be used.

The bell for the church was ordered from St. Louis, Missouri, and it continued in use in the present building until it cracked in 1956. It was then sold as scrap bronze for \$122.92. The present bell was acquired as a replacement at a cost of \$100 from the Evangelical & Reformed Church of Ben Arnold, Texas.

Many German settlement churches in America were denominationally independent. However, they called their ministers from whatever German-language group they could get them as long as they spoke the German language. Some of these ministers were educated in Switzerland seminaries which sent out a number of ministers as "missionaries" to American German settlements.

Most of the folks at Richland came from Prussia where in the early nineteenth century, the Reformed and Lutheran Churches united to form the Evangelical Union of Prussia, with the encouragement of King Fredrich William III. So the folks at Richland, with this background, named their church in their constitution and on the cornerstone the EVANGELISCHE LUTHERISCHE KIRCHE RICHLAND BEI MANOR.

In the early years the Richland Church was served by ministers from a Lutheran Synod and the Lutheran catechism was used. There was a neighboring independent German language church at Dessau which was served by pastors from the Evangelical Synod of North America. A twist of history, involving these two churches and the two denominations occurred in 1892. The Dessau church called an Evangelical minister fresh out of the Evangelical Seminary in St. Louis, whose name was J. Horstmann. He was evidently delayed in arriving for some reason,

and in the meantime the Dessau church found and called another minister from the Lutheran Synod.

When the Horstmann family did arrive, the folks at Dessau said, "We have already moved another minister into the parsonage. But there is a little church on the prairie out at Richland that has no pastor at this time. You might go and talk to them about becoming their pastor." So he did, and the Richland church identified itself with the Evangelical Church, and finally in 1952 united with the Evangelical and Reformed church. The Dessau church began to identify with the Lutheran church at that time, though it did have an Evangelical minister, Jaworski (Leon Jaworski's father), in the early 1900's. Still later it called Lutheran ministers again and officially joined that denomination. It became inactive in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving an empty building. But in 1987, under the sponsorship of the Immanuel Lutheran Church of Pflugerville, the Dessau church was revived, and called a full-time Lutheran minister, and it is a thriving, growing church.

While Horstmann was pastor at St. John church, he organized the first Sunday School in 1892. After he left to go to other fields of service, he translated hymns from German to English, and three of those hymns appear in the Evangelical hymnal. "The Work is Thine O Christ the Lord" is one. It has been sung through the years to begin the annual congregational meetings. Until women were given voting rights, the men remained in the sanctuary to carry on the business while the ladies went over to the parish hall to listen to the men's voices wafting through the windows and carry on "women's" talk.

Later, in 1900 when Rev. H. Mernitz was pastor, a mixed choir was organized, with practices being held in the homes of members who had either a piano or an organ. In the early 1900's, the constitution and bylaws were rewritten.

Pastor A. Romanowski served St. John Church from 1902 to 1906 and after his departure Pastor H. Barnofske arrived. In an official action taken on February 16, 1908, renters were given the right to vote at church meetings and be responsible for financial affairs of the church. Up to that time, only land owners could vote in official business matters. Also during his pastoral service, the "Jugend Verein" (Youth Fellowship) was organized in 1908, and a resolution was passed to purchase a book in which the official records of the church should be set down and kept by each pastor. This record book is still in use today; all its titles and headings are in German.

In 1911 a resolution was passed to build a new two story parsonage. A clock was purchased in April, 1914 for \$15 by the Youth Fellowship. Pastor Zucher organized the men's choir in 1915, and directed the formation of the "Frauenverein" in 1920, which was later called the "Ladies Aid" and became the "Women's Guild" in 1954. On August 26, 1917, the Jugend

Verein purchased the statue of Christ for \$33, which is still in use on the altar. The Jugend Verein also bought a piano for the parish hall at a cost of \$490.10.

It was decided on February 8, 1925, to build a new sanctuary, the same one which stands today. The building committee was: Gus Hamann, Henry Steger, Otto Janke, Ben Kerlin and Henry Arend. The contractor chosen for the project was F. J. Sefcik of Taylor and the architect and planner was John Wuethrich also of Taylor. Lumber was purchased from Spencer Lumber Company of Taylor. The old building was then moved next door and served as a Sunday School unit until 1939, when it was torn down and some of the lumber used to construct the present parish hall. The Frauenverein contributed most of the money for the new parish hall, and the men of the church provided all the free labor. Only two men were hired to help with the building, and they were not members.

A committee was formed to supervise the purchases for the interior décor of the new sanctuary. Pressed tin was selected for the interior walls. Other items included the altar, which cost \$350, and the pulpit for \$199. Construction of both was by a Mr. W.E. Schmidt of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The handcrafted wooden arch, which cost \$35, was made by a craftsman we have been unable to identify. The stained glass windows were purchased for \$269.43. The cross on top of the bell tower was purchased for \$30. The architect's original bid had been \$13,900. However, after several additional appointments, the completed new sanctuary cost the congregation \$20,000 in 1925. For the new building, the Frauenverein purchased 26 pews and 130 opera seats, and contributed \$2,401.

It is significant to note that in 1925, when the church construction took place, the central Texas area suffered a severe drought. Farm production was a complete failure. Yet members of the congregation made sacrificial efforts to build and pay for the new structures.

E.B. Kasiske remembered talk of some members who actually borrowed money from the bank to pay their pledges to be repaid in a future, more productive year. Their faith paid off, for future years were productive, and 1925 has not been repeated since.

The Rev. Julius J. Kasiske arrived as the new pastor on May 29, 1928. Almost immediately he set about organizing an orchestra. Membership in the orchestra totaled 36 at one time, and a wide variety of instruments were used. Frequent concerts were performed, the first annual concert being in 1929. A very successful open-air concert was performed in 1935. A wide variety of music was performed by the orchestra including church hymns, light classics, marches, etc. Old records note performances of Wagner's "Under the Double Eagle" and "La Paloma, Spanish Sereade" by Yradier. Tradition has it that Pastor Kasiske was also a composer, and wrote some of the music for the orchestra as well as for the mixed choir. He served as director and organist for the mixed choir.

Membership stipulation for orchestra and choir was begun during his leadership. A person could become a choir or orchestra member after a month's trial, and an attendance record was kept. Performances included German and English hymns at regular worship services, playing for weddings and anniversaries and at funerals. The choir also performed Easter cantatas and Christmas music, and occasionally sang at surprise birthday parties for the elderly.

It was during Pastor Kasiske's leadership that the practice of receiving morning offerings at worship services was introduced. Up to this time, "dues" were assessed from church members, based on an agreed upon formula. The new practice caused quite a stir.

A church library was started on June 1, 1930 by the Youth Fellowship. They also purchased a "Hectograph" for copy work. In 1933 the youth fellowship dues were reduced from \$1.20 to 60 cents per week, because of the "Great Depression."

On March 28, 1933, it was decided to begin having more worship services in the English language. On the second Sunday of each month services were held in a combination of German and English. Every fourth Sunday there was an evening service completely in English.

In 1934, there were 100 active members of St. John Church. However, in those days, only the head of the family, usually male, was officially a member of the church. Others were members through him or her. Thus 100 active members meant 100 active families. In 1934, the mixed choir had its German constitution translated into English.

On December 28, 1941, shortly after "Pearl Harbor," it was resolved to alternate services in German and English. On April 2, 1950, it was decided that the first Sunday of each month would be a German worship service, and all other services of the church would be in English.

In 1950 a committee was appointed to work with the pastor to write a new constitution for the church in English. In the same year, a tin cistern on a metal tower was constructed, and paid for by the Ladies Aid.

On March 1, 1952, single membership was introduced meaning that people other than heads of each household could become voting members. Thus anybody who had been confirmed and had reached a certain age could become an official member of the congregation, with all rights, privileges and obligations.

Following World War II was probably the most vigorous period in the church's history for benevolence giving. Old records reflect a tremendous effort to render war relief, especially to Germany. Some of the activity was carried on through a German war relief organization and

some through CARE. Apparently this effort generated a benevolence enthusiasm that lasted for some years to come. The congregation over-paid its apportionment during its first year as a member of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

For several years there were annual "Mission Fest" Sundays, in which the whole day was devoted to making members aware of mission activity and the need for benevolence giving. Frequently there were three worship services and an all-church dinner at these events. This benevolence enthusiasm seemed to die out, however, and such giving declined severely over the next several years.

Life style changes came rapidly in the 1950's and 1960's. Young people left the area to go to cities where they could find work. The whole style of farming changed with greater usage of machines and less dependence on human labor. Roads were built by the County. Telephones came to the rural area. The first electronic organ, a Wurlitzer, was purchased as a memorial and given to the church for its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On April 1, 1954, the congregation officially decided it would no longer require a pastor to be able to conduct services in German. Construction on the present parsonage began on November 8, 1954, and was completed in 1955. During this same year, the Rev. E.H. Wierth served as interim pastor.

The Evangelical Synod of North America had merged with the Reformed Church in the United States in 1934, thus forming the Evangelical and Reformed Church. This was while Rev. Kasiske was pastor of St. John church. However, it was in 1951, under the leadership of Pastor Edwin Eiben, that St. John German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Richland officially voted to affiliate with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, thus connecting itself with a denomination church body. In 1952, St. John Church was officially voted and received into membership of the Texas Synod (a regional judicatory of the E & R Church), and became a voting member of the E & R Church. At this time, the adult Sunday School class presented the church with a missal stand, and the Young Peoples' League erected the church's road sign. Acting on advice from an E & R denomination official, the president of the congregation secured an engineer for \$50 to draw up a map of the church property, which was to be filed along with other necessary papers, to apply for a charter to incorporate the church.

During the tenure of Pastor Albert Patrich, the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged with the Congregational Christian Churches, forming the United Church of Christ. Official ceremonies for the merger took place in Cleveland, Ohio, on June 25, 1957. South Central Conference of the UCC replaced the old Texas Synod of the E & R church in 1960. The Rev. Jewel Johnson served as interim pastor for a few months after Rev. Petrich's departure. Shortly thereafter, during the leadership of Pastor E. H. Schwengel, St. John church officially became a member of the United Church of Christ.

Pastor E. H. Schwengel was installed on December 7, 1958. Several programs and improvements were initiated during his sixteen-year tenure. The circulating heating systems were installed in the sanctuary and parish hall. Up to this time, the minister or a designated layman was selected to build the fires in the stoves in the sanctuary and parish hall on cold Sunday mornings. Concrete slabs were poured in front of the sanctuary and parish hall, and a concrete walkway was laid between the parsonage and sanctuary. It was also discovered that in the church cemetery there were 74 unmarked grave sites. This situation resulted in the establishment of a Maintenance Fund for the cemetery. Altar paraments, using the four liturgical colors in season (white, green, red and purple), began to be used during Pastor Schwengel's leadership.

In 1968, the church purchased 425 square varas from W. S. Steger to give additional room on the northwest side of the auditorium.

For a few months in late 1974 and early 1975 after Pastor Schwengel's retirement, the Rev. Edwin Kloppe served for the second time as interim pastor.

Some days prior to this, the church had decided to sign up as a future customer for a city water system, which was activated in the summer of 1975. Following its installation there was a virtual explosion of new housing in the Richland area. With this major factor, Richland had essentially ceased to be a rural area and was for all practical purposes now a suburb of greater Austin.

The Rev. Harold L. Rucker arrived at St. John church as pastor on June 15, 1975. He had reflected a strong interest in Christian Education and working with children. The church library was re-created, and currently has over 700 volumes, plus magazines and periodicals. A Stewardship council was organized and benevolence giving was again on the increase. Lay people became involved as liturgists and lay preachers in regular worship services. Special sermons for children, utilizing the laity and youth as leaders, was begun as part of a program to help children develop some of their own educational curriculum. In the latter filmstrip, the children wrote their own script, did their own art work (which was copied onto slides), and narrated the recording of their script. Both filmstrips were shared with the congregation.

Some physical improvements were made to the parsonage prior to Pastor Rucker's arrival: addition of wall to wall carpeting and a central heating and air conditional system. A new garage was completed in early 1976, at a cost of \$4,000. The Dougherty Foundation had contributed \$3,500 earlier, which aided in these improvements. The old garage was torn down, and a small implement shed built on the cemetery grounds with materials from the old garage. A new sound system was donated and installed in the sanctuary in late 1975. This was especially helpful in alleviating hearing difficulties.

The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. John church was celebrated on June 4, 1978. The day-long celebration was attended by many past members, friends, neighbors, and neighboring communities and churches. During the morning service a Texas historical marker was unveiled on the front pillar of the church.

During Rev. Rucker's service the Pfolk Pfest (bazaar/auction) was re-instated, also a variety of fellowship activities such as volleyball, dominos and the annual Halloween party were started on a regular basis. Minutes for Pastor Rucker's time in Richland are mission and all events during his time at St. John were difficult to reconstruct. Pastor Rucker left soon after the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary to serve a church in Kansas.

Rev. Jewel Johnson from Coupland was contacted and agreed to serve as interim pastor to St. John for the second time. Services were held at 8:30am.

Rev. Bryon Wells was called to serve as pastor beginning December 1, 1978. Pastor Wells was associate minister for a church in Missouri prior to coming to Richland. Pastor Wells and his wife Margaret were instrumental in reorganizing the church choir. Margaret had a music degree and served as choir director during their time in Richland. In the late 1970's the possibility of a new airport for the city of Austin, being located in the Manor area, was started. Pastor Wells spent a great deal of time researching the airport subject to see what recourse the congregation had. The airport referendum was defeated by the Austin voters. In 1980 the walls of the parsonage, the ceiling in the parish hall and church were insulated, and ceiling fans were installed in the parish hall and church. In 1981 a blood bank under the name of St. John UCC Richland Community, was started. An Allied fence was installed at the parsonage.

The year 1983 brought an extremely cold winter causing damage to the interior wall paint of the church, which required repainting. A different organ was purchased on December 4, 1983. The Women's Guild, Improvement Fund, Memorial Fund and individual contributions helped pay for needed repairs and other items. Pastor Wells accepted a call to Round Grove United Church in Lewisville, TX and left St. John on March 31, 1984.

On April 15, 1984, Rev. Jewel Johnson gave a trial sermon and accepted the call to serve as pastor beginning August 1, 1984. He had left Coupland in 1981 and was serving in the Sandhills of Nebraska. Howard Pitts served as interim pastor until June 30, 1984 and Rev. Frank Dietz served from July 1, 1984 thru July 31, 1984.

Pastor Johnson began his ministry at St. John on August 1, 1984. The Undershepherd Program was established February 12, 1985. A new metal roof was put on the church and the towers have had work done on them. Mini blinds were put in the parish hall and parsonage. A new copier and electric typewriter were purchased with memorial funds. In 1987 new wiring was put in the parish hall, also a new metal roof was installed on August 2, 1987. The new

cemetery fence was dedicated on November 22, 1987, with the marker inscribed Ev. Luth. St. John Friedhof 1886. Eighteen new choir robes were purchased. Earlier, when the horn speaker failed, a new system was installed in the sanctuary with a two column speaker on each side. The amplifier which was replaced was moved to the education building with two column speakers completing the new sound system there.

Many members and former members of St. John church are scattered throughout the country, though most of them return periodically. Only a few church families continue to make their living exclusively by farming or ranching. Most combine farming with other jobs for their source of income. Some newer residents do what might be called recreational agriculture, working with livestock, gardens or row crops on their small acreage homesteads.

The church and the community are composed of talented people of a wide variety of professions such as school teacher, factory worker, government worker, engineer, air traffic controller, lawyer, business, etc. We have undergraduate and graduate college students and a number of our people have had one or more degrees in higher education.

On November 3, 1987, Austin voters passed the referendum, which had been defeated years earlier, to move their airport east of Manor. This plan placed St. John about one minute from and in a direct line with a runway. The airport and its accompanying industrial sprawl would probably have devastated the church at its present site, the residential environment, and the life style of the Richland community.

Notwithstanding all the disenchantment and difficulties of perplexing circumstances, the congregation believed (God help our unbelief) that with the help of God, St. John Church would meet the challenge concerning the airport issue because of the rich heritage of the congregation and the strong faith of its members.

Today we draw from their faith and from the faith of that great cloud of pioneers who witnessed over many years, and from the Word and Spirit of God who is present in trials as well as rejoicing. We affirm that St. John Church is the people and is alive today. It shall continue to grow as the historic Richland Community continues to grow and change.

Praise the Lord, All nations!  
Praise him all peoples!  
His love for us is strong,  
And his faithfulness is eternal  
Praise the Lord!

## PASTORS WHO HAVE SERVED ST. JOHN CHURCH

Rev. E. Ernest – 1861  
Rev. J. G. Lieb – 1861  
Rev. G. Haehnelt – 1878  
Rev. F. Frankenstein – 1879  
Rev. E. Schroeder – 1881-82  
Rev. M. Puhl – 1883  
Rev. W. Pfenning – 1884-85  
Rev. E. Schroeder – 1885-88  
Rev. H. Butterman – 1888-89  
Rev. H. Rhode – 1889-92  
Rev. J. Horstmann – 1892-95  
Rev. C. Neuhaus – 1895-1900  
Rev R. Mernitz – 1900-02  
Rev. A. Romanowski – 1902-06  
Rev. H. Barnofske 1906-11  
Rev. J. Endter – 1911-14  
Rev. G. Zucker – 1914-28  
Rev. J. J. Kasiske – 1928 – 49  
Rev. E. Eiben – 1950-53  
\*Rev. E. Kloppe – 1954  
\*Rev. E. Wierth – 1955  
Rev. A. Petrich – 1955-58  
\*Rev. J. Johnson – 1958  
Rev. E. H. Schwengel – 1958-74  
\*Rev. E. Kloppe – 1974-75  
Rev. H. L. Rucker – 1975-78  
\*Rev. J. Johnson – 1978  
Rev. B. Wells – 1979-83  
\*Rev. H. Pitts – 1983  
\*Rev. F. Dietz – 1984  
Rev. J. Johnson – 1984  
\*Interim Pastors

*- from one of St. John's historical books, published in the 1980's*