History

[Adapted from a History of Emmanuel written during the 1980's by lifelong member Edith E. Lidke, who died in March 1996 at the age of 101.]

In 1833 the Rev. Friedrich Schmid was sent by the Basel Missionary Society of Basel, Switzerland, to Christianize the Indians in the Saginaw Valley of Michigan. He came by way of Detroit and soon went west through Ypsilanti to Ann Arbor.

Rev. Schmid discovered that the Germans in the area had no church and that many were not God-fearing people. They quarreled a great deal over various matters and held lawsuits over property lines and personal grievances of various kinds. So he turned from his Indian mission work to the Germans in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor and areas to the southwest. In his more than forty years of work (from 1833 to 1879) Rev. Schmid established congregations in Ypsilanti, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Monroe, Freedom, Waterloo, Bridgewater, Rogers Corners, Lansing, Chelsea, Marshall, Northfield, Saline, Plymouth, Saginaw, Genova, and one Indian Mission in Sabawaing. He also founded the Michigan Synod of the original American Lutheran Church.

Among the congregations the Rev. Schmid established in 1859 was **St. Emmanuels Evangelische Lutheranische Geminde** (English translation Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church), at the home of Mr. and Mrs. George Ehman. Charter members of this congregation were N. Bamor, C. Breining, G. Ehman, F. Dergler, J. Collins, G. Erich, Y. Hartman, G. Franz, C. Kohler, W. Lange, G. Otto, L. Schade, C. Siegmund, G. Schweizer, A. Thumm, and G. Warner. Census data from the 1880s suggests that many of the charter members were German immigrants from Württemberg. Descendants of these charter members are members of our congregation today.
The congregation met at the home of the Ehmans until the first church building was erected in 1860, a year after the congregation was established. The white frame structure stood at the northeast corner of East Michigan Avenue and North Grove Street (the current location of Kluck's Drive-In). A day school was built next to the church in the mid 1880's, and the building was electrified in 1892. At the time of its silver anniversary in 1884, Emmanuel counted 52 families among its membership.

Between 1859 and 1890 our congregation was led by the Reverends Husbaum, Marchand, Stein, Miller, Lederer, Turk, Schoensperlen, Abelmann, and Kionka.

The Rev. Henri Luetjen was called in 1890 and served the congregation for 22 years. Worship services were conducted in Hochdeutsch (high German) up through the end of Pastor Luetjen's tenure; this presented its own set of challenges because an increasing number of wives and children of members did not speak German, and those that did spoke Plattdeutsch (low German) at home. As a consequence, beginning classes in Sunday School all had to be taught the alphabet, syllables, words, and finally whole sentences -- in High German. Sunday School pupils did not use the Bible.

Pastor Luetjen retired in 1912 for health reasons, and convinced the congregation of the need to call a pastor who could preach in English.

The Rev. Hugo Fenker was called to serve our congregation in 1912, and Emmanuel for the next 32 years. He continued to hold German services for the older members, but at once introduced English worship services. He also
instituted the practices of allowing families to sit together; previously the men and boys sat on the left side of the church while the women and girls sat on the right side of the church. A Ladies Aid and the Dorcas Society Circles were formed, Junior and Senior Luther Leagues and the Men's Brotherhood were established. These steps resulted in an increase in congregation membership and worship attendance.

Pastor Fenker's deep interest in the spiritual welfare and lives of people and his sincere faith inspired others to deeper loyalty and stronger faith. Every member of his family gave their time and talent to the church and community. Mrs. Fenker helped organize the young women into Deaconess Girls, later the Altar Guild. She also started a children's Mission Band, a Junior Choir, and the Mary Martha Missionary Society for women. The Fenker's son Luther became director of Emmanuel's Senior Choir; their daughter, Betty, served as Junior Choir director and as Organist for 40 years (until her passing in 1970); and their son Ted was a longstanding member of the Senior Choir.

Early in Pastor Fenker's tenure, the old facilities proved inadequate for the fast-growing congregation. A longtime member, John Engel, had given to Emmanuel a lot at 201 North River Blvd. (on the northwest corner of the intersection of River Blvd. And North Street), and in 1921 the congregation members decided to build a new church building on that site. The cornerstone of the new church was laid on August 28, 1922, and the building was completed the following year. The original building had educational space located immediately below the sanctuary, including offices for the pastor and a kitchen. The stained glass windows that decorate our sanctuary were installed at that time, as was a Moeller pipe organ. The total cost of all construction of the original building, including all the furnishings, was about $55,000. The new sanctuary was dedicated on December 23, 1923.
In 1924, our congregation shared in a happy celebration when Emmanuel member Herman Meyer was ordained into the Lutheran Ministry by Pastor Fenker in our church.

Beginning in 1940, seven interns from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio served as vicars for one year each. They were Gary Pflunger, Ernest Phillipi, William Zimpfer, Otto Emmelhainz, George Neiman and Walter Weitske. Pastor Weitzke later became Director of Theological Education for the former American Lutheran Church.

Pastor Fenker passed away suddenly at his home the first Sunday in December 1944, with his hat on his head and his Bible in his hand ready to go to church. The Rev. Harley Sipe was installed on June 24, 1945, as the 15th pastor of Emmanuel. Under Pastor Sipe’s leadership Emmanuel continued to be active and grow. Among the outstanding events during Pastor Sipe’s tenure was the ordination of his oldest son, Theodore H. Sipe, into Lutheran ministry at Emmanuel on June 19, 1955.

Following the influx of families after World War II, the congregation saw the need for more educational and meeting space as well as larger kitchen and restroom facilities. After considering several options (including an expansion of the sanctuary toward the Huron River on the west), the congregation purchased the two lots to the north of the original church building for the construction of an educational wing, based on designs by local architect Ralph Gerganoff. Pledges of $200,000 lead to groundbreaking in 1956; work was completed a year later and dedication of the new space was held on October 6, 1957. Although the educational wing stands two stories high, the structure was designed to support the addition of a third level housing a multipurpose area (auditorium/ gymnasium) if it is needed in the future.

In 1959 Emmanuel celebrated its 100th anniversary. A centennial pageant, involving nearly 200 members, was presented at the Ypsilanti High School auditorium for the public. Luther Fenker (son of the late Pastor Fenker) staged and directed this event.

In 1960 the American Lutheran Church was formed, resulting from the merger of three Lutheran bodies. The new women's organization, American Lutheran Church Women, sought to include all women members in its outreach. As a result, Emmanuel Ladies' Aid, Dorcas Society, Altar Guild and Mary Martha Missionary Society disbanded and all women members were organized into circles of Emmanuel Lutheran Church Women (ELCW). Eda
Forsyth, president of the former Ladies' Aid, was elected as the first president of ELCW.

In 1963 Pastor Sipe accepted a call to a new mission congregation in Florida, and the Rev. Paul Pretzlaff was called to Emmanuel. In 1965, the Rev. Wilson Kotchenruther joined him as Assistant Pastor. When Pastor Pretzlaff was called to Bethesda Lutheran Church in Detroit in 1967, Pastor Kotchenruther became Senior Pastor and the Rev. James Liefeld served as Assistant Pastor for two years. After nine years at Emmanuel, Pastor Kotchenruther entered the University of Michigan to pursue a degree in Counseling.

The Rev. Carl J. Leach was installed as pastor on November 4, 1974. Pastor Leach entered the ministry at age 40, and his diverse vocational experience prior to his entering the ministry proved to be an invaluable asset; he was able to establish connections with members of the congregation and the surrounding community, and his preaching of the Word of God helped guide the congregation to greater faith in Christ Jesus.

In 1982 the congregation decided to secure the help of an intern, a senior-to-be at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus Ohio. Steve Huff was the first of these vicars, followed by Douglas Gunkelman in 1983, Steve Reshan in 1984, Colleen Kamke in 1985, and Cathy Schibler in 1986. This highly successful program came to an end at Emmanuel in 1987 because of the small number of interns available. In 1988 the Rev. Joel K. Brandt was called as Assistant Pastor.

In 1984, Emmanuel celebrated its 125th anniversary, and the church underwent a remodeling shortly thereafter. The office areas were enlarged and technology was updated with new computers and a copier. The Moeller organ was replaced with a Rodgers electronic organ which uses some of the original pipes. Furthermore, the sanctuary roof underwent repairs, the sanctuary was redecorated, and a new sound system was installed.
In 1988 Emmanuel became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), formed by the merging of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), Lutheran Church of American (LCA) and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC). The ELCA has over 11,000 congregations with more than 5 million members. Together they support 29 Lutheran colleges, eight seminaries, and 2,875 social services agencies, as well as worldwide missions. A new constitution for Emmanuel was drafted and approved at the congregational annual meeting in January 1990. As a congregation of the Southeast Michigan Synod, Emmanuel was a leader in the Synod in the 1990 fundraising campaign of Lutheran Social Services of Michigan.

Pastor Leach retired in June 1991, and he and his wife Charmaine moved to St. Marys, Ohio. His ministry was a time of healing and growth for the congregation and of outreach to the community. Emmanuel extended a call to the Rev. Stanley J. Eckermann who was serving as pastor at Christ Lutheran Church of Warren, Michigan. He was installed as pastor on October 20, 1991. Pastor Brandt completed his call at Emmanuel in 1992 to enter a Master's Program at Library Science and is now serving a church in Livonia MI.

In 1994, after an extensive review of staffing needs, Emmanuel hired seminary graduate Gretchen Bingea as its Director of Parish Education/Volunteer Coordinator. In September 1996 she was ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and was installed as Assistant Pastor at Emmanuel. In January 1999, Pastor Bingea completed her ministry at Emmanuel.

In 1996 the basement-level kitchen was refurbished with new cooking, refrigeration, and cooking equipment, new cabinets and a ceramic tile floor. This renovation enabled Emmanuel to continue as the host location for the Ypsilanti Hunger Coalition dinners on Tuesday evenings. The $85,000 cost of the renovation was initiated with a substantial bequest in memory of a former kitchen and hospitality chairperson, with remaining funding generously contributed by congregation members.
After serving nearly seven years at Emmanuel, Pastor Eckermann left to accept a call to St. Paul Lutheran Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in July 1998. The Rev. Janet Marvar then began her two-year ministry at Emmanuel as Interim Pastor several weeks later. After Pastor Marvar relocated to Nashville Tennessee, the Rev. Garnet Hasse succeeded her as Interim Pastor.

The congregation called the Rev. Jonathan Bomgren in 2001 to serve as Emmanuel's pastor. Pastor Bomgren provided spiritual leadership to the congregation until his retirement in June 2006 for health reasons.

Also in 2001, the congregation began a fundraising effort to fund the Handicap Accessibility project to make the church building more accessible to all persons. An elevator was installed in the rear of the educational wing to provide barrier-free access to both levels of the church building as well as the parking lot; bathrooms were modified to make them more barrier-free as well, and faucets and doorknobs were upgraded to comply with the specifications of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This project was completed in 2003 at a cost of $240,000 with funding from congregational members.
With the assistance of the Southeast Michigan Synod office, the Rev. David Hendricks arrived in October 2006 to serve as Interim Pastor following Pastor Bomgren's retirement. Following prayerful deliberation by our congregation, Pastor Hendricks was called to serve as our 'called' Pastor and formally installed in February 2009, the beginning of Emmanuel's sesquicentennial year. Pastor Dave provided spiritual leadership for our congregation for nine years, before accepting a call in January 2015 to serve as interim pastor at Lord of Light Lutheran Church in Ann Arbor.

Pastor Christine Thompson accepted a call as Interim Pastor in February 2015, and is working with the congregation as we perform a self-assessment and develop a plan to call a new settled pastor.

We look forward to a future of continued growth, deepening faith, and greater outreach and service in our Lord’s name.