St. Paul's Lutheran celebrates 130 years on the prairie

BY DIANE NEWBERRY

The old church is crowded and some civically minded congregants are trying to organize an effort to open the windows to let in some dry summer wind.

"It's on page 448," a woman loudly whispers to her husband as the first hymn begins.

"I know what page it is," her husband shoots back, joining in with the congregation on the second bar.

Boisterous children in the front are shushed, and the service has officially started. It might seem like any other Sunday June in St. Paul's Lutheran Church, which sits on the prairie a little northeast of Hazen, a quarter mile east of R.R. Highway 200. However, this service marks the celebration of the church's 130th anniversary.

The congregation can trace its roots to May 1, 1889, making St. Paul's five months and two days older than North Dakota's statehood, according to churchgoer Myron Radjen, who gave a short presentation on the church's history during the service.

"Can you even imagine what this country was like over 100 years ago?" Radjen asked, before emphasizing the struggle original congregants would have to go through to gather together on the prairie for worship without roads, cars or telephones.

Radjen touched on the outstanding longevity of St. Paul's.

"I'm sure many of you here today are direct descendants of that congregation," Radjen, who was baptized and married at the church, said.

While at first the services were held in various area schools or sod buildings, a church was built on the present site in 1905. The original building was destroyed in 1959 by a tornado, which also destroyed the adjacent school church with 40 children inside. In a lucky turn of events, no children were seriously injured. The congregation immediately began rebuilding, and the present building was in operation as early as 1951.

In its early days, the church's services were held in German and throughout its many decades, St. Paul's has held its German Russian heritage close. At its

The German singers sing in both German and English to the congregation.

Sunday service, a group of German singers lead by semi-retired Pastor Elden Zeuern sang hymns with the first verse translated into the congregation's native language.

The service was presided over by Pastor Bill Wagner, who delivers sermons on the second and fourth Sundays of each month. Walter Wolff of Hazen who gives sermons on the first Sunday of each month, Val Sayler preaches on the third Sunday of each month, and if there is a fifth Sunday, non-ordained Myron Radjen sings then.

While Wagner was delighted to celebrate the history of St. Paul's, his Sunday sermon focused on the future of the congregation.

"We humans really are better at looking back than looking forward," Wagner said. "We're tempted to revere the past, even idealize the past.

Wagner acknowledged some congregants' nostalgia for the "good old days" when the church was filled with young families - "Oh, to have the church full every Sunday like it is today! But Wagner emphasized that while it is important to re-tell the stories, how God never failed this congregation, it is equally important to remain hopeful for St. Paul's future.

The hymn "Lead on, O King Eternal" was chosen for the service specifically, as Wagner said, "because it helps us remember God is with us and will lead us into the future."

After a hopeful service, congregants gathered together to continue their nostalgic celebrations in the church's basement over a meal of (what else) knoephla, fleischkueche and kuchen.

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