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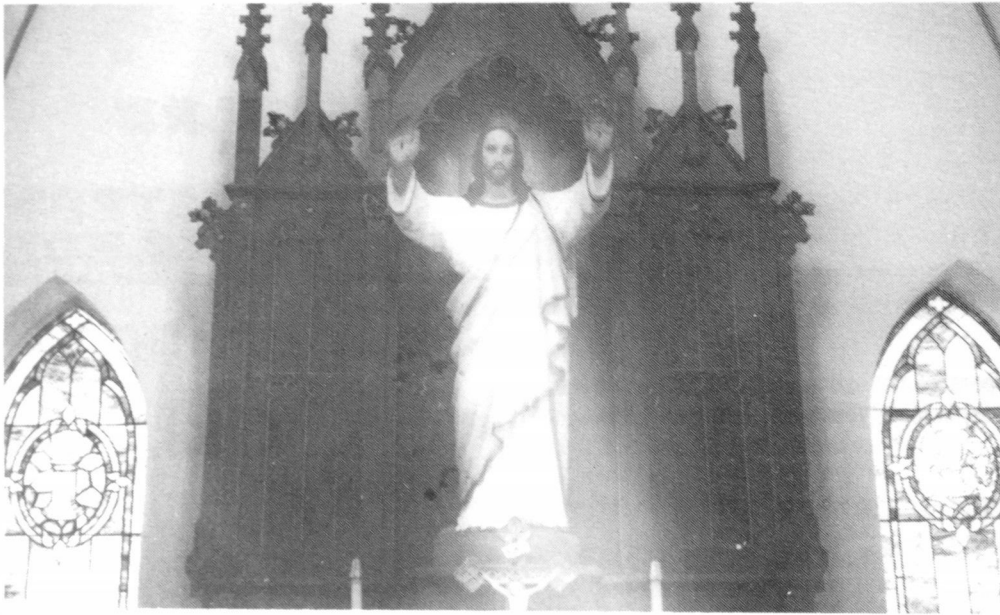
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Pictured are the nine-point reredos backing the altar and the statue above the altar, a gift in 1907, from Pastor Gemaehlich. Notice the built-in halo.

Rural Religion

by Margaret Friedrich

Western Oklahoma has had a rich heritage of religion. The opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Country on April 19, 1892, brought a variety of people from the North, the South, from back East, and from Texas. Every small community was settled by a mixture of families with their own traditions. One of the strongest among those traditions was their religion. Hardly a neighborhood existed without a church -- perhaps two or three churches. Or at least there was a union (nondenominational) Sunday school. The pioneers longed for religious training for their children.

Almost every rural community built much of its life around its churches. Those country churches formed a strong adhesive influence during horse-and-buggy days. The coming of the automobile slowly affected the religious life of the farm communities. People drove to nearby towns to attend the services of their choice. Rural churches often merged with their sister churches in town where there were modern facilities and additional activities for all family members.

Today the completely rural church has almost disappeared from the countryside in Western Oklahoma, according to some observers. Not true. Washita County has several outstanding examples of active rural congregations. One of these will serve to show the tenacity of the rural

church.

A large brick building stands beside Highway 183 midway between Clinton and Cordell. To a passing motorist the bell tower distinguishes it as a religious edifice before he approaches near enough to read the sign which identifies it -- Peace American Lutheran Church. A strong country congregation has flourished for more than 90 years at this location. What is the secret of its longevity? In an attempt to answer that question, I attended the Morning Worship Service one Sunday.

As I walked up the front steps, others who were arriving greeted me with "Good morning" and a smile or a handshake. An usher opened and held the door for me. "We're glad to see you," he told me. Somehow I believed him. A lady welcomed me, handed me the morning bulletin, and invited me to sign the guest register. At the door to the sanctuary another usher asked me where I would like to sit. Since I wanted to observe the people, I asked for a place near the back.

The Service was probably not typical of many country churches because these worshippers followed their ancestral tradition of form. Organ music surrounded those attending as they assembled. They seemed to observe an unwritten rule that the sanctuary is for worship only. No conversation disturbed the peace that flowed softly with the music. People

entered in family groups; parents and children sat together. Teenagers and college-age young people sat with a few friends scattered throughout the audience. Farmers made up about half of the congregation. Almost indistinguishable among the flock, these farmers were well dressed and well groomed. Their faces were wind tanned, but so were the faces of the golfers and boat enthusiasts. Only by their hard, work-worn hands could the farmers be identified. Farm wives and children bore no outward distinguishing characteristics at all. Perhaps half of the persons attending, I knew to be business and professional people. I saw a banker and his wife from Clinton, a lawyer and his family from Cordell, a college professor and his wife and daughter from Weatherford, an Oklahoma City accountant who has retired to his farm but continues his business, and so many other nonfarm members.

Some people bowed their heads in silent prayer as soon as they were seated; others simply opened their Books of Worship and marked the hymns listed on the hymn board; still others sat as if in deep thought.

The organ music became livelier and then ceased when Pastor Don Brewer entered and opened the Service in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Confession followed, led

by the pastor. The congregation responded together in words worn smooth with time. Yet there was no sense of rote response. The worshippers spoke sincerely with meaning. After the choir anthem, directed by Dr. Don McGurk, and the reading of the Bible lessons, the people sang "Amazing Grace."

It was time for the sermon. Pastor Brewer spoke that day on "Sermons We See." He dealt with a religious philosophy expressed in action -- feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the needy, and loving others.

When the formal Service was ended, greetings and conversation took place in the narthex [vestibule] or outdoors, never in the sanctuary. It was obvious that his people loved their pastor and trusted him to lead them in spiritual endeavors. He is young; Peace Church is his first parish. He is a product of Western Oklahoma. He grew up in Gotebo and attended Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford. Like all 15 pastors who preceded him, he is college and seminary trained with a year of internship before he actually became a pastor. No Lutheran minister can be ordained without those prerequisites. Brewer is not a pusher, neither of people nor projects. He is a leader. Talking with him reveals a high degree of dedication and a deep prayer life.

But the influence of Peace Church cannot be attributed to any single pastor nor to all 16 of them combined. There must be something in the character of the people themselves to account for 90 years of active participation in their Christian Faith and in devotion to their Lord and to their church.

This led me to a study of the history of this rural church. I learned that the lay leaders of today are often the third- or fourth-generation descendants of the founders of Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church (the original name). The original members were immigrants from Russia who came to the Cheyenne-Arapaho Country to find a place where they could worship God in freedom. They saw signs that the Russian Government would destroy their churches. This calamity did indeed happen a few years later.

In February of 1893, twelve German-speaking families came to County H (later Washita County), Oklahoma Territory, and filed on land not claimed by anyone in the Cheyenne-Arapaho Run on April 19, 1892. Among the group were ten farmers, a physician, and a schoolmaster. Included were the families of George F. Dick, Conrad Keil, John Friedrich, George Koch, Henry Arndt, John Bolinger, Philipp Frick, Gottfred Fritzler, Philipp Keil, Dr. Jacob Schneider, Schoolmaster Gottlieb Goeringer, and the doctor's son Alexander Schneider.

Immediately after a half-dugout shelter was provided for each family, the first activity of the newcomers was to begin

religious services in one another's homes. Schoolmaster Goeringer led the group by reading the Bible lessons and a sermon. All joined in the prayers and sang the hymns without accompaniment. A daughter of the Conrad Keils, Sophie Intemann, 84-year-old Oklahoma City resident, recalls stories her parents told of crowding into the tiny rooms, sitting on packing boxes or trunks, and sharing the meager books they owned. By the end of that first year her father had given a small part of his farm for the construction of a little sod church. All the pioneers joined in building their house of worship. Thus the precedent of devotion and every-member participation was set in the beginning of their life in the New World.

The little sod church blew away in a tornado on March 28, 1901, but even before that the membership had more than tripled, and they had built a larger wooden building in 1896. That building became the parochial schoolhouse when it was replaced by a much larger building with a 60-foot spire in 1906-07. This landmark building was replaced in 1942 by the present brick church. A new brick parsonage was dedicated in 1954. An educational wing as well as a complete air-conditioning and heating system were both dedicated on December 18, 1958. And improvements continue every year. All these buildings were largely the work of the members themselves, created by their own hands. They always quickly add, "by the help of God."

Amateurs, however, did not attempt to install any of the art objects inside the building. The altar, the stained glass windows, and the organ were all gifts of individuals or extended families and were installed by professionals. The altar is comparable to the exquisite wood carvings in some of the European churches.



This sign identifies Peace Church on Highway 183 near the small town of Bessie.

There is nothing else like it in Western Oklahoma. A gift of Pastor John Gemmaehlich about 1907, it has been carefully preserved and moved from one building to the next. The stained-glass windows are rich with brilliant color on a sunny afternoon. They too are outstanding examples of ecclesiastical art usually not seen in this part of the West. The donors were several families, some of whom did not want their names recorded. The Reuter pipe organ was given by the two Baumgart brothers when the present church was built. With its carved console and its set of 21-note Deagan Chimes, it is a fitting instrument on which to play the great classical Lutheran music of Bach, Brahms, Luther, and other composers.

Surprising as it may be, Peace Church has never lacked for organists. At any one time there are usually several young persons vying for the honor of playing the organ. The church itself encourages this by setting high but not unattainable requirements. Then they give everyone who is capable a place on the list and rotate the privilege of playing. Although the organists are paid a minimal fee, it is the joy of serving that counts.

Activities and auxiliaries keep the members involved and interested. The Sunday School was established on July 7, 1895, and classes began one week later. An ever-increasing number of men and women have been willing to serve as directors and teachers. Classes are now maintained for ages pre-kindergarten through the oldest adult. Vacation Bible school is conducted every summer. Acolytes come from the pre-high school group.

Women's work includes Bible study, mission support, Oaks Indian Center, altar care, and other groups that come and go as the need arises. Tabitha Circle, the oldest of the auxiliaries, is especially well known for lovely handwork -- quilting, embroidery, crochet, and the like. In November of each year the circle sells at auction all the creations the members have crafted during the year. The auction has become a community affair. Money raised is used for missions or occasionally for a local church project.

Few people want to miss the supper served in the dining room after the sale. The widespread reputation of the good food prepared from German family recipes attracts dozens of friends. Feasts are also served on other special occasions, such as anniversaries in the church's development, when new equipment or gifts are dedicated, or at Mission Festivals. All these are joyous events. Then too, out of love and a desire to comfort those who are bereaved, a meal is served to the family and close friends of the deceased.

Just across Highway 183 is Peace Lutheran Cemetery where 450 of her dead lie buried. Love and concern is especially

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to worship there." That was in 1888, according to Mrs. Hosmer. After her husband died, the lady married a Presbyterian minister, a Rev. McNamee, but continued teaching organ lessons for many years.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the church, 1939, three of its thirteen charter members were present--Mrs. McAnally, formerly Hosmer, Mrs. Lillie Cotney Cox, and F. M. Doughty. Mrs. McNamee was honored for serving thirty-nine years as teacher of the Adult Sunday School class.

Almost 500 people attended one or more of the three services held on that memorable day.

Generations have passed and friendships have ripened into romances that resulted in families. The church congregation increased, people prospered, and the town thrived. Then began a population decline brought about by a changing economy as people looked for jobs.

Now, it is a time for reminiscing for Martha Methodist Church members and friends. It began when the doors closed in 1981 and accelerated when Jack and

Velma Smiley bought the building. Nelson Doughty recalls that fifty members of his family were on the church's active roll at one time. "This church means a lot to me," he said. "All four of my children were baptized here." His daughter, Donna Cullen, Norman housewife, said that her earliest memory is of attending church camp at Red Rock Canyon at Hinton. "I'll miss the old church," she said. It's like losing an elderly friend."

As a friendly ghost, I feel a glowing pride for my people who selflessly dedicated themselves to serving their Lord.

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manifest when one of her families suffers the loss of a loved one. Not only do the members express sympathy and offer prayers in behalf of the mourners, but they make a special effort to help their friends go on living in faith and trust after the funeral is past.

These people are givers. From pioneer days when they had nothing to give but themselves and the work of their hands through days of plenty, the work of their church has flourished. Not always easy nor peaceful was the transition from the European system of church dues to the present method of free-will giving for the joy of it. In response to the question, "What is the annual budget of Peace Church?" an officer of the church, who prefers not to be named, explained, "We have none. If there is a need, we meet it when it comes."

Nowhere is the concern of the church more apparent than in its care and

encouragement of her youth. Approximately 80 confirmation classes have been conducted. The young people, after being instructed in Bible concepts and in the beliefs of their church as expressed in Luther's Catechism, are asked to make a commitment for themselves. Usually the children of the church are ready to take their vows of loyalty to God, to their Savior, and to the church in their early teen years. So they become confirmed members. Continued participation of the youth at Peace Church is reinforced by the leadership of their present pastor. The Rev. Don Brewer is head of Youth Activities for American Lutherans in Oklahoma.

Not always do individuals nor groups measure up to their own ideals. These people see themselves as sinners saved by grace. They feel in need of daily forgiveness. They believe in absolute reliance on Jesus Christ as their Savior. No human effort, they are convinced, can

bring about their salvation. Expressed in lay language, their attitudes seem to include reliance on a Power much higher than human, a need for daily forgiveness, careful training of their young, the expression of devotion through action, love for one another and for others around the world, and a sincere prayer life in the homes.

Could these attitudes, however imperfectly attained, be the reasons why this rural church has been active and strong through 90 years? Could these reasons explain why the "children of the church" tend to bring their spouses and their own children back to their rural church home even though they are no longer farmers?

Although they are not today a completely rural people, it just may be that the faith of their fathers reinforced by individual commitment keeps alive and active rural religion in one church in Western Oklahoma.

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