

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH OF MANHATTAN

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SANCTUARY ON WEST 100TH STREET

“A POWER FOR GOOD IN THIS CITY”

The history of Trinity is closely bound to the history of development in our community. Our roots go back to a real estate speculator, Edward Dressler, who according to one account, wanted to attract thrifty German immigrants to his housing developments on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Dressler believed that a German Lutheran church in the area would be an attractive draw for his prospective tenants. The year was 1888. Dressler, a resident of the neighborhood, met an old acquaintance in a bar who was an out-of-work Lutheran clergyman, Pastor Friederich Heinle.

In May of 1888, Dressler provided a meeting space for the church at the southeast corner of 106th Street and Manhattan Ave. A small group gathered and was incorporated on July 9th, 1888 as “The German Independent Lutheran Holy Trinity Church of Bloomingdale, NY.” After only five months, Pastor Heinle was forced to leave because as it was said “he was filled with the wrong spirits.”

The church reached out to the New York Synod and in October of 1888, Pastor Carl Reinhold Tappert was called (Tappert was the father of renowned theologian, writer and professor, Theodore Tappert). By Jan 22, 1889, he had reorganized the church under the new name: “The German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation.” Tappert describes what he found in his new congregation as follows:

My first impressions of my new charge were discouraging, to say the least. For my installation and first church service were conducted in a store. The discharged pastor still lived with his rather large family above the store, and three of his daughters supplied music for the service, one by playing the harmonium and two by standing nearby and singing. Of a congregation there was little to be seen. The first congregational meeting was a rather stormy affair; it lasted until midnight.

Not long afterwards the member of the congregation in whose store the services were held went into bankruptcy and we had to find a different place for our services. We managed to find a larger store with several rooms (on Amsterdam Ave. between 100th and 101st streets). It was located near a fire-house, (interestingly, NYFD Ladder Company 22 is presently across the street from Trinity) and because the horses there attracted flies to the neighborhood, such merchants as butchers, grocers, and bakers would not rent the place. For this reason, we were able to get the store at a small rental—I believe for forty-eight dollars per month.

Since there was no public school in this whole district and children roamed the streets at all hours, we started a school there. The school was well attended from the start. A man, who was our organist, was engaged as a teacher. A woman, trained as a school teacher, and two girls with training in kindergarten instruction were also employed. Soon all the space at our disposal was filled. I myself taught the most advanced class. The instruction in this school was, of course, in English. On Saturdays, however, I conducted morning and afternoon sessions of a German School with the help of the organist and one of the teachers. On Sundays, in addition to Sunday School, I held two services, one in the morning and the other in the evening.

From its earliest days of struggle, Trinity showed a desire to respond to the needs of its

wider community, recognizing the plight of children who “roamed the streets” and welcoming them to a school program. Even before having a proper sanctuary, the church provided a safe space for these neighborhood youth in its humble store-front, a pattern that would continue to the present day, as we will see.

It was a good beginning, but Pastor Tappert suffered from sharp pains that turned out to be appendicitis. At the time, he thought it was “excessive exertion” and sought a transfer to what was considered a less stressful pastoral position in Connecticut. At the time of his transfer, he suggested that the Rev. Ernest Brennecke, pastor of a small congregation in Brooklyn, be called to Trinity, which he was.

Dr. Brennecke was installed as Trinity’s pastor on November 10, 1889 and would serve there for sixty years. His installation service was in German, as would be all services for at least a generation, but another service in English was held later in the week with a guest preacher who is quoted in an article as saying: “A large field to do good work for our Lutheran Church is before this new congregation and we feel confident that they will make rapid process and become a mighty power for good in this city. May their efforts bring fruit.”

Even though Brennecke had only 5 adults and 7 children present for his first service and sermon, not a month passed before he presented the little church with a vision to build. Congregants noted that not all shared this bold vision: *We still have a definite recollection of the censure, the ridicule and contempt poured out over the little congregation, because it had risked to undertake a task that seemed entirely beyond its ability. We were a laughing stock not only to the total unbelievers among the Germans, of whom there were quite a number in this district, but members (and pastors) of old and rich congregations down-town spoke quite indignantly about our foolhardiness.* Nonetheless, the congregation grew in both numbers and support.

As might be imagined from such beginnings, our founding members were immigrants of modest means. They could not afford to build on Broadway, nor to install pricy Tiffany windows, nonetheless, they began a building fund and by February in 1890, only 3 months after Brennecke’s installation, the church purchased a lot on W. 100th Street and Amsterdam Avenue for \$12,500. It was there that the present building was built, but it was the second construction project on this site. The first building, which was solid brick in a Romanesque style, was dedicated on September 14, 1890. It cost \$45,000. Money was saved on the foundation due to the generous donation of a Mr. Rossi. Rossi was an active Roman Catholic layman who did the foundation work on a pro bono basis. His wife was a member of Trinity.

After only eighteen years, the congregation outgrew its first building, which was torn down in 1908 and a second, adjoining, lot was purchased. The archives note that “It must have taken a lot of grit for those still remaining in the original congregation in 1908 to give their consent to the tearing down of a place of worship so enshrined in their hearts.” The new building was constructed on the same site in the French transitional gothic style. It was dedicated on January 24th, 1909. The sanctuary is on the second floor, the better catch the light streaming in. A three story parsonage was also built, attached to the church.

The architect was George Conable who already has one building on the National Historic Register. The church windows were installed soon after the new church was

built-- enamel-painted stained glass signed by the Henry Birkenstock Studios of Mount Vernon, NY. In 1909, the Hutchings Organ was installed.

Over the years, Trinity has shared the neighborhood's ups and downs over two World Wars and the Depression eras. In 1949, the church received notice that it would be demolished as part of Robert Moses' "urban renewal" plans. This resulted in a ten-year campaign to save the church. In spite of Trinity's own struggle to remain standing, the church opened its doors to welcome others in need of a home. Founded by German immigrants, Trinity welcomed Latino immigrants to Spanish language worship beginning in 1949 which lasted through most of the fifties and provided sanctuary space for a French-speaking Haitian congregation and a Chinese congregation, as well. German services were discontinued in 1959 after 70 years.

In 1957, Moses' plan was put into effect and 37 acres of brownstone and tenement buildings around the church were demolished. Trinity alone remained standing as the only building in the area from that era to survive Moses' development. Trinity was able to remain thanks to the perseverance of the members and the political ties of the pastor, the Rev. Saunders, who had a good friend on the Real Estate Board of NY State. In the end, 100th Street was shifted so that Trinity could remain in place.

As a new neighborhood rose up in the 60's and 70's, with the large Frederick Douglass Housing Project across the street, and Park West Village on the other side. Trinity remained more committed than ever to its diverse neighbors and their needs. The church opened its doors to scouting, neighborhood job training, high school equivalency classes, day care, a soup kitchen, a photography studio for ex-convicts and an off-off Broadway theatre. In the 70's, under the leadership of Pastor John Backe, Trinity's basement became a hotbed of social activism: anti-war and anti-nuclear groups met and planned, Pete Seeger sang here and there were regular meetings of those engaged in the Chilean resistance movement who called Trinity, "The Peña** Church." Trinity also began to host the annual community thanksgiving dinner which has been held yearly since 1973 served 550 people this past Thanksgiving (11/08).

In the early 80's, Trinity was one of the first churches in the city to address the AIDS crisis, working both with a doctor from the Ryan Health Center and a community organizer. These programs eventually became a multi-million dollar scatter-site housing system for persons with AIDS in East Harlem. The New York City Coalition against Hunger also had its beginnings in our basement with the participation of several of Trinity's leaders. Pastor Richard Foster, who served Trinity in the late 80's and 90's, attracted new energy around music and the arts at Trinity. It is interesting to note that as early as Pastor Brennecke's ministry, Trinity had a strong drama group as part of its ministry and Trinity's choir, known as "the best amateur choir in NYC" at the time, sang at the World's Fair in 1939 and 1940.

Today, our congregation, like our community is vibrant and diverse. Our members include long-time community residents, visionary young adults and new immigrants from Latin America and more recently from Germany, like our founders. Once again, we are being impacted by adjacent development, as luxury apartments are going up less than ten feet from our building. Our own building naturally continues to age and we have been forced to put up scaffolding as a protective measure.

Despite these challenges to our building, like our founders, we seek to offer sanctuary to those who are becoming increasingly marginalized in this community and city by

present urban development trends. Besides being home to a growing congregation of over 200 members that worships in English and Spanish, Trinity houses and runs an after school program, a Latina support group and Trinity Place, a shelter for homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young adults. These young people (aged 17-24) have been thrown out by their families and have nowhere to go, “roaming the streets,” like the first youth welcomed in by the church. Trinity is their sanctuary. As one transgender young woman put it, “this is the only place where I feel human.” Over 1000 people are reached yearly through Trinity’s various social programs.

The outstanding acoustics of our sanctuary make it a sought-after rehearsal and performance space for many musicians and choral groups and our own choir continues to grow, delight and inspire. Our building and sanctuary not only allow us to dedicate space to programs that serve and support our neighbors, it uplifts us in our work. At Trinity, beauty and justice meet. We hope to never have to sacrifice one for the sake of the other. We seek creative ways and inspired partners to continue to help us offer the best of both. After 100 years, we seek to build on the best of our past as we move towards a future still to be written, a future that continues to embody the vision set forth in 1889—to be “a power for good in this city.” May our efforts bring fruit!