

Early St. John's, A Period of Change and Challenge

When St. John's congregation formed in 1814, it was a church for German speakers. Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist), Evangelical Protestants and Catholics worshipped together. In 1819 the first Catholic church was built at the corner of Vine and Liberty Streets. It's likely a number of Catholics left for the new church. As more Germans immigrated to Cincinnati, the congregation grew.

The 1820s and 1830s were a time of change in locations and with ministers for the congregation. The Rev. Ludwig Meyer was minister from 1820 until 1835. He preached at the building on Arch Street between Broadway and Ludlow where the floor collapsed during an active debate over the need for a new building. In 1824, the church location was Third Street east of Broadway. These two locations were near the site of old Fort Washington where the German community lived at the time. The final location for the Rev. Meyer was on Sixth Street at Lodge between Vine and Walnut Streets in 1833.

The Rev. Meyer was known as a "Low German" because he came from the region of Germany in the north with low elevations. "High Germans" were from southern Germany with high elevations. There was a difference between Low and High Germans in dialect, plus a difference in religious views. Low Germans followed Martin Luther and believed that in communion services the body and blood of Jesus was present in the bread and wine. The High Germans believed in the spiritual presence of Jesus in the bread and wine. The Rev. Meyer was accused of being partial to the Low Germans although there was no proof. In 1835 he decided to leave for a church in Bremen, Ohio.

In the 1830s there were two splits in the congregation and a number of changes in ministers. In 1832 a group left the church to form the United Protestant Evangelical German St. Peter's Church with the Rev. Phillipp Hauser as minister. In 1835 the Rev. H.W. Lauer became St. John's minister until 1837. He was followed by the Rev. Wilhelm Moellmann. At the end of 1838 he left to form North German Lutheran Church, taking the North German part of the congregation with him. In 1839 "St. John's" first appeared in the name of the church when the name was changed to German St. John's Church through an act of incorporation. The name had been the German Lutheran and Reformed Church, adopted in 1822. Dropping "Lutheran and Reformed" from the church's name is the first time there is no reference to a particular Christian denomination, indicating an independent Protestant church. In 1839 the Rev. F.M. Raschig became minister until 1841 when the Rev. August Kroell was called. In a period of less than ten years, the congregation had five ministers. The Rev. Kroell remained at St. John's until 1874 and brought a period of stability and prosperity.

Although the 1830s were difficult for the congregation, as evidenced in Church Council minutes, over time the splits were positive. The groups that split in 1832 and later in 1838 eventually merged during the 1940s to form St. Peter and St. Paul United Church of Christ. Today that church is located at 3001 Queen City Avenue in Westwood, a neighborhood of Cincinnati.

Sources of Information:

History of St. John's Unitarian Church by Rev. Hugo Eisenlohr, May, 1934

Cincinnati Historical Society "Genealogy of Some German Evangelical Churches in Cincinnati, Ohio"
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Church Council meeting minutes from the 1830s. Translated from German.

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