

The Path Toward Unitarianism

The Rev. Joseph Zesline [Zaeslin] was sent by the Lutheran Synod of Pennsylvania to perform duties of an evangelical missionary in Ohio and Kentucky. In the fall of 1814, he became the minister of the German Lutheran Church, our congregation's first minister. The Rev. Zesline died in 1818 and was remembered as a religious and educated man respected by the community. His ministry was followed by Jacob Guelick, a lay person, who held the congregation together.

The Rev. Ludwig Meyer was minister from 1820–1835. 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 had a more conservative view 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. Rev. Meyer was accused of being partial to the Low Germans. 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. 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. 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 10 years, the congregation had five ministers. The Rev. Kroell remained at St. John's until his death in 1874 and brought a period of stability and prosperity.

Rev. Kroell's education took place at the University of Giessen beginning in 1826 for classes in philology and theology. At the time the University of Giessen was known as a rationalist university. Rev. Kroell, due to his liberal views, attracted many new members including those who supported the failed German revolution of 1848-49. This growth and the fact that German families were moving to Over the Rhine in Cincinnati caused the congregation to build a new church at 12th and Elm Streets.

In 1869, Rev. Kroell published a hymn book for use by the congregation. The paragraphs below appear in the preface in German. These words describe his religious viewpoint.

One of the fundamental principles of this church is: “Acknowledge the truth—it sets you free.” And the counsel of the Master is “Hold to my word, and you will recognize the truth.” His teaching however, is in brief this: God is your Father, his nature and being is Love, you are his children, therefore your life ought to be one of love. To love God above all things, and your neighbor as yourself—this is religion, this is eternal life. In the spirit of this teaching, we have selected hymns for this book.

It is self-understood that no hymn has been included, which is in contradiction with that spirit. Excluded, therefore, is that theology of the traditional churches, which begins with the wrath of God and the sinful nature of man, and ends with the bloody atonement and the everlasting damnation of all those who do not believe thus. Such a theology is a sin and a crime against the religion of Jesus, and heaven and earth cry out and witness: ‘It is not true.’

Rev. Hugo Eisenlohr was the minister of St. John’s from 1884 until 1931. He was born in Cincinnati in 1860 and was St. John’s first minister born in the United States. Rev. Eisenlohr’s ministerial training was at the Meadville Theological School established by a Unitarian. He began his training in 1879 and graduated in 1883. When Meadville Theological School celebrated its 75th anniversary, Rev. Eisenlohr was granted an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

Rev. Eisenlohr became concerned that the congregation was not affiliated with any denomination and presented his concern in his annual report in 1922. The following year Rev. Eisenlohr was out of the pulpit for two months due to illness. During this time, a Presbyterian and a Reformed minister delivered Sunday services. At the next annual meeting, Rev. Eisenlohr pointed out that the congregation had no place to turn in times of need. The congregation voted to affiliate with the American Unitarian Association in 1924. Rev. Eisenlohr applied for Fellowship with the Unitarian Ministry on March 22, 1924 and in April he was granted admission. When St. John’s congregation joined the American Unitarian Association, it had 525 members in good standing. The church’s name became First Protestant St. John’s Church, Unitarian. In 1930 the name was changed to St. John’s Unitarian Church.

The ministry of Rev. Kroell and Rev. Eisenlohr influenced St. John’s to become a Unitarian church.

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