

HISTORY OF
ST. JOHN'S UNITARIAN CHURCH
CINCINNATI, OHIO



BY
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The history of what is now known as "St. John's Unitarian Church" is almost coextensive with the history of Cincinnati itself, and the church has exerted such a decided influence on the development of the city, that a brief allusion to the founding and early development of Cincinnati may well have a place here. The great Northwest Territory had been thrown open for settlement, the territory of what now forms the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Michigan. Soon settlers came over the Alleghany Mountains, principally from New Jersey, to Pittsburgh and Wheeling and from these points journeyed down the Ohio River looking for some advantageous point to settle.

John Cleves Symmes had received a large grant of land, including all the land between the Little and the Big Miami River, and extending miles north of the Ohio River. One of these bands of emigrants landed on this grant and decided to settle at a point opposite the mouth of the Licking River. Because it was just opposite the mouth of the river, they gave the new settlement the name Losantiville. But within a short time a number of officers of the well known society of Cincinnati came to settle here and the name of the new settlement was changed to Cincinnati. Soon others were moved to leave the "crowded East" and go out into the wide open spaces, these later settlers coming from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland, though those from New Jersey and Pennsylvania far outnumbered the rest. Among the settlers of 1789 was one German, Pesthal. The first town meeting was held in 1791, almost two years after the settlement was founded.

In the meantime a number of German families, mostly Swiss Germans, had been attracted to the new settlement and came from Vevay, Indiana, to engage in the cultivation of the grape, for which the district soon became favorably known. The first societies among the Germans were religious societies. A Methodist missionary conducted a series of prayer meetings in the log school house as early as 1810, but the efforts to organize a congregation met with no success. The German of those days was not much given to sectarianism. From his old home he brought knowledge of only two protestant denominations, the Lutheran and the Reformed. Within these two bodies, it is true, there were found in the southern part of Germany many pietistic movements, most of which, however, never succeeded in creating a schism in the bodies themselves.

In 1814 Dr. Dreher, a representative of the United Brethren in Christ, came to Cincinnati bent upon organizing a church among the German part of the population of that city. Early records speak of his lack of success by saying that he spoke at the Court House before empty benches.

In the same year Joseph Zaeslin, who had been sent as a missionary to Ohio by the Moravians, made his appearance at Cincinnati. Zaeslin was a man of classical education and is reported to have been especially gifted as a pulpit orator. His efforts to organize the German element of the town into a religious congregation were crowned with success, and he gathered not only the protestants, but the catholics as well, into one church, there being no catholic church in existence at that time. This congregation adopted and for about twenty (20) years retained the name German Evangelical Lutheran and Reformed Church. It is a splendid testimony to the spirit of these people that the records show that they dwelt together in harmony for several years until the first Roman Catholic congregation was organized. Zaeslin remained with the newly founded organization until his death, which occurred only three years later, in 1817.

The United Brethren in Christ had a small missionary station at North Bend, some fifteen miles down the river, and there being no minister available to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Zaeslin, they took over the vacant pulpit. But the missionaries of the United Brethren were crude and uneducated and their services proved far from satisfactory to the congregation that had been served by a man of Zaeslin's attainments. So about one year later, an educated and efficient layman of the congregation took over the duties of a minister to keep the church alive. His name was Jacob Guelich and to him belongs the credit of having saved the young church from an untimely death.

In 1824, the congregation, which numbered sixty (60) members, (among them, as I have already stated, a number of Catholics) moved into their first church building, having hitherto met in the school house. It was not a pretentious building, was two stories high and built entirely of wood. I succeeded in obtaining a drawing of this first church building from one of the early members by the name of Thron, who was still living at the age of 92 years, when I took charge of the church in 1884. This drawing showed a two story frame structure that differed from more modern dwellings only in that an attempt had been made to crown it with a small steeple. It was located on Arch street, east of Broadway. Guelich was anxious to have an ordained minister settled over the church and when, in 1820, one became available in the person of Ludwig Heinrich Meyer, he readily resigned his position to make way for the new man. Meyer was a Low German, as they were called, coming from the northern part of Germany. I mention this because it played a very important part in the history of the church. The oldest book of minutes still in our possession, dating back to the year 1820, records that it was resolved to purchase a horse for the minister that he might travel to Pennsylvania and raise funds among the many prosperous Germans there, for the struggling congregation. One of the later records shows that he was unsuccessful in this undertaking. He reported having secured just enough money to pay his expenses, so the horse was sold and the incident considered closed.

Meyer remained with the church until 1835, but his reign was far from being a peaceful one. Running through all the history of these years there

was the struggle between the Low German and the High German or Suabian element. Now Meyer, being a Low German by birth, was accused of showing partiality to that element in the church, though there probably was no ground for the accusation. At times feeling ran very high and in one of the congregational meetings the spirits were raised to such a pitch that the floor gave way and the whole congregation was precipitated into the basement, luckily without any serious injury to those present.

The first split in the congregation occurred in 1332, when a number of members left under the leadership of a Rev. Mr. Hauser to form what is still known as the United Evangelical Protestant St. Peter's Church. It is rather difficult to determine just what caused the rift. For in this same year the congregation bought a church hitherto occupied by an Episcopal congregation and located at Sixth and Lodge streets. Whether this or the differences between the Low and High German was the determining factor cannot be established with certainty. I am inclined to believe that it was the latter, since nearly all who left for the new organization were from the Rhine Palatinate, and since, when there was a split in the new congregation only a few years later, it was the element from the northern part of Germany which withdrew to form a new church, the Evangelical Protestant St. Paul's church of which my father was the pastor for 22 years.

But the old congregation showed remarkable vitality. In spite of the fact that there were continual wranglings during the succeeding years and that both elements were about equally represented in the old church, it not only continued to eke out an existence, but thrived. Perhaps the good old pioneers enjoyed a fight, for when it came to the selection of a successor to Meyer, conditions developed which are almost unbelievable, and which would be impossible today. Finally, after much political wire pulling, Rev. Mr. Batizians H. W. Lauer was duly elected and installed as a minister, but his stay was brief, and in 1837 it became necessary to look for a successor to him. There were two opposing candidates for the vacant pulpit and the feeling between their proponents was so bitter, and the methods indulged in so low, that Rev. Mr. Steinmaier, one of the candidates, withdrew and returned to Germany where he became Professor at the University of Bonn. This left the other candidate, Rev. Mr. Moellman, in possession of the field, but though he was a Low German, the great split came just a little less than a year after his settlement, when the whole North German element withdrew to found a new Church, the North German Lutheran Church, as they called it. In their first constitution there was a provision that no one could be a member of the church Council who was not able to speak "Low German", a dialect of the German language spoken only in the northern part of that country. The three years following were turbulent years, due to the fact that no suitable man could be found to take over the work.

After close study of the conditions obtaining in this period of St. John's church, I have come to the conclusion that all this strife was caused, not so much by the differences in language, though undoubtedly the good people concerned were of this opinion, but that at the bottom there was something quite different. And I am confirmed in this opinion by the subsequent development of the two churches, the North German Lutheran and the original congregation. The earliest name of the congregation was "United Lutheran and Reformed Church", a union of these two branches even earlier than the historic union in Prussia, out of which came the Prussian State Church. In the earliest constitution it was specifically stated that each mem-

ber should receive communion in the form in which he desired it. In those churches they *received* communion, a relic of the catholic view of the communion service carried over into the churches of the reformation. The communion was the great point of difference between these two churches of the German Reformation, Zwingli and Luther being unable to agree on the exegesis of the words "This is my Body" and "This is my Blood." I am convinced that at the bottom of the difficulties which led to all the bitter dissensions and to repeated splits in the church there was really a difference between the orthodox and the liberal element. The people from the northern part of Germany, the Low Germans, were outspoken Lutherans, while those from the Palatinate and adjacent territory had come under the more liberal views of Zwingli. The Palatinate has always been more liberal as a careful study of its religious history will show. And I am further strengthened in my view by the fact that when, after the last split, the congregation was finally incorporated, it was under the name "German St. John's Church". This occurred in 1839 on the 15th day of March. You will notice that not even the word Protestant is included in the official title, while the churches which had come from the withdrawals were Evangelical Protestant or, in the case of the last and greatest defection, Lutheran.

Subsequent developments in the history of the church only strengthened me in my opinion. After a period of almost three years during which various ministers, especially one Rev. Mr. Raschig, of Cincinnati, had sought to fill the vacant pulpit, but without succeeding in bringing order out of chaos, the congregation called Rev. August Kroell who had just been settled in Louisville about a year and a half before. With his coming, a new era dawned for the harrowed church.

Kroell was born in Rohrbach, in Hessen, on July 23, 1806. He was the son of poor but honorable parents, and his mother had no greater wish than that her August should prepare himself for the ministry. It was a hard battle that was waged by the good woman and her husband, to finance his student years, but somehow they managed it. He went to the Gymnasium at Buedingen at age of twelve years, remained there until 1826, when he was admitted to the University of Giessen. Having passed his state examination he returned home in 1831. But the pastorate was a political position and Kroell had no political influence, being of very humble birth. After waiting for a year he was finally appointed vicar, or assistant at Eckardtshausen. There was little likelihood of his ever advancing, and when, at this time, a book was widely circulated in his town describing in glowing terms the possibilities that awaited those who would settle in what was then the "Far West" of our country, he joined a band of emigrants and set sail for the country of golden opportunity. Landing at Baltimore he traveled on foot over the mountains to Wheeling, proceeding thence on a flatboat down the Ohio with St. Louis as his destination. The dishonest boat owner put them ashore at Paducah, Ky. and only after an appeal to the courts was he forced to carry them to their destination. From here Kroell went inland and with a good friend, a physician, took up a farm and worked it. However, this did not satisfy him and when his friend died and he heard of a vacant pulpit in a German church at Louisville, Ky. he hastened there with all the speed that the mode of travel in those days would permit. He was called to the pulpit, only to leave it within a year and a half, having been called to the St. John's church after having appeared in its pulpit as a candidate.

Under his wise and beneficent leadership which began Oct. 7, 1841 the

almost disorganized church took a new lease on life. The organization was soon strengthened, dissension ceased, and the people looked forward to the future of the church with new hope. This was due in large part to the personality of the new minister. He was a man of imposing appearance, tall, broad-shouldered, erect, with a kindly eye and a beneficent countenance. I remember him well and am convinced that he who had seen him once, could not forget that impressive personality. But he was more than this. He was an outspoken liberal, and well able to uphold his opinions in controversy or debate. And there soon came ample opportunity to display this ability. For no sooner had it become known that there was a liberal in the pulpit than the hosts of opposition arose. Newspaper controversies were plentiful, debates were forced upon him, and he soon became one of the best known figures in the city, especially among the large and ever growing German element. For the years 1848 and 1849, the years of the German revolutions, brought many liberals from that country to our shores, and Cincinnati, having already a large German population, received its full quota of these. But Kroell was also a man of the people, in the very best sense of that much abused term. None were too low for him, he made no distinction of wealth, power or social station, but was the friend of all. And being a true liberal his friends among the Jews and the Roman Catholics were numbered by the hundred. Combined with it all was such a true and deep-seated love of men, such a warm sympathy for all conditions, that it was said, if St. John's Church were as large as the following of Kroell, it would be the largest church in the Middle West. With surprising rapidity he built up the church that had almost succumbed to internal dissensions and placed it in the front ranks of the churches in the whole region.

In 1849 Kroell founded a religious weekly, the "Protestantische Zeitblaetter", a journal of outspoken liberalism. It was not simply a Church bulletin, though it served him as such also, but a journal of religious liberalism. I have reason to believe that the annual deficit was paid by him out of his own pocket, though his people came to be enthusiastic supporters of all his activities, this journalistic venture included. I am of the opinion that it had not a little to do with the flourishing condition in which, after a period of about ten years, the church found itself. Yes, he had a few collaborators among whom was my own father, who later on was entrusted with the duties of editor, having come to Cincinnati on the recommendation of Kroell in 1857 and remaining there until 1879. Soon the old church became too small for the growing congregation, and a new church building was planned. But before it could be erected the civil war broke out and brought the planning to an end. However, soon after the close of the war, a new church was constructed in what was then the German part of the town, "over the Rhine". Construction was begun in 1867 and a year later in October 1868 the new church was dedicated, though not entirely completed. The spire was built in 1873. The following year was also the year in which death ended a pastorate replete with the finest things, a pastorate that had been of such a nature that no one thought of speaking of the minister except as "Papa Kroell". In fact, he was so known not only to his own people, but throughout the city. He left a large and well organized congregation, with a Church School that was probably the largest in the city, with a very active Ladies Society, a Young Men's and a Young Women's Society and a choir that was above the average in those days.

It should be stated here that Kroell with the assistance of one or two others and the wholehearted support of the congregation, sought to organ-

ize the quite numerous independent German churches in the Middle West into an efficient body. For some years this organization, known as the "Protestantische Bund" flourished. It had even begun to create its own literature, adding to the "Zeitblaetter", which became its official organ, a journal for the Sunday Schools, "Der Jugendfreund". A hymn book also was compiled and introduced into a number of these churches. To give you an idea of what they stood for, allow me to quote in translation a passage from the introduction of this hymn book, written by Rev. Mr. Kroell. "An outstanding principle of the teaching of Jesus is: Know the truth, the truth will make you free. Keep my commandments and you will know the truth. His teaching was: God is the Father; his being is love. Ye are his children, therefore your life must be love". It goes without saying, then, that no hymn has been admitted which contradicts that spirit. The theology of the churches of the old faith, which begins with the wrath of God and original sin and ends with a bloody sacrifice and with eternal damnation of all who do not accept his teaching, this theology has been excluded. Such a theology is a crime, a sin against the religion of Jesus, and heaven and earth cry out against it, shouting 'It is not true'. A catechism, written and published by my father, Rev. G. W. Eisenlohr, and harmonizing with these views, was also adopted.

How to find a successor to fill the place which a man of such views had so ably and devotedly filled was a question not easily answered. To find a man who, after a ministry that had extended over thirty-three years, could take up the work which Kroell had laid down was a herculean task. The choice of the congregation fell on Rev. J. C. Scholz and he took over the pastorate in March 1875. Unfortunately Scholz was not the outspoken knight of liberalism that Kroell had been, he vacillated between a moderately liberal and an orthodox standpoint. Soon a process of disintegration set in. There was no open revolt, no split in the church, but gradually quite a number of the better families withdrew quietly, to seek other pastures. During this time, Dr. Chas. Wendte was minister of the Unitarian Church at Cincinnati, and being well able to speak the German language, attracted quite a number of the most influential families of the church to his congregation. I would not, however, be understood as intimating that Dr. Wendte deliberately sought to take members away from the old church. They felt themselves repulsed by the attitude of Rev. Mr. Scholz whose theological standpoint was neither fish or flesh, but was rather inclined to favor that of the evangelical churches. And after the many years of ministry of Rev. August Kroell, this did not satisfy them. Other difficulties arose and after a ministry of about nine years, he was forced to resign very suddenly.

The congregation was again almost disorganized, the elements remaining were very heterogeneous, and the church debt quite heavy. Fortunately the board of Trustees were level-headed men who saw that if they went into a competition of candidates for the vacant pulpit, they would be inviting new difficulties. So without having seen or heard him, they extended a call to Rev. H. G. Eisenlohr, then Pastor of the St. John's Church at Wheeling, W. Va. After a period of about three months, during which the congregation was served by the minister of St. Paul's church, the new minister settled over his new charge on the 9th of November 1884. He found a rather numerous element that was outspokenly orthodox, others who still remembered Kroell and his splendid work. He also found a church debt of almost \$30,000 and a membership of, nobody knew how many. For one of the first things that confronted the minister was the task of establishing who was and who

was not a member. A long list of names was handed him of people who had been members at one time, but whose present standing was very doubtful. It finally developed that a little less than two hundred members remained in good standing, while the Board had been under the impression that there were about three hundred and fifty.

Then, too, the debt was pressing heavily and the resources of the congregation were almost exhausted. It will be fifty years this fall that the present Minister-Emeritus took hold of the helm. The congregation has grown in numbers, has long ago wiped out the debt, built a parsonage, made numerous and some costly improvements in the church property and, what is most important of all, has lived in peace and harmony for half a century.

During that long pastorate, two things occurred that might well have caused grave difficulties. One was the question of language. The oldest constitution that has come into my possession states that for all coming time the German language *only* shall be used. And to make this more binding, there was printed with this constitution a resolution passed by the congregation, which declared that paragraph 2, relating to the language to be used, can never be altered or repealed. For almost sixteen years of my pastorate, all services, all business meetings, everything pertaining to the church was conducted in the German language exclusively. The Church School was so conducted also. Then the minister discovered that while the children could memorize the German text they had no idea of its meaning, and he so reported to the Church Board. Much to his surprise he was given authority to do what he thought best in the matter. He did this, of course, and soon the church school was conducted in the English language. This led to another innovation. In 1901 it was decided to institute English evening services and the attendance soon showed the advisability of the new deal. Of course, when after a number of years the new deal had become an old one, the attendance at these English services dropped off considerably. This led to establishing English morning services twice a month until in 1918 it was finally decided that the English language be used exclusively, both in the church services and in the meetings of the various organizations of the church, for these had, up to this time, all been conducted in the German language. There is now but one German service a year, a traditional service on Good Friday morning. So that difficult question has been settled without even the sign of a conflict.

But there was still another, perhaps even more difficult question to be settled. For all these years the congregation had been entirely independent, if we except a few years when it was a member of the "Protestantische Bund" which long ago had ceased to exist. And so the minister who had been with them so long was increasingly worried by the thought that he might be doing a purely personal work, that would be thrown into discard when he was gone. But he was not satisfied with this condition of things, so in 1922, in his annual report to the congregation, he touched upon this question. He bluntly stated that he could not be satisfied with the thought of doing a personal work only, but that he was serving a cause. And he asked them where they would look for a successor to take up the work. Some saw in this a threat to resign, but he assured them that he only wanted to set them thinking. In the following year the minister was out of the pulpit for about two months on account of ill health, just before the annual meeting of the congregation. During this time, services were continued, a Presbyterian minister officiating this Sunday and a Reformed minister following him the next.

Fortunately the minister was able to attend the annual meeting and read his report in which he again pointed out that the congregation, being absolutely independent, had no place to turn in case of need. That had been strikingly demonstrated during his absence from the pulpit. After the meeting a number of people came to him saying: "You said last year you wanted to set us thinking, and we have been thinking. The only place we can see is the Unitarian church". The minister did not commit himself, but said: "You know where I stand. Any action which the congregation takes must come from them without any pressure from me." The physician sent the minister to Florida for three months. Soon after his departure a meeting of the congregation was called to discuss the question. After the discussion it was unanimously resolved to affiliate with the American Unitarian Association. I said unanimously and that is true, but the congregation did lose about four members by this action out of a membership of about 400. The congregation was now re-incorporated under the name of St. John's Unitarian Church.

In January 1931, Rev. H. G. Eisenlohr presented his resignation to the congregation but it was not accepted. Instead, he was made Minister-Emeritus and as such he is still active in a measure. But the work is now in good hands, Rev. Julius F. Krolfifer having been called by the congregation and settled since September 1931. The work is going on nicely and especially the work with and for the young people is being stressed, and that was needed.

In conclusion I would say that the congregation may look back upon one hundred and twenty years of splendid work in spite of all the difficulties which beset its path. It is still, as it long has been, one of the really influential churches of the large and flourishing city. It has furnished a Lieutenant-Governor of the state, a number of Judges of our courts, Representatives to Congress and to the State Legislature, a Mayor, numerous City and County Officials, quite a number of members of the Board of Education, even its minister being elected for a four year term to this body. It has always participated in the movements for community welfare and has often been represented in these movements. For quite a number of years its minister was a member of the Board of the Associated Charities, soon after the organization was called into existence. It looks forward to many more years of beneficent activity, and will I trust, continue to flourish. The people feel entirely at home in the Unitarian body with which they affiliated ten years ago and enjoy the fellowship which is now theirs.

