

A Brief History of the 25 Years of the Ministry of Music



ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN CHURCH

In the mid-thirties, it was decided that a program of church music was not only needed to supplement the educational program, but also to improve our worship through music, the study of hymns and the use of the liturgy.

For this purpose Frederick A. Snell, organist and choir director at St. John's Lutheran Church, Boyertown, Pa. was called in August, 1937. His task was to organize a system of choirs and to lead the congregation in music. After 25 years his efforts have been richly blessed, his tenure among us has been loyal and untiring, and St. Mark's is known for its fine choirs and music.

The Senior choir was the first group to be organized, singing its first anthem in November. Charter members were Katherine Ealer Geiger, Helen Gensel Stroup, Eleanor Kauffield Webster, Helen Koehler Clokey, Eleanor Poff Starr, June Stonesifer McConnell, Eleanor Shaefer Sobers, Carol Shaffer Fulmer, Anna Belle Tepel Smith, Helen Vollmer Troxell, Dorothy Welker, Harold Best, Clarence Gilmore, Harvey Hartman, Clarence Johnson, Elliot Kinley, Robert Rohm, Burrell Troxell, Carl Zeigler, and William Zeigler. New vestments, made by the Dorcas Society, were worn for the first time on Christmas Eve.

Also in October, a Youth choir was organized. In this group were Betty Newcomer Worthington, Betty J. Kuhns Paris (now our Director of Education), Ann Louise Schaefer Hahn, Charlotte Shaffer Venema, Jean Hamilton Welker, Katherine Stroehmann Crane, Betty Tepel Chrisman, Doris Swoyer Buzzard, Charles Yoder, Herman Doebler, John MacMinn, Grover Stonesifer, Jr. and Chauncey Tepel.

At this time very few churches in the country had a multiple choir program, and none in this immediate area, so St. Mark's was truly pioneering. Under the untiring efforts of Mr. Snell, in 1938, a children's choir was organized. In this group were Shirley Newcomer Vognet and Gladys Shaffer Knauss—both presently members of the Senior Choir. These children, in brilliant red gowns with little white ruffled collars and white cottas, made a striking appearance.

A month later, the choir program was complete—with the inception of a carol choir made up of still younger children: ages 6-9. Included in this group were Ray Best and Marian Stroehmann Waldeisen, now a member of the Senior Choir.

The Senior Choir sang for every morning service, while the Youth and Children's choirs sang at the Vespers. The Carol Choir sang short anthems for our special monthly musical programs.

With the choir and music program well under way, other problems appeared. A storm in 1939 damaged the chambers of the old Austin organ which had served the church since 1914. On September 1, 1939, our new Moeller Organ with 27 ranks of 1,896 pipes was dedicated together with the remodeled and enlarged choir loft. On April 15, 1940, the first 3 hour Good Friday Devotional Service was held. The three older choirs offered special music for the occasion, and the church was filled.

It was the aim and the desire of Mr. Snell and the choir to further the cause of good music in Williamsport. A first endeavor was a co-sponsored concert by the Westminster Choir in February, 1939. Also in 1939, a group from our choir was invited to participate in a massed choir at the New York World's Fair.

1940 saw the dedication of new parish house. Our choir participated in this dedication, singing the inspiring "Built on a Rock." For the Festival of the Reformation, the choir presented the Bach cantata, "The Lord is a Sun and Shield." According to a



FREDERICK A. SNELL, Organist and Choir Director

for the Sunday Fellowship Vesper Service of the convention of Rotary International. Pastor Houser presided.

Through the war years the choirs continued to work hard. On March 17th, 1945, a concert of choir and organ music was presented for the Lenten season. The same program was given in Grace Lutheran Church, Shamokin and at Christ Lutheran Church, Lewisburg. According to the newspaper clipping . . . "The program was one of the best presented by the choir, the precision chorus work giving evidence of a well-trained and well rehearsed group. The vested choir, composed of 26 voices, presented the music in the chancel."

On August 15, 1945, we praised God for the end of hostilities, and observed the great V-J day. For this very special service, we sang the inspiring setting of the "Te-Deum" from the Common Service Book. For the Easter Musical service in 1946, we had as guest soloist, Miss Elaine Shaffer, flutist from Williamsport. With Mr. Snell at the organ, she played a program of flute duets and for her services received \$10.00. This is most interesting now, because Miss Shaffer today is married to the well known conductor, Efreim Kurtz, and is recognized as one of the world's outstanding flute virtuosos . . . and receives thousands of dollars for a concert today.

MUSICAL TRAINING IN ST. MARK'S

Hundreds of boys and girls have come up through the ranks of St. Mark's Choirs, not only to become full time church leaders, but also to serve as organists, choir directors, music teachers, professors, and in other fields. There can be no doubt as to the value of 25 years of intensive musical training in St. Mark's. A number of young people, having experienced the value and training under a dedicated choir director, have gone from our choir program and church into the field of the ministry. These include: Raymond Best, Pastor St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, Dover, Del.; Harvey Hartman, Pastor Memorial Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Fla.; James Shipman, Assistant Pastor, Frieden's Lutheran Church, Myerstown, Pa.; William Martin, Pastor, Port Royal Parish, Port Royal, Pa. J. Ray Houser, Jr., Pastor, Holy Redeemer Lutheran Church, Southgate, Mich.; Sister Betty Swinehart, Parish Deaconess at Syracuse, N. Y.; Ronald Mease, Assistant Pastor, Zion Lutheran Church, Wilmington, Del.; Frederick Foltz, Pastor, St. John's Lutheran Church, Espy, Pa.

It had become the practice to present awards to members for faithfulness in attendance. The awarding of stoles was begun, and later changed to the wearing of a cross: Silver for 1-5 years and gold for more than 5 years. One of our most faithful members was Ed. Scheafer, who has seen 4 of his grandchildren also singing in the choirs

news report, this cantata was sung by us, for the first time in Williamsport. The news item went on to say . . . "When the choir announces a special rendition such as this, we know that they are prepared to give us something worth hearing."

For Christmas, 1941, something unique was offered: "Gloria", a Christmas Chorale Play by the senior and girl's choirs, together with special music.

In 1942, after the morning service, the Senior choir, Mr. Snell, Pastor Houser, went to Buck Hill Falls in the Poconos, where a concert of sacred music was presented

at one time or another. He was given special recognition at a choir banquet several years ago, when he retired from "active duty."

Of the hundreds who served in the choirs during these years, to the best of our knowledge, there have been only three deaths: Lt. Glenn Edward Good, Betty Cummings Belles, whose daughter is now a member of the youth choir, and Sonya Lebet, of the youth choir.

After 25 years, Dr. Houser resigned to become President of the Lutheran Seminary at Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. On September 14, 1954, the choirs and congregation assembled in full strength to say and sing farewell. His initial ideas of a broad youth program, together with a multiple choir program had been realized, and he knew the work would continue.

In 1957, Betty Swinehart, a former member of our Senior Choir, was consecrated as a deaconess in St. Mark's, the first woman from the congregation to enter full time Christian service.

Ground for the new St. Mark's was broken in 1958. Choir members and Mr. Snell worked in this campaign with the choir pledging a sizeable amount.

The new hymnal was used in 1958 for the first time. The Senior and Youth choirs were present at both services, giving strength and confidence to the first efforts to sing familiar words to new settings. St. Mark's was the first church in this area to adopt the new Service Book and Hymnal.

DEDICATION OF NEW CHURCH

As tears of sadness had filled our eyes on February 21, 1960 for the last Service in the old church, tears of joy filled our hearts on February 28th. A bright, brilliant new House of God was to be dedicated. The congregation assembled in the old building at 9 A. M. The Bible and Sacramental Vessels were removed from their places, and after a brief service of de-commissioning the building as a place of worship, the clergy, choir and congregation proceeded to the new church. Singing "Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty" we entered the new church. No one of us will ever forget the utter joy and the presence of God we felt that day. The choirs and Mr. Snell had worked hard preparing special music.

In the following week a dedicatory organ recital by John Weaver, an outstanding young artist from NYC, was given to a capacity audience.

Our desire to present fine music was evidenced in 1961 as we sponsored or co-sponsored the Gettysburg College Choir, the Marie-Clair Alain organ recital, and our own choir together with the Mansfield State College Brass Ensemble.

There is an increased understanding and the appreciation of the Liturgy, worship and good music. It has provided an invaluable musical education for the youth of our parish. Hundreds of men, women, youth, and children have been members of these organizations at one time or another. Many of these young people have become organists, choir directors, music teachers, an opera singer, or musicians in their own right. Out of this group have come pastors, a deaconess, professors, business men and women, and faithful lay people in the work of the Lord.

CONGREGATION AT WORSHIP



Fine church music has been presented to the congregation and community. This music program has been a success, not only because of the untiring efforts of Mr. Snell, but also because of the cooperation of pastors, council, congregation, choirs, and "Choir Mothers", caring for the vestments, laundering, mending, and replacing them. We will not forget the sincere devotion of Mrs. Jennie Bobb who attended to the needs of the Senior Choir for many years prior to her death. Mrs. Ernest Gustafson has been chairman for more than 11 years.

YEARS OF DEDICATED WORK

Mr. Snell who is a native of Reading, studied and trained especially for his work. Since coming to St. Mark's in 1937, he has earned his B.A. degree from Bucknell, his M.A. from Penn State University, and has continued graduate study at the School of Sacred Music at the Union Theological Seminary in NYC. In 1940, he married Helene Ritter. He has been a member of the Worship Committee of the Central Pennsylvania Synod for 8 years, and chairman for the past 5 years. He has been serving on the consulting committee of the Commission on Liturgy and Hymnal since 1958. He is Dean of the Williamsport Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, and has always been active in all fields of music throughout the community.

He is recognized as a contemporary composer and writer, having 12 articles on church music and hymnology published in THE LUTHERAN, THE JOURNAL OF CHURCH MUSIC, and THE PARISH SCHOOL MAGAZINE. Two of his anthems "Thanksgiving" and the Pennsylvania Dutch Carol "Song of the Sleeping Babe" have been published, while numerous other works are still in manuscript form. His most recent anthem, written during this past summer and dedicated to the Senior Choir of St. Mark's is entitled "Worship." This number will be sung by the Senior Choir for the first time on October 14th.