

A HISTORY OF THE AUSTIN (MN) BETHLEHEM FREE METHODIST CHURCH

On February 12, 1967, a diversified group of committed Christians met to discuss their desire to fulfill the need for a Wesleyan Evangelical witness in the Austin, MN area. The Minn-I-Kota Conference Superintendent, along with the General Secretary of Evangelism from the Free Methodist Headquarters in Indiana, was present at the question and answer session held at the Oak Leaf Restaurant in Austin, MN.

On April 23, 1967, five families met at the Gerald and Darlene Gilbertson home to prayerfully commit to becoming charter members of the new Austin Free Methodist Church, supporting it with their prayers, resources, time and energy. These five families (including Dave and Joyce Reynen) took turns hosting Sunday evening Services. By the end of the month the Minn-I-Kota Board of Administration adopted the organization of this fledgling congregation as a TEAM (Total Evangelism Advance of Minn-I-Kota) Project. The Conference budgeted \$5,000 to help the congregation proceed. Pastor Earl Tousley was then appointed.

May of 1967 saw God's hand in several milestone decisions necessary for church growth. A three-lot building site for a chapel/parsonage was purchased with the option to purchase three additional lots by December.

The congregation moved their worship services to the Southgate Elementary School on June 25, 1967. Sunday attendance averaged 36, with 30 attending Sunday School. Sunday evening services were held in the Sterling State Bank basement or various homes. The Society approved the new name, Bethlehem Free Methodist Church in July. Ground breaking took place in August with the first service conducted in the basement of the newly constructed chapel/parsonage unit on December 3, 1967. Ten different locations were utilized that first year of Bethlehem's existence. Official dedication of the church building was May 19, 1968.

In June of 1969, Pastor Carl E Pavey was appointed to lead as pastor. The faithful, dedicated, young congregation voted in 1973 to terminate its mission status and trust God to provide the necessary financial resources to make BFMC self-supporting.

On December 4, 1983, Pastor Steve Munger was officially installed to shepherd the BFMC congregation. Through his leadership, the church

underwent three major building campaigns and the addition of multiple services. By then, attendance had grown to an average of 125. The congregation voted in January, 1990 to purchase the vacant former Assemblies of God facility at 1500 4th Ave. SE. After considerable renovation, the first worship service was held in the Fellowship Hall on August 5, 1990. With the departure of Pastor Steve (12/83 – 6/92), BFMC experienced a succession of Pastors: Interim Pastor Mike Kinde (8/92-8/93), Pastor Dan Crawford (7/93-6/95), Pastor Dick Dickinson (8/95-6/96), Pastor Bill Glaser (9/96-6/00), and Pastors Michael and Penny Ewert (7/00-7/09). We were blessed to have additional ministerial staff including: Justin Moreland (5/03-8/04), youth, Anna Juissa Tarango-Flores (9/04-6/05), Lucia Orozco (12/05-9/06), Pastor Ramon and Marisol Alberto (2/07-2/-08), Hispanic ministry, and Associate Pastor Michael Cogswell (3/08-4/11).

Completion of the renovation of the building slowly progressed. On July 18, 1998, the first wedding ceremony was performed in the completed sanctuary. July 19, 1998 marked the first joyous worship service in the sanctuary. We continue to make improvements, along the way, being additionally blessed as debt-free (as of October 2004).

In July 2009 Pastor David Martin become our pastor. His vision and outreach was to include the many people groups living in our community. We now have the Burmese language congregation and the Oromo congregation who use the building for their services. As a result of the renewed vision, there have been more short-term Mission trips taken by our youth. Pastor Martin retired on July 1, 2014. Paul Steele was appointed interim pastor in 2014 and then appointed as the senior pastor during the Easter service in 2015. God's blessings continue as we strengthen our relationship with Him.