

By Frank Schmersal

The history of Elias Evangelical Lutheran Church begins with a small group of farmers, primarily of German heritage, in the Toms Creek Hundred area a few miles east of what is now Emmitsburg. In 1757 this group established a congregation that was visited about once a month by the Rev. John George Baugher, a German Lutheran pastor from Hanover, PA. Pastor Baugher founded more than one hundred congregations in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

A small, rough log church was built on what is now Four Points Bridge Road, with a cemetery across the road from it that is still in existence. In 1768 the Lutherans and the local German Reformed congregation joined forces to form a union church, and in 1782 they built a new frame church building which they shared, each led by its own visiting pastor.

In 1797 the Lutheran and German Reformed congregations moved into Emmitsburg and built a new stone church there, facing the road from Emmitsburg to Gettysburg (an old alignment of the present Irishtown Road.) The new church in Emmitsburg had a bell in a belfry, and an upstairs gallery where servants were seated. The sanctuary faced the west, with the altar against the west wall. The church at Toms Creek Hundred was sold to a Methodist congregation which is now Toms Creek Methodist Church; the building was torn down in 1905, after the present Toms Creek Church was built.

In 1814 a full steeple replaced the belfry. 92 feet high, the steeple was paid for through a state-authorized lottery. Entrance to the church was through the base of the steeple. Some of the timbers from the original belfry can still be seen in the attic of the church. The original weathervane from the steeple, an iron fish, was removed in 1859 because it was being used as a target by local marksmen; it is now mounted in a display case in the sanctuary. The steeple also held a clock with a wooden mechanism; some parts of the clock still exist in the church archives.

The Maryland Lutheran Synod was organized in 1820. The pastor who served Elias Congregation at the time, the Rev. John Grobp, was a leader in the organization and became the vice-president of the synod. Although there have been many mergers along the way, the present Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) can trace its history directly back to the Maryland Synod.

Until 1828, the service was conducted in German. Both English and German services were conducted from 1828 until some years after the Civil War, when German services were ended.

The Union Academy was formed by the Lutheran and Reformed congregations in 1829 because of dissatisfaction with the public schools of the time. A building was erected adjacent to the church. Records of the Union Academy in the Elias archives show that there were never more than 40 students. The building was razed in 1870.

By 1835 more space was needed, and so the sanctuary was enlarged with an addition on the north side. The sanctuary, including the gallery, was turned to face the north, with the altar against the north wall. Despite the two-foot-thick stone walls, windows and doors were moved to maintain the symmetry of the structure. Entrance was still from the east.

In 1852 Elias Lutheran Church was separated from the Taneytown Charge and became the center of the Emmitsburg Charge, with its own pastor. This marked the beginning of the Elias parish records of baptisms, marriages, and burials; before this time, these records presumably were kept at the home church of the pastor. The Emmitsburg

Charge also included, at various times, congregations at Fountaindale, Mount Joy, and Sabillasville.

In 1868 the Lutheran and German Reformed congregations decided to separate. The Lutheran congregation bought the interest of the German Reformed congregation in the stone church and cemetery; the German Reformed congregation moved up the street to establish what is now known as Incarnation United Church of Christ. Also in 1868, the Lutheran congregation purchased a home on West Main Street from Edward Taney for use as a parsonage. A small building to the west of the home, once the law office of Roger Brooke Taney, became the pastor's study. The study was torn down in 1905, when the present walkway leading to the church was built. The old parsonage was razed in 1920 when the present parsonage was built on the site.

By 1870 the old alignment of Irishtown Road was no longer in use, so the present entry or narthex was built on the south side of the church. The entrance through the steeple remained as a secondary means of access to the sanctuary.

The congregation celebrated the 100th anniversary of the building in 1897. The stained glass windows were purchased at this time, as well as the present pews and most of the chancel furniture. (Interestingly, there is no record of any celebration of the 100th anniversary of the congregation in 1857.) Several celebration services were held, and the church was decorated in the style of the day with banners, bunting, flowers, and shrubs.

The painting behind the altar, of Christ ascending, was added around 1905; the bottom part of it was obscured in 1922 when a new altar was built. Fortunately we have a hand-painted postcard from 1906 that shows the complete painting.

The Rev. Philip Bower became the pastor of Elias Church in 1924, and served for 38 years until his retirement in 1962. Many an Emmitsburg-area couple was married by Pastor Bower, either in the church or in the front parlor of the parsonage. Pastor Bower's successor, the Rev. W. Ronald Fearer, served Elias for 34 years, and today is the Pastor Emeritus. Few congregations can boast that they had only two pastors in 72 years!

The final addition to the church was made in 1930, when the present parish house was added to the east of the original building. The parish house provides much-needed assembly rooms and classrooms, offices, and a kitchen and dining room to support the various activities of the congregation and the community at large. Originally only the front part of the parish house was covered with stone; the rest was covered with cedar shakes. The stonework was completed in 1967.

The Rev. Susan Haas Yatta became the first female pastor of Elias in 1997. She was followed by the Rev. David Knodel, an interim pastor. The current pastor of Elias, the Rev. Jon Greenstone, began his ministry in Emmitsburg in 2003.

Elias Evangelical Lutheran Church celebrated its 250th anniversary throughout 2007 with a series of special services and other celebrations. We enjoyed a banquet in April; a reenactment service at Toms Creek Hundred in June, with Pastor Greenstone arriving on horseback as Pastor Baugher did in 1757; an old-fashioned lawn festival in August; and a Homecoming Service in September. It was during the anniversary celebration that the old weathervane, shaped like a fish, and the phrase "Catch the Grace!" began to be used as the Elias logo, a practice that continues today.

The 25 Pastors of Elias Church

	Years	Home Church
John George Baugher	1757-1759	Hanover PA
Ludwig Beck	1761-1767	Hanover PA
Charles F. Wildbahn	1769-1782	Hanover PA
John G. Young	1762-1794	Hagerstown MD
Guenther Wingert	1794-1795	Taneytown MD
John F. Ruthrauff	1797-1802	Greencastle PA
John G. Grobp	1802-1828	Taneytown MD
John N. Hoffman	1828-1833	Taneytown MD
Samuel D. Finckel	1833-1837	Taneytown MD
Ezra Keller	1837-1840	Taneytown MD
Solomon Sentman	1841-1852	Taneytown MD
John Welfley	1852-1854	Elias
George S. Collins	1854-1855	Elias
Henry Bishop	1855-1863	Elias
Washington V. Gotwald	1863-1866	Elias
Elias S. Johnston	1866-1888	Elias
Luther DeYoe	1889-1891	Elias
Oscar G. Klinger	1892	Elias
Charles Reinewald	1892-1920	Elias
William Charles Day	1920-1924	Elias
Philip Bower	1924-1962	Elias
W. Ronald Fearer	1963-1997	Elias
Susan Haas Yatta	1997-2000	Elias
David Knodel	2000-2003	Elias
Jon Greenstone	2003-	Elias