

THE BICENTENNIAL OF ZION CHURCH IN BALTIMORE

By HANS-LUDWIG WAGNER

From its very beginnings, 200 years ago, Zion Church has been the focal point of the German element in Baltimore. To be sure, that was not the reason for which the old pioneers organized Zion Church in 1755. It is one of the by-products of a congregational life that up to this day has used the German language in its worship services, its songs and its prayers.

1955 was observed as the 200th Anniversary Year. A number of events mark this year as an outstanding year in the history of Zion Church. All events endeavored not only to look backward to recall the past history, but very determinedly pointed out the importance of Zion's future. This future is built upon the experiences, the achievements, the failures, the hopes and the disappointments of the past. Throughout the Anniversary Year and the special events that mark the bicentennial, Zion's colorful history was reviewed, always with an eye upon the future.

The opening event, as well as the closing event, were rather quiet Communion Services, both bringing into sharp focus foundation, purpose and goal of Zion Church, or of any church for that matter. This foundation is the Word of God and the Sacraments instituted by Christ himself. People, both within and without the congregation, always have been impressed with the ancient Communion vessels which were used since the very early days of Zion Church. They are the work of a German silversmith, Lewis Buichle, who was famous in Baltimore and throughout Maryland in the latter part of the 18th century.

The second event in the series of anniversary observances was the historical pageant on Shrove Tuesday. Shrove Tuesday always has been observed with fun and frolic by Zion's people whose ancestors, though protestant, always enjoyed the gay activities of the pre-Lenten season as observed by their Catholic neighbors in their old homeland. In the same vein they continued in Zion. This time the men and women of Zion's colorful past greeted a capacity audience from the stage of Zion's beautiful Adlersaal. The pageant, retelling Zion's history, was written by Dorothy Weiss Carter. It told the story in thirteen scenes.

The anniversary day itself, on May 8, was a day that will long be remembered, not only by Zion's people, but by the city of Baltimore. The central theme of the day was the Church. Prominent church leaders, both from the United States and Germany, took part in the Anniversary Services. Dr. Carl C. Rasmussen, professor of Systematic Theology at the Gettysburg College, and Dr. Ralph Tabor, pastor of the First English Lutheran Church and prominent member of the executive board of the U. L. C. and the National Lutheran Council, represented the United Lutheran Church in America. Dr. Martin Erdmann, Bishop of Braunschweig, represented the Lutheran Church of Germany and the Lutheran World Federation. The social highlight of the entire anniversary year was the Church Family Dinner at the Emerson Hotel. The speaker at this occasion was Dr. Abdel

Ross Wentz, former president of Gettysburg Seminary and one of the founding fathers of the Lutheran World Federation.

The choirs of Zion Church, under the direction of Robert D. Johnson, presented a stirring performance of Bach's Reformation Cantata, "God is a Sun and Shield." This cantata truly summed up the thoughts and emotions of Zion's anniversary service . . . thanks for God's blessings of the past, and a prayer for God's continued presence in the future.

Once more the congregation met for a special anniversary service during October, when, on the annual Church Day, October 16, Zion's Pastor Emeritus, Fritz Otto Evers, preached the anniversary sermon, significantly using as his text I Corinthians, chapter 13:13: "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

On the previous Sunday, October 9, Zion's former pastor, Leopold Wilhelm Bernhard, preached at two special services on the privileges and obligations of Christians in these days, in this place and in this congregation.

Perhaps the most abiding feature of the entire anniversary year, and a truly tangible memorial is the book, *Zion in Baltimore* by Klaus German Wust. The history of Zion Church has been written several times before, both in German and in English, but so far by Zion's pastors only. For the 200th anniversary the colorful history of Zion has been retold for the first time by an outsider, a man who has made a name for himself in the field of historical research concerning the German element in Virginia.

Wust's approach in telling the Zion history is new, refreshingly unbiased, honest, at times blunt, but always understanding. The author has examined with great care all source material. The result of his diligent work is a book which is informative, and interesting both to the historian and to the interested layman. Rarely has the history of a local congregation been published which could satisfy the exacting historian and still appeal to the layman. Klaus Wust in his *Zion in Baltimore* has achieved just that. The book does credit both to the subject matter and to the author.*

In the following we give a few excerpts of the address which the Rev. Dr. Abdel R. Wentz delivered during the Church Family Dinner on May 8, 1955.

"Here we have a thrilling record of great triumph over many difficulties. In this respect the congregation reflects the various stages in the history of the American nation. It is not merely the fact that this little group of Lutheran Christians two hundred years ago had to struggle with the weaknesses of small beginnings, for *aller Anfang ist schwer*. But this little group met opposition and repeated deception from Christians of other names. Efforts were made to prevent them from obtaining a lot on which to build a church, and after a lot was finally secured, attempts were made to prevent them from erecting a church on it. Not only was there opposition from without, but there was strife and dissension inside. It was not easy for these immigrants and their children to adjust themselves to the new conditions of the American scene. There were difficulties and contentions among the laity of the congregation, and oftentimes differences of judgment between the laity, and the clergy. Sometime there was sad dissension between the pastors, usually between the old pastor and the young pastor. There was repeated trouble over the language issue and issues in political life. Sometimes there were nativistic attacks by political rowdies. The congregation was visited by repeated disaster to its property. More than once its buildings were devastated by fire. At least once the raging flood

* An extensive review of the book, written by Dieter Cunz, was published in the *New Yorker Staatszeitung und Herald*, September 4, 1955; another one by A. E. Zucker in the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, L (December 1955), 341-342.

waters of Jones Falls reached up and sought to pull the church into its muddy current. All these difficulties and disasters were overcome and outlived, and the reader of the book is impressed with the record of magnificent triumph as the goodness of God preserved the flocks, and the faith of the people rebuilt the fold after each disaster.

"Situating for generations at one of the important gates of immigration into America, Old Zion of Baltimore performed an important service to the nation by gathering those who came from German-speaking countries and helping them through the difficult transition to American life. Zion provided these newcomers, generation after generation, with a haven and a sanctuary where they could cultivate the faith of their fathers in their mother-tongue. We Americans pride ourselves on the fact that here everyone may worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience, but we do not always realize that it is important also that everyone should have the liberty and opportunity to worship God according to the dictates of his own mother-tongue. One has not really mastered a foreign language until he can use it for edification in his private devotions, and by the same token it is cruel to compel people to worship God in a tongue which they have not really mastered. So the bilingual character of Old Zion met a real need of the nation and of the Church, because it provided a haven for the German Lutheran immigrant and at the same time provided a spiritual home for his children and their children.

"From the beginning until this day Zion in Baltimore has been conscious of her special relation to her community and to the city. It is not without significance that the official name of the congregation is "The Zion Church of the City of Baltimore." Zion has had a distinctive part in the life of the city with which her name is so closely associated. Her pastors and people were active in many civic and religious organizations and, over, and over, brought Zion Church into the work for the welfare of the community. This was particularly true of the long service and the high reputation of Zion School, which won for Pastor Scheib and his congregation the respect of a wide segment of the German-speaking and also the English-speaking elements in Baltimore. Many of the products of the School became prominent in the life of the city and the state. Zion's services to the community bulked large also during the two world wars, when her many and varied lines of activity on behalf of the American cause completely vindicated the loyalty of these citizens of German background.

"Old Zion was the mother of many other Lutheran churches in this city and in all this section of our country. Pastor Kurtz was one of the founders and the first president of the Maryland Synod in 1820. He was also one of the founders and the first president of the General Synod, organized that same year. Thus the direct influence of Zion in Baltimore was felt in the solidifying of the Lutheran forces of the country and the continuing organization of Lutheran congregations over a wide area. Scores of Lutheran congregations in Baltimore and vicinity, and more than a hundred in this general area, trace their origin directly or indirectly to old Zion.

"Zion Church of Baltimore has recently been following more and more the evangelical lines and tendencies of its founders and early pastors. Pastor Kurtz, during the forty-seven years of his faithful ministry here, planted the evangelical roots of the Gospel so deep in this congregation, that even sixty-one years of rationalism in the pulpit under Pastor Scheib did not suffice to uproot them. During the last three pastorates, Zion has gained growing insight into the foundations of her belief, has gained new respect

for the faith of her founders, and has been inspired by new confidence in her mission. The services of worship have been transformed so that they now follow more nearly the pattern of the fathers of the Lutheran faith. And the church plays a larger part in the daily life of her members. This means that these three pastors have closed the ring of evangelical progression around the center, Jesus Christ, and have brought the end of the two centuries to the high levels of faith that characterized the beginnings of the congregation.

"It is refreshing also to observe that today the old congregation is renewing its youth and laying hold on a new lease of life. After more than a century of separation from the Maryland Synod and the General Synod which old Zion helped to organize, she has now reunited with the Synod (1953) and so become an integral part of the great United Lutheran Church in America. She has a new constitution, one that places her in organic connection with more than two million other Lutherans in this country and gives her the joyous certainty of continuing in greater strength and faithful fellowship with the whole church, to the greater glory of God. With the advent of a new pastor, a gracious and devout servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, the old congregation develops a devotional spirit of worship and a new period of activity that will stand unexcelled in the long history of Zion."

It goes without saying that throughout the anniversary events the names of Zion's leaders in the past have been recalled time and again. They are not mere names. Their personalities have left their mark upon the people and the work of Zion Church. As the people of this city cross the Memorial Plaza, they are always reminded of the mighty fortress of faith, hope and love as they look at the beautiful structure across from the City Hall, the parish house with its conspicuous tower, somewhat different from the surrounding architecture. It was Julius K. Hofmann, who, at the beginning of this century, conceived the idea of this Baltimore landmark. Hofman was not only one of Zion's great leaders, but a leader among the German element in Baltimore as were his predecessor Heinrich Scheib and his successor, Fritz O. Evers.

It is perhaps interesting to note that Zion took a rather significant forward step during its 200th year. The congregation conducted its first daily vacation Bible school in 200 years. The noteworthy feature about this Bible school was, that it was conducted as a neighborhood project. The neighborhood responded to Zion's invitation. Being a neighborhood school, it was conducted on an integrated basis. Zion's people may surely be proud that they could pioneer so successfully along the road of better racial understanding and community spirit. The presence of the members of the Board of the Housing Authority at the closing assembly of the daily vacation Bible school was an indication that our City government acknowledges the importance of Zion's Bible school experiment and better community development. Zion is still pioneering. As it was founded by German pioneer immigrants in the mid-eighteenth century, Zion's people are still endeavoring to pioneer in the name of Christ in the mid-twentieth century.