

St John's Lutheran Church



GERMANTOWN

THE STORY of the Lutheran Church in Bundaberg begins with the arrival of many German families in Maryborough from the 1860s onwards. As available land became scarcer, many chose to journey to the Bundaberg area to take up land in the Woongarra Scrub, near The Hummock, in 1873. The settlement became known as Germantown, and families lived in tents or bark huts until larger and more comfortable houses could be built.

There was no local Pastor for this early settlement, so a request was made to Pastor Carl Hellmuth in Maryborough to make the two day journey by horse and cart to Bundaberg on a regular basis. By 1877, regular monthly services were being held in Bundaberg in a shop, then at the Pioneer School on the corner of Barolin and Woongarra Streets, where the Linden Clinic currently stands.

EARLY CHURCHES

In 1882, the Lutheran community had grown sufficiently to require their own building and resident pastor, and a small weatherboard church was erected in Tantiitha Street, with Pastor Johann Koehnke in residence. This church was flooded several times over the years, and in 1890, the decision was made by the congregation to purchase a block of land on the corner of George and Boundary Streets for a new church.

Unfortunately, Pastor Koehnke died of typhoid fever in 1884, and it was



not until 1893 after the second Lutheran Church was built in George Street, that Pastor C.F. Schmidt was invited to move from Maryborough to Bundaberg and become the second resident Pastor. The second St John's church cost the congregation 440 and was a brick and timber building. Pastor Schmidt remained at St John's until his death in 1914, by which time the congregation consisted of over 80 families.

The next Pastor revolutionised the outreach services in Bundaberg and outlying districts through his vision and commitment. Pastor Martin Reuther had only graduated two years previous to his Bundaberg appointment in 1915, and remained there until his death in 1951. In that period he opened centres for worship in Currajong, Goodwood, Cordalba, Childers, Gin Gin, Wallaville, Goodnight Scrub, Baffle Creek, Winfield and Bucca. He also initiated the Young





People's Society in St John's, planned for the building of a Sunday School and encouraged the change from the German language to English in church services.

A NEW CHURCH

The idea of a new church was kick-started by an anonymous donation of one pound, sent to Pastor Reuther in 1940 and signed 'a progressive Lutheran'. Current church history suggests the donor was none other than Mrs Reuther, who wanted a new and larger brick church.

Nothing more happened until 1947, when a bequest of 6000 was left to the church for the erection of a tower on a new church. Initial canvassing of the congregation began, but the death of Pastor Reuther in 1951 brought a halt to any plans. With the appointment of Pastor John Biar, the idea of a new church was again discussed, and by 1956 the congregation pledged another 32,000, and the tender process for a new church began.

The architect of the new St John's was Dr Karl Langer from Brisbane, and Brisbane firm J. Hutchinson and Son won the contract to build the church. Groundbreaking began in January 1958, with the church dedicated on 3rd April 1960.

BUILDING THE CHURCH

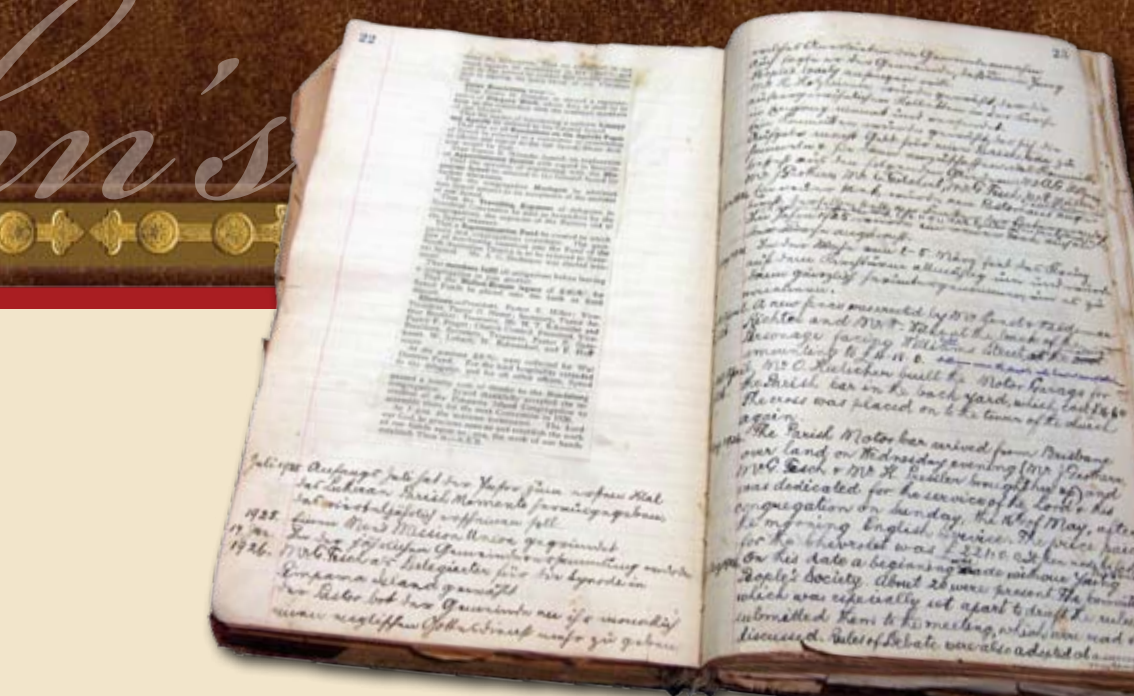
Unlike earlier churches, the present building was erected a few feet from the current church. Once the outer brick walls of the new church had reached a particular height, the old church was dismantled, moved and re-erected as the present church hall.

Much of the early work of digging foundations, carting bricks and gravel, as well as clearing the land, was done by members of the congregation. Hand cement mixers were used for the foundations, and volunteers laid the cement, and transported the bricks from the railway station to George Street. The bricks used in the construction of St John's were brought from Maryborough by rail and the timber, donated to the church, was from Rosedale and Gin Gin.

The new St John's - construction and fittings - cost approximately £61,000, and is 40.9 metres long, 14.6 metres wide and 42 metres tall. The spire was of Finnish design, sheeted in copper, and topped by a 2.7 metre cross lit by fluorescent tubes. The original £6000 bequest left by Mrs Lovgren in 1947 had to be used solely for a tower or



steeple, and so the imposing tower with its copper-sheeted steeple, spire and cross is the result of that legacy. The cross can be seen for kilometres around Bundaberg, and has proved a favourite with birds and lightning strikes, resulting in continuous replacement of the fluorescent tubes. Originally, workmen would climb a ladder on the inside of the church then up the outside steeple to replace lights - nowadays it's a bit easier and safer with a crane and riggers.



At the time of construction, St John's was considered one of the state's most modern buildings, due no doubt to the striking façade of an open Bible. Two passages from St John's Gospel are written in white letters 60cm high, and are visible for kilometres around our city. The letters were precast in concrete with iron stakes through to give them stability, and as the concrete is beginning to show signs of erosion, plans are in place to eventually replace them with a lighter material.

The new St John's Lutheran Church was officially dedicated on April 3, 1960. Approximately 1,400 worshippers attended, as well as two local and seven visiting pastors. The Dedication Ceremony was conducted by Pastor F.H. Schmidt, President of the U.E.L.C.A. (United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia), Qld. District.

THE CHURCH INTERIOR

The interior of St John's Church is a combination of old and new fittings, with many treasured items removed from the previous church and refitted into the new building.

Twelve stained glass panels from the earlier church, donated by local families in memory of their ancestors, were reset into the new building, and the organ, originally installed in 1899, was rebuilt and replaced into the new church.





The church bell, cast in Maryborough at the Union Foundry for £38, was also transferred to the new St John's, and is 105 years old.

One of the more interesting features of the Church is the leather bound German Bible with silver clasps. This Bible was presented by the Empress Augusta Victoria of Germany (Queen Victoria's daughter) to St John's after the German Consul-General, Dr Irmer, visited the Lutheran community in Bundaberg. The Bible has not been used since the last public service in the German language in 1940, although it remains a treasured possession.

The striking 4.57m wooden cross is also a dominant feature of the interior of St John's. Czech-born wood carver Alfred Schubert emigrated to Melbourne from Bavaria in 1955, and has carved hundreds of crucifixes for churches. The St John's crucifix was number 250, and took over 550 hours to carve. It came from one log of Tasmanian King William pine, and the Christ figure is 2.44m in length.

Perhaps the last words on St John's church should go to the Foreman of Construction Mr H. Compton, who commented to the News-Mail in 1959 - "Bundaberg has some marvellous churches, but this is one out of the box!"...



References

- 100 Years of Grace – St John's Lutheran Church 1877-1977
- St John's Lutheran Church 40th Anniversary Leaflet
- Bundaberg News-Mail, various articles 1958-1960



Many thanks to Edwin Tesch, Delwyn Ainsworth, John Taske and Les Tesch for generously sharing their knowledge of the construction of St John's, and photos and clippings supplied for this article.

Sue Gammon

-Bundaberg Library