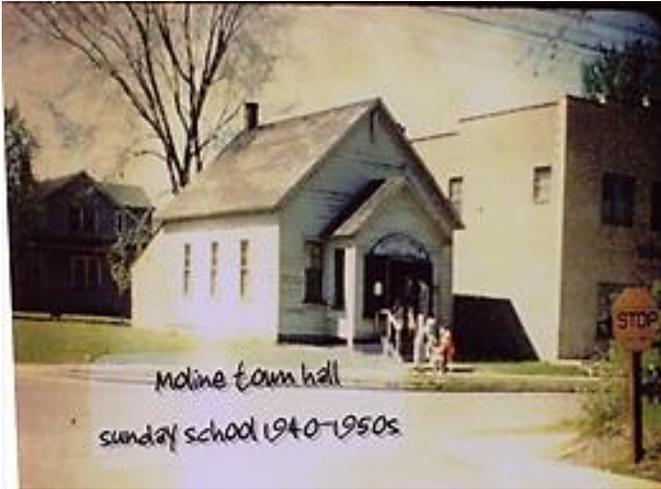


## Calvary's First Decade (1919-1929)

From school to dance hall to “basement church,” our Calvary congregation kept moving to accommodate its amazing growth during its early years. As part of our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary observance, we will spend the coming months looking back at the church’s century of history, decade-by-decade. Let’s pick up where this congregation’s faith journey began.

Calvary Lutheran Church of Moline was officially organized on Nov. 2, 1919, the outgrowth of a Sunday School established through the efforts of Ernest Weideman of Trinity Lutheran Church in Moline. In the beginning, the children met in a classroom at the Fairview School (Roosevelt). In May of 1919, the Rock Island District of the Augustana Synod recognized the growth potential in the new Highland Addition of Moline, and called future Augustana seminarian Harry Alden to serve in this mission field—and knock on some doors.

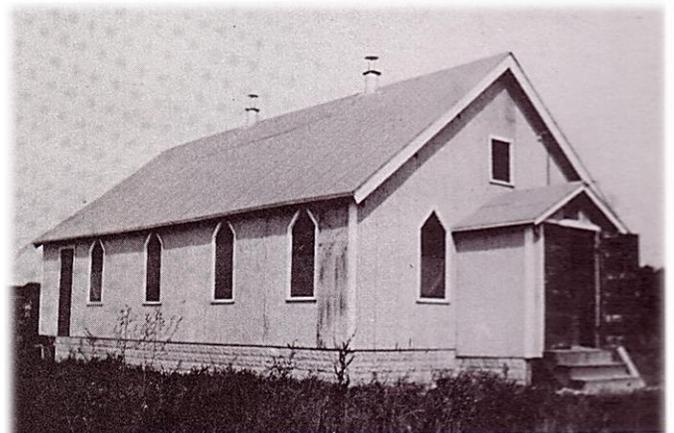


It was a slow start, to be sure. That June, only eight people attended the first worship service held at the school, where the teacher’s desk served as the pulpit. But a canvass of the neighborhood showed there was a strong interest in establishing a church there, and worship attendance grew steadily, until finally a larger meeting place was needed. When school resumed at Fairview that fall, the decision was made to relocate to Sellers Hall, a former dance hall (and a drafty one, at that) on 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue (now Avenue of the Cities). It was here that a new congregation named Calvary Lutheran Church was officially formed with 38 charter members and 60 children. The Rev. Walter Tillberg of Trinity presided over the meeting, during which Mr. Alden was named the church’s pastoral leader. Just a week later, worship was moved to Township Hall

at 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 29<sup>th</sup> Street. The parishioners reportedly brought their own coal to heat the building, which was being rented for \$5 a month. If the township officials needed the space for an event, however, the congregation had to vacate the hall. Its members longed for a place of their own.

And they would have it. The Luther League of the Illinois Conference agreed to purchase a portable chapel for the new congregation. Now they just needed someplace to *put it*. On Feb. 16, 1920, the members decided to purchase a plot of ground at 29 ½ Street near 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue for \$1350. That summer, the Brotherhood of the church built the chapel. Furnishings were provided by three Lutheran churches in Moline: Trinity (pulpit platform and collection plates); Salem (pews and altar) and First (pulpit). Material shortages—and the city’s concerns over safety of the portable building—delayed its opening until July 18, 1920. The chapel was dedicated Aug. 1, with the president of “our” Augustana Synod and various pastors from the Tri-Cities in attendance for the festive occasion.

By the following August, the Sunday School enrollment had grown to 200 under the direction of Sunday School Superintendent Mr. O.O. Walker, and there were about 50 congregational members. Calvary was not without its challenges, however. Mr. Alden lamented that total offerings were averaging only about \$6 a Sunday, which he attributed to high unemployment among the membership. In his final report, he also declared that Sunday attendance was being negatively affected by what he called “the dance.” He said that parents were staying out too late dancing on Saturday nights and not getting their kids to Sunday School the next morning. Still, the mission field showed considerable promise and he issued a plea that a pastor promptly take over the work he had begun.



First Church Building on 30th Street  
Donated by Luther League

In October of 1921, the Rev. Emil Bergren of the Augustana Book Concern was called to serve as Calvary's first ordained minister. Under his leadership the congregation began growing by leaps and bounds. On Easter Sunday in 1926, some 46 children from infants to age 14 were baptized during a single service!



That same year, the Calvary Church Council moved forward with plans to construct a church building; clearly the chapel was not large enough. The congregation had earlier seized an opportunity to purchase three other lots on the more visible southeast corner of 23<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 29<sup>th</sup> Street, with the hope that a church would one day be built on the site (the lots on which the chapel sat would be sold). In September of 1926, the congregation finally authorized construction of a "basement church" which would have to suffice until Calvary members could afford to raise the roof, so to speak, for a first-floor sanctuary. Cost of the basement project was estimated at \$13,000. Fund-raising began, and a Roosevelt teacher, Mrs. Grace Puttman—who was not even a member—donated the first \$50 to get things rolling.

Work on the new structure began that October. By the end of that year, the Rev. Bergren left Calvary to accept a new call. In February of 1927, before the basement church was finished, the congregation called Adolph Dickhart, who was a seminary student at the time. He became the first ordained pastor in fulltime ministry at Calvary when he joined the church in July of 1927. By then, the congregation was in its new building (no date for a "basement church dedication service" could be found). The newly built structure lacked most of the basic furnishings of a worship space/fellowship hall, so the Rev. Dickhart and his parishioners set about filling it with a pulpit, baptismal font, pews, kitchen furnishings and the like. It was reported that the pastor also worked to "build up the walls of the spiritual church." His dedicated efforts resulted in a significant increase in membership in a congregation that was young in more ways than one: the majority of the members were under 30 years of age.

The Rev. Dickhart served the church through the remainder of its first decade. His words to the congregation, urging them to attend regularly and devote themselves more fully to their faith life, should still resonate with members of Calvary today. "We must grow in the inner life and soul life of our congregation...," he stated in one report. "How necessary it is for us to make use of the Word and Sacraments, and feed our soul life... . We cannot grow outwardly unless we grow inwardly."

Interior of the basement church, looking toward the library and kitchen →

