

# *Laying of the Cornerstone* *Zion Lutheran, Pickrell, NE*

Following is the presentation from our May 29, 2016 worship service celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the laying of the cornerstone, as narrated by the late "Pastor J.B. Reents" (portrayed by Dave Holland).



# *Laying of the Cornerstone*

Therefore thus says the Lord God,  
“Behold, I am laying in Zion a  
stone, a tested stone, a costly  
cornerstone for the foundation,  
firmly placed. He who  
believes in it will not be  
disturbed.”

Isiah 28: 16

*May 28, 1916*

# **ZION - BUILT ON A CROSS OF CHRIST**



So here we are 100 years later, almost to the day, in this magnificent sanctuary built by the ancestors of many of you. It is great to see so many of you here to honor the men who made the building of this place possible, not only the building committee and paid construction workers, but also all the members of that congregation 100 years ago that volunteered of their time freely.

Evangelical Lutheran Zion's Church  
1916

Evangelical Lutheran Zion's Church 1916

I was there that day when the cornerstone for the Zion German Lutheran Church was put into place by the north tower.



It was a beautiful day, one filled with men, women, and children in their Sunday best. A basement, mostly dug by hand, was to have a heating plant.





There were 114 buggies and 179 automobiles counted that day which showed something about the prosperity of the German Lutherans in this township.



The services opened with a song of the entire congregation and the invocation was given after which the cornerstone was put into place.





Pastor Reents stands beside the cornerstone during the service.

A history of the founding of Zion Lutheran Church in 1874 was read before it was placed in a copper box inside the cornerstone along with the other items listed below.

Contents of the box:

- The deed to church property
- A list of those subscribing to the construction of the building
- The church book
- The New Testament
- History of the church organization.





This was the condition of those items when the cornerstone was opened in 1999 during the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Church. Water had entered through the mortar that had been breaking down over the years.



I think I will just sit down here in my chair to give you some of that history. I understand that this rocker was refinished by Edward Ideus, grandson of Henry Jurgens, and is still used often in the Fellowship area. I spent many, many hours sitting in this rocker in the 43 years I was doing ministry at Zion.

It is often said that pictures speak louder than words. I don't know if that held true when I was preaching. Young men would stand outside when the church was full and could STILL hear me preach in those early years of my ministry.





Zion German Lutheran Church was organized with 10 members on March 14, 1874. All of the immigrants came from the area of Hanover, a small overpopulated territory in Northeast Germany. I was born on January 15, 1874 in Germany so I was 3 months old when Zion was organized on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1874. I also emigrated to America with my parents in 1891. If I was still living, I along with your church would be 142 years old.

Members in 1872 met in each other's dugouts and sod houses. This excerpt from a letter found in a family history book of Ernest Jurgens gives us an idea of what those services were like in 1872.....

Dear Antje (cousin of Marie)

I will tell you about our first church service in the dugout. Women, with their small children sat down and the men had to stand. Little John was a bit fussy and I happened to look toward the ceiling. I spied 2 rattlesnakes on the rafters. I couldn't keep my mind on the sermon and was conducting my own prayers to God, asking Him to keep his Christian rattlers up there, not joining us below. When I got home, I checked my rafters carefully with a stick, but all I stirred up was a mouse nest and a bunch of bugs.

When the traveling minister can't make it, we hold services with each settler taking his turn interpreting the Bible as best he can, with the Guidance of God. The ladies tell me William does an excellent job and I am quite proud of him. We are hoping for a permanent minister although I don't know how we would support him. He would probably have to farm like the rest of us. God to with you and bless you as He has done for us.

Your Cousin,

Marie (Marie Aden Johnson, mother of Elsabe Jurgens)



The settlers decided to start meeting in the District 38 schoolhouse that sat across from the current Zion cemetery. This is also the school that the architect of this church walked to every day for 3 years as a child before moving to Beatrice.

In 1880, the members decided to build a worship place of their own but as you can see by this two excerpts from “America, Here We Come”, that church was short-lived. So in 1881 another church was built at what became known as “church corner”.

December 1880 (excerpt from “America, Here We Come” by Barb Hawkins)

Dear Antje,

Our congregation built a small church in the corner of our pasture last spring near the leaning evergreen tree. We decorated the tree for Christmas this year. It sure is nice having church so close to home.

Love Marie

December 1881(excerpt from “America, Here We Come” by Barb Hawkins)

Dear Antje,

The church we built last year burnt down in a prairie fire but we have saved the roots from the evergreen, planning to rebuild the church and replant the tree. The new church will be built on upon the top of the hill, instead of in the draw and will be much bigger.

Your cousin, Marie

## First Zion Lutheran Church Built in 1881

On January 1, 1881, a meeting of the congregation passed a resolution to build a worship place of its own. The structure would measure 30 by 46 with the total indebtedness not to exceed \$50.00 and to be completed by July 15<sup>th</sup> of the same year.

The members sent for Christian Meints, from Golden Illinois, to build that church. He liked the area and stayed to raise his family in the Bear Creek area. That first church wasn't very big; in fact 4 of those churches would fit in the current sanctuary.



Pastor Oskar Lompe came in 1887 and served Zion until 1898. In the 11 years he was here, he started to also hold worship services in Townsend School, seven miles northwest of Zion, as a convenience for people who lived farther north, which later led to the founding of Christ Lutheran Church of rural Pickrell in 1893 to alleviate crowding at Zion and to make it easier for settlers who lived north to worship.



On January 5, 1898, the congregation voted to lengthen the structure of Zion Church by 14 feet and add an altar niche to the west end. A factory-built altar was placed in that altar niche with a factory-made pulpit also being installed.

On the east end of the church a 65 foot bell tower was to be added which would house a 2,000 pound bell. It is the big bell that is in the church's north tower yet today.





This is the interior of the first Zion German Lutheran Church, Hanover Township, Nebraska. The work was done by Christian Meints, who was also originally from Illinois. The result was a beautiful building - 'churchly' in appearance inside and out!

# 1881 Zion Church 1898

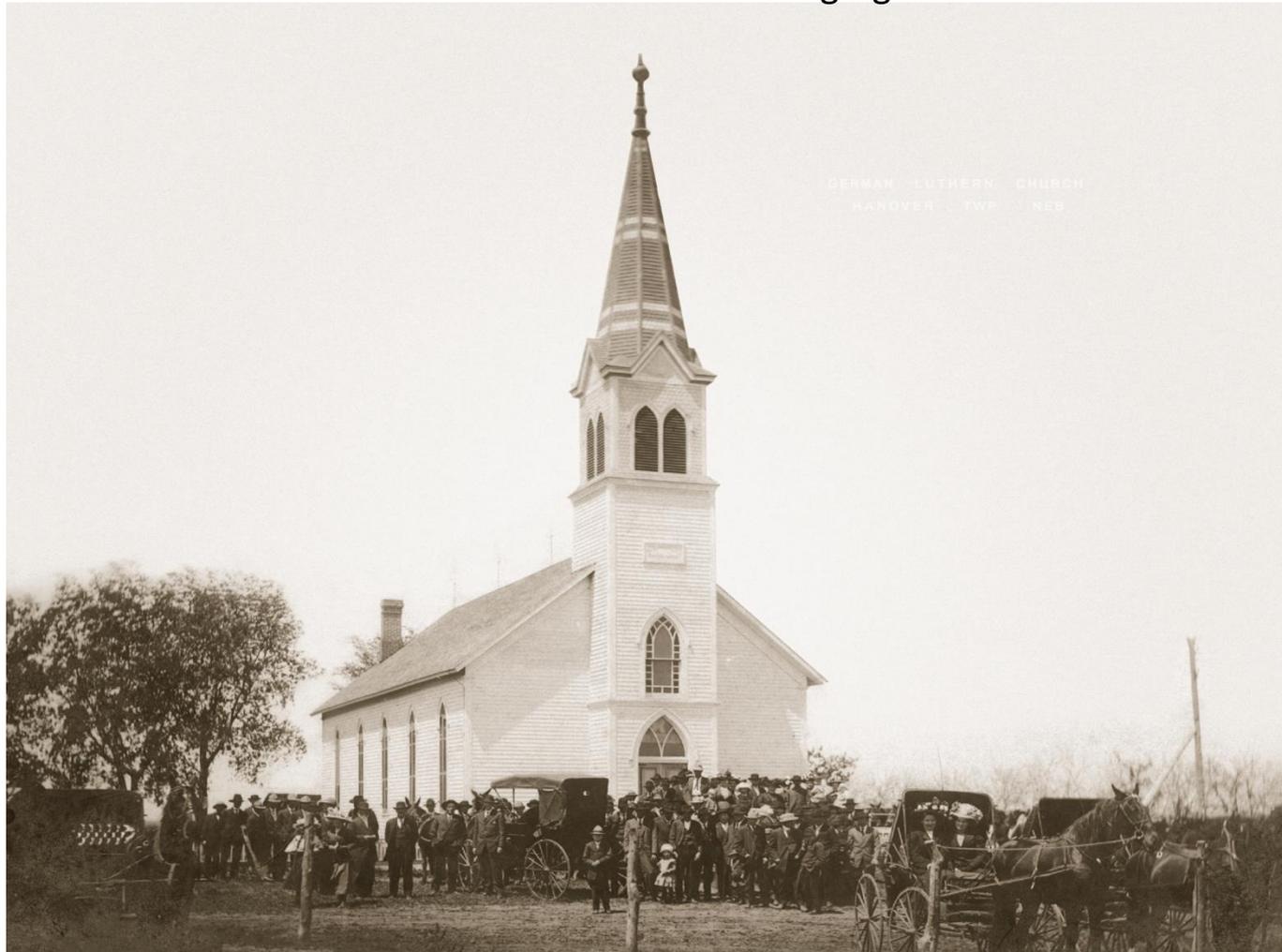


Pastor Wolfgang Hertel served Zion from 1896 to 1902. When he left to serve a church in Iowa, the congregation called his son-in-law, Pastor J.B. Reents who was the first residence pastor of Zion's sister church, Christ Lutheran.



This is what the Zion property looked like when I was called to be Zion's minister in 1902 at the young age of 28. You think you have disagreements today. Well it isn't anything like in those days. Our annual meetings could last 6 hours or longer and that is without any women there. The men were passionate about their church and they fought for what they believed. I'm glad things are more mellow now but that passion was admirable. Notice the position of these buildings (door facing east, altar niche to the west,). You are currently sitting exactly where the original church sat. It was moved across the road so construction could begin on the new larger church.

I saw a need for area settlers to have a home church. With Zion's pews being full, I helped organize yet another congregation in the area, the Immanuel Evangelical Church, located six miles southwest of Zion, in order to serve the settlers living in that direction. And still Zion's membership grew. According to the Jubilee Anniversary book, "With the coming of Pastor Reents there began a period in the life and history of this congregation that is marked by such unusual growth in numbers, such strengthening of faith and doctrine, such outstanding accomplishments in every phase of the congregation's existence, that it must be called unique and almost unbelievable in the case of a rural congregation."



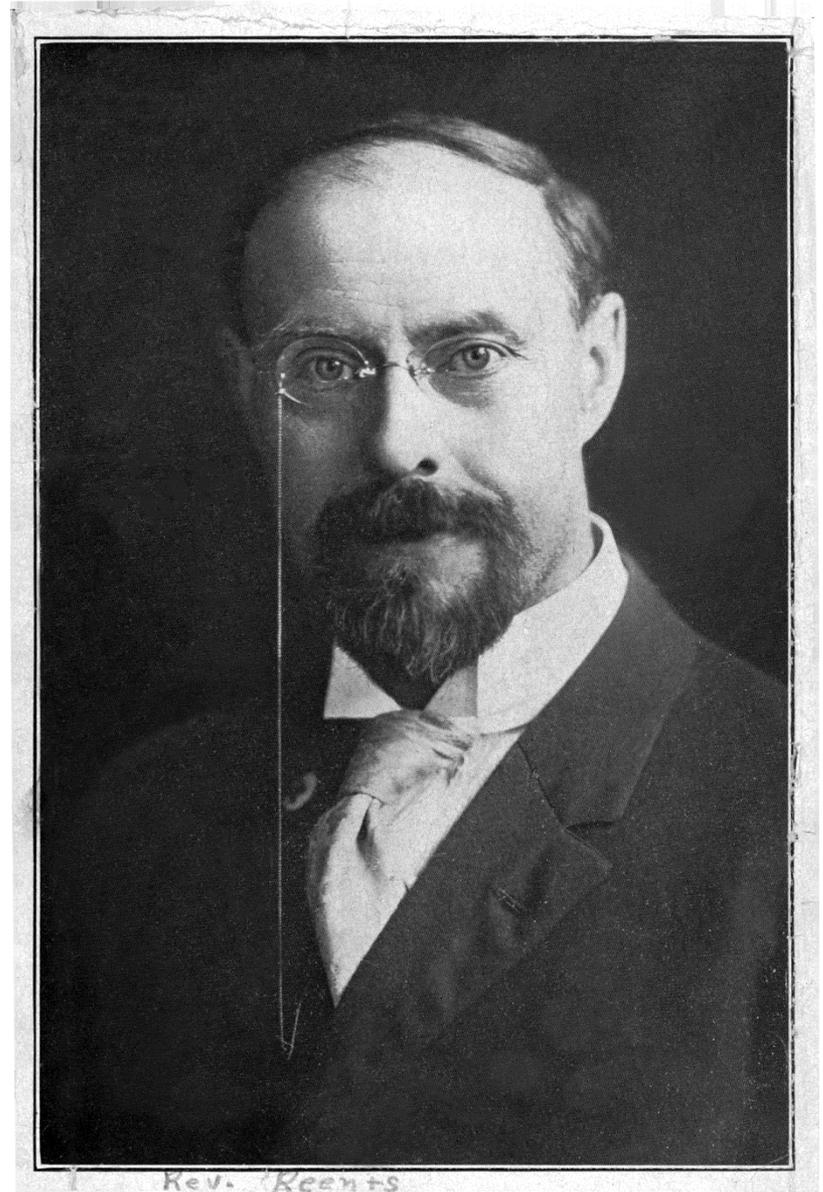


Even with additional churches in the area, more German Lutheran worshippers came. In 1910, the vestrymen of Zion started talking about more additions.

# Building Committee

In 1910 there was more talk of further addition. I was a young man, just two years out of seminary. I was against this make shift; I had a vision for a new church but it took 5 years for me to convince others! During the congregational meeting in 1915, by a vote of 90 'for' and 30, 'against' the decision was made to build a new and larger church, BUT, construction would **NOT** begin before \$25,000 was raised. Cost of the structure was estimated to be \$40,000. The church, which sat on the land where the new church was to be built, was moved across the road where services were held until the new church was completed.

**Chairman: J.B. Reents**





With the dedicated members this congregation had, I knew it could be done and it was. It was said I was pretty persuasive in those days but I am proud of the fact that not one penny was raised from outside of the Zion membership.

But I couldn't have done it without my devoted wife. She was known by some as the "Unseen Power". Every time I went out to visit a parishioner, she would be the one to harness up the team of horses. When I'd have one of my terrible headaches, she was the one who went to warn my confirmation classes that they better be on their best behavior. Those headaches are gone now that I am in my heavenly home where there is no pain.

All pledges were to be paid by 1917, and if not they must pay 8% interest. The church board authorized Rev. J.B. Reents to solicit funds from the congregation. \$34,500 had been pledged before actual work began (some say \$42,000).





After the needed money was raised all I needed now was a building committee that had the same vision and a construction crew that could do the work. I found them in the following people:

Fun Fact:

Great grandson, Dean Siefkes, was the Construction Manager for the fellowship area that was added in 2013. When taking out a window to put in the door to the fellowship area, Dean found his great grandfather's name carved on the underside of the window sill that was being removed.

**Secretary: Ben H. Siefkes**



**Treasurer: Henry Ehmen**



## **Additional Member: Henry T. Jurgens**

Fun Fact: He donated the 1 ton bell in the original church, which is currently the biggest bell in the north tower.



Fun Fact:

Leonard Buhr, grandson of John Buhr, was a member of the Building Committee for the Fellowship addition that was added to the church in 2013 following in his Grandfather's footsteps.

**Additional Member: Jann (John) Buhr**



**Additional Member: Henry Miller**



Fun Fact:

Mr. Tholen presented me with a Ford Coupe car from the congregation on a surprise Sunday celebration to recognize my 20 years in the ministry.

**Additional Member: Thole Tholen**

## Architect: Richard W. Grant



This is an excerpt from an architectural journey when he was seeking bids for this church

Pickrell, Nebr.—Church: 1 sty. & bas. 54.4x96. Nr. Pickrell. Archt. Richard W. Grant, Beatrice, Neb. Owner German Ev. Luth. Zion Church. Logan and Hanover twps. Bids will be received by architect until 1:30 p. m., Dec. 20.

Reprinted from **American Contractor Vol. 36,**  
December 18, 1915

Richard Grant was 53 years old when he was hired as the architect. He was born in Illinois but moved to Gage County when he was 7 years old onto a homestead that was 2 ½ miles east of the current Zion Church under the Homestead Act (at that time there was no church yet). He and his sister walked to District 38 where they attended school for 3 years. The District 38 schoolhouse was located across from the Zion Cemetery and was the schoolhouse that Zion members used to hold services until their own building was built in 1881.



He was a Catholic so his design has features that have Catholic elements to them. His plans called for a structure that was to be 50 by 90 feet with extra additions. The entire building was to be 150 feet long complete with two spires, one to reach a height of 115 feet with a 14 foot cross. The smaller spire would measure 85 feet with a 10 foot cross. There would be two bells housed in the north bell tower. The larger bell was to come from the old church and measured 35 inches while the smaller bell measured 28 inches. He was paid \$1019 for his work.

# Supervising Carpenter: Martin Alberts

Martin Alberts was the supervising carpenter and was also the only one who would go up and work on the steeples. He was so precise on his measurements that it was said that even though the steeples were built on the ground, once they were lifted with the teams of horses, they fit perfectly.

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## **Martin Alberts . . . after working for 65 years it gets to be a habit.**

Martin Alberts was born on the 21st day of March, 1882 in Aurich-Olendorf in east Germany. When only 13, Martin started doing carpenter work as an apprentice.

In 1900 he came to this country, where he located at Langdon, Missouri. It was in Langdon that Martin and his wife the former Fenken Schmidt who was also born in Aurich-Olendorf were married March 17, 1902.

In April 1905 Mr. and Mrs. Alberts came to Filley where they located 7 miles northeast of town on the farm now belonging to Louis Schoen. After three years

Martin and his family moved to his present home in the south edge of Filley which he has built.

1909 was a busy year for Martin when he constructed the following buildings. The houses now occupied by Tom Schuster, Jerry Hunt, Ivan Hedge and John Dorn and also the Masonic Hall. In 1915-1916 Martin worked on the Zion Lutheran Church northwest of Filley where he had the contract for all the woodwork in the church. Other homes and farm buildings that Martin built were Henry Ehmens' near Pickrell, Henry T. Jurgens, T. T. Jur-

(Continued on page 4)



According to Eileen Holbein, granddaughter of Martin Alberts, was the only worker on the project who would do the work on the tall spires. “Grandpa used to say that they all thought he was crazy because he was the only one who would go up on the pinnacle”, she said.

Story is that Mr. Alberts, not wanting to always go down to ground to get to the other spire, just put a board between the two spires and walked across thus eliminating the need to go down to the ground.

# Masons: John & Paul Witski

John & Paul Witzski, the masons, laid 225,000 bricks for the outside walls and 75,000 hollow clay tiles for the inside. The bricks came from Chicago and if you look carefully around the outside of the church, you may see a brick with the word Chicago on it. As the masons were laying the bricks, they would sometimes lose focus and lay a brick backwards by mistake. Now that is a scavenger hunt to do with your children!

They were paid \$4,096.

## Highlights:

- 225,000 bricks
- 75,000 hollow clay bricks
- Bricks came from Chicago and are marked
- Paid \$4,096

All materials were hauled by horse-drawn wagons from area lumberyards and train depots. The bricks were shipped to Nebraska City and had to be hauled to the construction site by members of the congregation. There were over 200 hundred loads. Whenever families went in for supplies and some money was left over, lumber was hauled and donated to the building of the church. Individuals hired to haul materials were paid 50 cents a load and it took one day for a round trip from Beatrice. When the bricks arrived by wagon, they were unloaded in huge piles. You can see the men sitting on these piles at the cornerstone laying.



Following are two notes sent to us from descendants of things they could remember being told about hauling those bricks and sand.

Bernadine said her Dad John Tholen was in confirmation at that time. He was 14 yrs old. He and other Boys his age <sup>each</sup> drove a wagon with horses to Pickrell to get the Bricks. She said the bricks loaded 1 foot high in the wagon Box. She did not know how many wagons or How many days or trips it took.

Bernadine Fisser's dad was John Tholen, member of Zion in 1916

Pete Hofeling (92 in 1996) of Beatrice also remembers the construction of the church in 1916-1917. He said he and his father used to spend a whole day hauling wagon loads of sand for the project. Church history records indicate that all of the building materials, over 200 loads, was hauled by members of the church with teams and wagons.

“I was 13 years old and my Dad and I would start out before noon with a team of horses and a wagon and get a load of sand from the sand pit,” Hofeling said. “Then we would stop at home for lunch because we lived 4 miles west of the church. Then we would go to the church and unload the sand and a whole day would be spent by the time we were done.”

What a beautiful job the Witzski brothers did on the masonry work.  
Now it is this congregation's duty to preserve that work.





The council, facilities committee, and the Endowment Committee have been working hard to do just that. While adding the Fellowship area and doing the mason work on that building, it was discovered what bad shape the mortar was on the 1916 building.

Capital Restoration from Lincoln has been working on tuckpointing different sections of the sanctuary for the last 4 years. So far, the two towers, the chimney, and the two entrances have been completed with more work being done in years to come.





Clay tile needing gaps filled in.



Here are some of the clay tiles that are located inside the towers. Water had been pouring in the towers because the mortar was all but gone. Dean Siefkes said they needed to just kept stuffing mortar in endlessly to fill the gaps. Water going down the towers causes much damage that goes unseen for many years.



**Brick holes, North Tower**



The janitors noticed as they were vacuuming that on the south stairway the woodwork was pulling away from the stair casing.



Adam Kool, from Capital Restoration, who has been doing the work for the last four years, said that there were areas in such bad condition that he would not have been surprised to pick up the newspaper and see a picture and story about the Zion towers collapsing.



Mr. Kool said there were areas where he could put his hands through.

**PRESERVE**  
**the**  
**MEMORIES**

**PRESERVE**  
**the**  
**SANCTUARY**

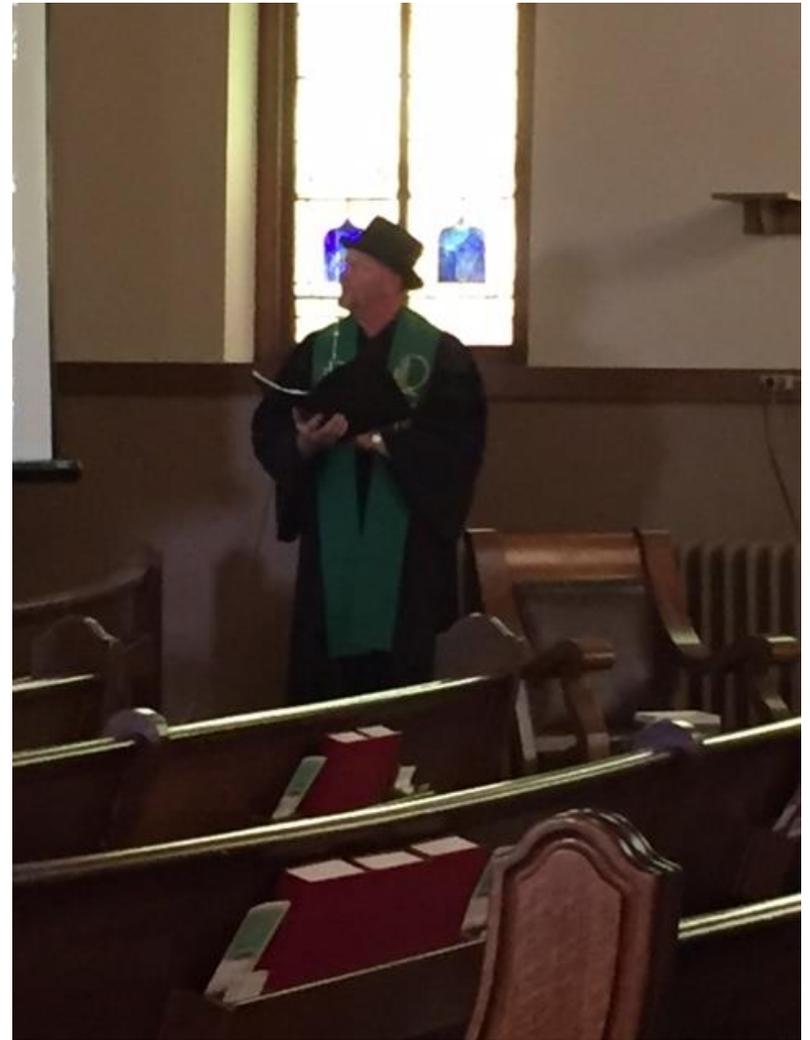
Last year alone, the Endowment committee gave almost \$30,000 for this re-mortering project. More information about the Endowment Fund can be found in the pamphlets in the pews or foyers, or by contacting the church office.

**“THIS IS THE ROCK  
ON WHICH I SHALL BUILD  
MY CHURCH”**

**Matthew 16: 18**

There is just too much to cover in one Sunday so please join the Zion members on another special service Sunday. We will be featuring a different aspect of our beautiful church on the last Sunday of each month, leading up to the Dedication Sunday in August of 2017.

I want to leave you with the same message that Pastor Bergstraesser from the German Lutheran Academy at Sterling had in his sermon on that cornerstone Sunday. It was to be proud of the devotion that your ancestors had for their church and continue their legacy by being an example to your children. Let them know that there is more to life than merely piling up worldly goods.



But before I leave you today, I'd like to end this portion of our Cornerstone service the same way they did on May 28, 1916 and that is with a prayer. This prayer however was not written by me but by Arnold Buhr, descendant of Building Committee Member, John Buhr.

Lord and Savior, we are so thankful that you have been with our congregation these many generations. Thank you for the pastors that you have provided to lead us. Thanks for giving them the insight to urge us to provide a place of worship for You as we are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary today. May we continue to face the challenges that arise in the future with your help. Open our eyes to see opportunities to serve those around us, following in our Savior's footsteps. Help us in all we do to lead others to their Savior and mine. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



# TO BE CONTINUED:

9:00 am, JUNE 26, 2016

Guest Pastor: Casey Lieneman, Son of the Congregation

“From the Heights of Zion”

Memories of the Balcony and Traditions of Seating

## **“Dear Ancestor”**

**Your tombstone stands among the rest; neglected and alone,  
The name and date are chiseled out on polished, marble stone.**

**It reaches out to all who care, it is too late to mourn,  
You did not know that I’d exist; you died....and I was born.**

**Yet each of us are cells of you, in flesh, in blood, in bone.  
Our hearts contract and beat a pulse, entirely not our own.**

**Dear ancestors, the place you filled one hundred years ago  
Spreads out among the ones left and would have loved you so.**

**I wonder how you lived and died, I wonder if you knew  
That someday I would find this spot, and come to visit you.**

Author Unknown

(reprinted from “The Family History of Henry & Marie Jurgens” book)



**Secretary: Bernhard (Ben) H. Siefkes**





**Committee Member: Jann (John) Buhr**



**Committee Member: Hinrich T. Jurgens**



**Committee Member: Hinrich (Henry) R. Miller**



**Committee Member: Thole Tholen**



Well I'd better take my memorial shovel now and head back to my burial plot before the 2:30 Memorial Day Service. You can come visit me there.

**Side Note:** Each of these seven shovels has a name of one of the original 1916 Building Committee burned on the handle in honor of their work and vision for the current Zion Church. It is the Anniversary Committee's hope that each of these shovels will be placed every year at the gravesites of the seven members on Memorial Day.



REV J B REENTS  
JAN 15      NOV 16  
1874      1945

