

# St. Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church

125 years

1888-2013



Compiled by Betsy Zimny

Celebrating 125 years  
1888-2013

One hundred and twenty five years is a long time. The oldest person ever to have lived, whose age was authenticated according to the Guinness Book of Records, was a woman named Jeanne Louise Calment who lived to the age of 122 years and 164 days. St. Stephen's is a faith community older than any individual person has lived. Just imagine! God is good!

There are other numbers within St. Stephen's history that also astound. In Pastor Huntington's day, the membership rose to 1300. In the 1960s there was a Saturday recreation program with 100 children and a director. In the 1980s, St. Stephen's committed to giving \$7,000 over seven years for the mission church at Hilltop. At the same time, they committed \$3,000 over seven years to Habitat for Humanity.

St. Stephen's raised \$1.7 million to build the chapel, the elevator, and the food pantry in the 1990s.

Vera Rathfon, 95, a member of St. Stephen's for 70 years, who was commended to God a week ago, would tell her son every time he brought her to worship, that she could remember when there was standing room only in the sanctuary. Some of us, perhaps, can't even imagine!

Some of these numbers no longer hold true; there is, for instance, plenty of standing room, but that is what leads us to praise God all the more. We understand that it is not our own righteousness that has brought us this far, but the faith that God has worked in us.

Just imagine - the Holy Spirit inspired Dave Warner to challenge St. Stephen's to raise \$5,000 during Advent last year to fund a revolving loan fund for women in India. St. Stephen's did that. This year he wants us to raise \$7,000. I can't wait to hear for what! The food closet that began in 1978, that was built into a food pantry dedicated in 1998, is a place where on a Wednesday evening or Sunday morning we find people packing bags for hungry people. For the first time ever, we had a table at the Brandywine Arts Festival. We had 1000 red bags with St. Stephen's icon printed on them and the words: LCS food pantry at St. Stephen's. We gave out 950 bags with information teaching people about hunger, the food pantry, and how they might respond. Last year we began the Magi Project - gathering food for the pantry over the 12 days of Christmas. We invited our neighboring church, Holy City, to participate and they did, proclaiming, "It made our Christmas!" St. Stephen's has a history of being a teaching church for interns and field education

students. Last year and this, students have asked to come and learn from us. Just imagine!

These are only a few of the signs of what God is doing through the lives of those who gather here to be fed and to be sent forth as witnesses to God's grace in the world. In the words of our chosen anniversary hymn "A Place at the Table," God is filled with delight when we are creators of justice and joy.

Just imagine what we will be able to do as more and more people are invited and discover that there is a place at the table for them here and in the world.

Here's to the next 125 years – wouldn't it be grand to see St. Stephen's in 2138?

In Christ,  
Pastor Dianne O. Loufman

# 1888

The Ministerium of Pennsylvania sent Rev. William A. Sadtler to Wilmington to organize an English Lutheran Church. Zion Lutheran Church, established in 1848, was the German-speaking Lutheran church.

On October 7, 1888, the first church service was held at the Institute Building at 8<sup>th</sup> and Market. On December 7, St. Stephen's English Lutheran Church was formally organized.

The congregation was incorporated on February 8, 1889, with 50 people signing the Constitution. The name, St. Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church, was adopted as the corporate name. In April 1889 the congregation moved to a vacant church building between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Streets on Tatnall Street. It was the church's home for the next 39 years.



Pastor Sadtler was pastor until 1890 when he resigned. The congregation then called Rev. Lewis J. Bickel as pastor. In 1895 Pastor Bickel resigned. The congregation then called Rev. Frederic Doerr.

Rev. Frederic Doerr was a recent graduate of Mt. Airy Seminary. Pastor Doerr was pastor until 1926 when he retired and became Pastor Emeritus. St. Stephen's had been his only call.

Under his leadership St. Stephen's became a self-supporting congregation, no longer a mission church of the Ministerium of Pennsylvania. A pipe organ was added to the Tatnall Street Church in 1897. A robed choir of men and boys made their first appearance for the Christmas Services in 1900. For the Twentieth Anniversary in 1908 the entire chancel was renovated with new furnishings and memorial windows.

The original Tatnall Street location.



# 1926

With a growing congregation, it was clear that they would need a new place of worship. They selected 13<sup>th</sup> and Broom Streets as their new location. The property was purchased in 1924 and plans were approved in 1926.

Pastor Doerr resigned due to failing health in 1926. Rev. Park W. Huntington was called as pastor. (Member Peggy DeLuca is his daughter.)

On January 9, 1927, formal ground breaking was held. (Member Eleanor Davis, a young child at the time, was there.) Local political figures, senior church officials, congregational leaders and members took part in the formal ground breaking. Plans for the church were described in the newspaper:

“... the main auditorium will seat 478 ... it will be constructed entirely of stone, and the perpendicular style of Gothic Architecture will be followed..”

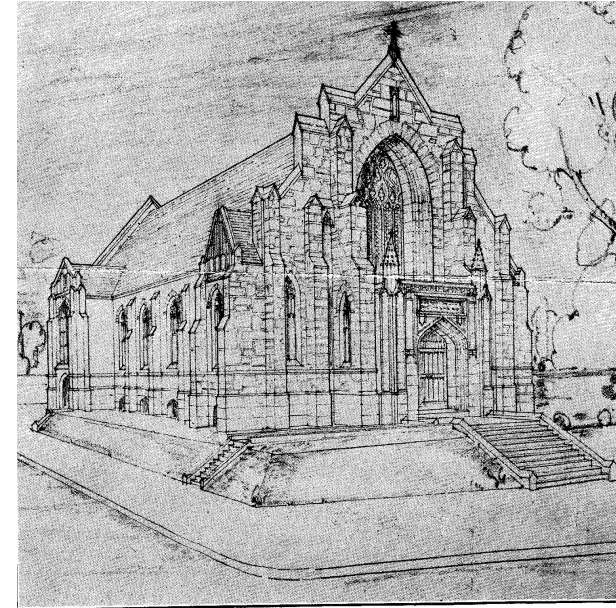
The cornerstone was laid April 24, 1927. By the time it was completed, the cost of the church was \$140,000.



The cornerstone for the Broom Street building is laid during a ceremony on August 24, 1927.

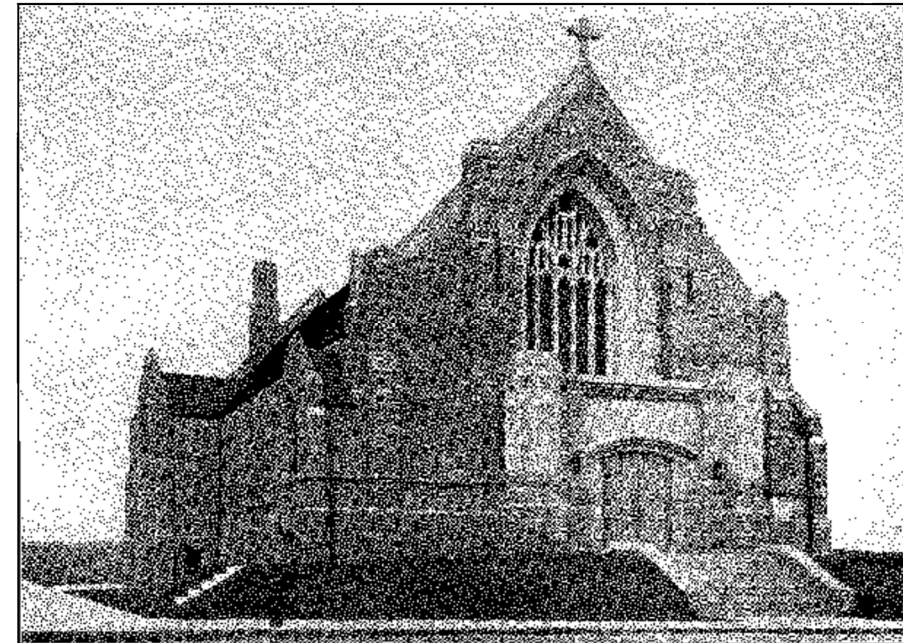
St. Stephen's new building was dedicated on March 4, 1928.

Despite the 1930 s Depression, the Church membership and the Sunday School membership grew. Under the leadership of Pastor Huntington and the devotion of the congregation, St. Stephen's had an active role in the local community. Groups like the Men's Club, the Willing-Workers, the Women's Missionary



C. R. Hope, Architect

The original architectural design for St.



St. Stephen's as actually constructed.



Society, the Friendly Fellowship Club, and Luther League provided service to the community.

In 1938 St. Stephen's celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary with a gala dinner and church services. Hopes for the future were bright.

The growth of the congregation continued despite the establishment of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (now Spirit of Life Lutheran Church) and many St. Stephen's members transferring to the new church. The growth of the congregation warranted a Parish House. When William J. Frederick, a prominent Wilmington businessman, died in 1940, he left St. Stephen's \$35,000. With this money a Parish House was built next to the church sanctuary. Groundbreaking was held September 28, 1942 and dedicated to William Frederick and his wife, who was a charter member of St. Stephen's, on June 7, 1942. The Frederick Memorial Hall had a chapel, the pastor's office, the administrative office, and rooms for Sunday School.



Frederick Memorial Hall

The winds of war were coming and would affect St. Stephen's in many ways. Pastor Park Huntington was a chaplain in the Delaware National Guard. He requested a leave of absence to serve in that position in 1940. He served on active duty until 1946. While Pastor Huntington was on active military service, St. Stephen's was served by supply pastors: Pastor E. Theodore Bachman, Pastor William Elbert, and Pastor Herbert D. Cressman. Service men and women who were St. Stephen's members were listed on an Honor Roll, numbering 114 names.

In 1942, St. Mark's Lutheran Church was established in north Wilmington, with thirty-four members transferring to it. St. Stephen's, however, continued its active ministry. The Congregational Annual Report for 1942 contained reports from 16 different church organizations. St. Stephen's continued to grow and prosper.

In 1952, after 25 years as pastor, Pastor Huntington resigned. During his tenure the congregation grew from 175 members to over 1300. The church reflected the active ministry of Pastor Huntington who continued to serve the Wilmington community after his retirement.

## 1952

In 1952 Pastor J. Elmer Leas was called to serve the ever-growing congregation. Under his leadership, St. Stephen's made significant strides. The first stewardship program under the Sector Project resulted in more than doubling the benevolent and current budgets of the church. As a result, it was possible to call the church's first full-time minister of music, Robert A. Imbt. Pastor Leas was instrumental in securing the first assistant pastor when Pastor Robert F. Sauers was called in 1956. Then later Pastor Edward O. Lukens served as an assistant pastor.

As early as 1954, the congregation realized the need for more Sunday School space. The Frederick Memorial Hall was overcrowded and in 1949 the Social Hall had been partitioned to make classrooms. In the previous ten years the Sunday School attendance had increased by 275%! A committee had been formed to look into renovating or enlarging the FMH, but it was suggested that the Hoopes Estate might be the answer.

The Hoopes Estate backed up to the church property. The estate of the Hoopes family needed to dispose of the property. In June of 1956 the congregation voted to purchase the Hoopes Estate for \$32,750. Renovations were made so that Sunday School classes could use the building.

In 1960, Pastor Leas resigned to become pastor of Bethany English Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Dr. Frank Ulrich took over as supply pastor, helping with visitation, confirmation, and preaching.





The Rodney Street building obtained from the Hoopes Estate.

# 1960

Pastor Robert E. Mohr was called to St. Stephen's in November 1960.

He initiated many programs and activities, some of which are still going on today.

\* In 1961, he started the weekly Wednesday Lenten dinners served before the evening Lenten services. Ladies of the church cooked and served the dinners from the church kitchen. The average Lenten attendance was 220 for the Wednesday evenings.

\* In 1961 a Thursday noon "Quiet Service" was started with meditations by Pastor Mohr and music by Robert Imbt, the organist.

\* A Senior Citizen Center was organized at St. Stephen's in December 1961 for anyone over the age of 60. It was open every Tuesday from 12-4 pm. On its first anniversary there were 58 people who regularly attended.

\* The Saturday Recreation Program for neighborhood children was started in April 1964 with Seminarian Jimmy Shelton in charge. At first starting with 25 children it bloomed into a more structured program with over 100 children and a paid director.

\* In April 1964, Pastor Mohr initiated the Dial Help telephone contact service where people could call 655 5523 to hear comforting and inspirational messages recorded by Pastor Mohr. Letters poured in from shut-ins, blind people, and those who were in difficult situations, attesting to the comfort they received from this contact. Over 1000 calls a week were counted.



The sanctuary before its redesign for the 75th anniversary.

\* In December 1964 Chrismons were first used to decorate fir trees in the sanctuary. Based on Christian Monograms, Chrismons originated at the Lutheran Church of the Ascension in Danville, VA, in 1957. There are about 15 different symbols used, made of white and gold colors, representing Christ's purity and His regal nature. St. Stephen's altar guild made the ones we still use today.

\* In February 1967 St. Stephen's 11 am service was



The sanctuary following its 75th anniversary changes.

broadcast across the radio waves by WDEL -FM. Money for this project was raised by the congregation.

\* Wilmington's first religious school for children with hearing difficulties opened at St. Stephen's on Saturday, April 1, 1967. Sponsored by the Parents' League of Hearing Impaired Children, the school provided religious inter-denominational instruction.

In February 1966 Pastor Thomas Sinn was called to be Associate Pastor. (Of course, there was much "talk" about Mohr Sinn at our church) Pastor Sinn resigned in 1967 and Pastor Joseph Lettrich was called as Assistant Pastor in 1967.

The 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary was celebrated in 1963. Plans called for updating bathrooms with a supply of hot water, and a sound system, acoustical ceiling and fluorescent lighting for the Social Hall. Painting was done in the Frederick Memorial Building as well. Changes were made to the sanctuary.

The altar rail was moved so that congregants could receive communion at the altar in a kneeling position, the baptismal font was relocated so that it could be seen, and the old altar was placed against the reredos. New lighting, new chancel fixtures, carpeting, and rebuilding of the chancel platform were part of the new design for the altar area.

The rededication of the sanctuary was in September 1965.

# 1970

In 1965 Director of Music Robert Imbt resigned after 10 years of service. Anita Greenlee was called as Director of Music in 1966. She introduced handbells to the congregation in 1966 and was part of the Organ Committee that decided on the Cassavant organ.

Our second Pastor Emeritus was named, Rev. Park W. Huntington.

The Triangle 70 civic organization was formed. The boundaries were Pennsylvania Avenue, Delaware Avenue, and the B&O railroad tracks. Meetings were held at St. Stephen's. The civic association had a common ministry to improve and maintain the neighborhood. The office for Triangle 70 was in the Rodney Street Building and was staffed with a member of the Wilmington Police Community Relations Department.

In January 1970 Pastor Robert Mohr resigned to accept a call in Hagerstown, MD.

In December 1970 Pastor Alvin Kuhn was called. A native of Lincoln, NC, he attended Texas A&M College under an ASTP Army Program, then graduated from Lenoir-Rhyne College in North Carolina. He earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree from the Mt. Airy Theological Seminary in 1951. After serving churches in North Carolina and Washington, D.C., he accepted the call to St. Stephen's.

Congregational life was full with brunches, family retreats, plays, concerts, congregational dinner meetings, Arts and Hobby Festivals, bus trips by the Senior Citizens group, and pulpit exchanges between Lutheran churches. Old-fashioned sauerkraut dinners were held.

We had joint services with Westminster Presbyterian Church for Thanksgiving and Christmas. There were two adult Sunday School classes and the Saturday Club was going strong.

In September 1974 Anita Greenlee resigned to go to Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Chester, PA. John Floreen was called as our new organist. After one year, he resigned to continue his education. Joanne Hench became our new organist.

Pastor Joseph Lettrich resigned to go to Second English Lutheran Church in Baltimore in 1974. In May 1975 a call was extended to Pastor David Allen as assistant pastor.

At this time Holy Communion was offered on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the month and on special Sundays during the year.

In 1975 the property Chairman directed repairs to the roofs of all three buildings with a new roof for the Frederick Memorial Hall. Extensive repairs were made to the church building and the Rodney Street Building,

Instead of Lenten dinners with a more formal worship, the Lenten format was in home cottage meetings with informal worship and discussion.

St. Stephen's participated in L.I.F.E., Lutherans Involved in Food Emergency, and opened a food pantry in 1978. Triangle 70 was still going strong.

In April 1977 Pastor Kuhn left to accept a call in Alexandria, VA. In July 1977 Pastor David Allen accepted a call for Emanuel Lutheran Church in Corning, NY.

# 1980

In May of 1978 a call is extended to Pastor Robert C. Schmeelcke to become our eighth pastor. He started a children's sermon, bringing the children up to the steps of the altar for a special message especially written for them, after which the children would go to the nursery.

In 1978 the new green Lutheran Book of Worship replaced the red hymnal.

In October 1978 St. Stephen's had a student assistant, Ken Nicholson. In May 1979 Ken graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and in June 1979 St. Stephen's extended a call to Ken to become assistant pastor.

The 1980s flew by with kitchen renovations, Lenten pot luck dinners, Advent Workshops, family retreats, youth retreats, Adopt-a-Family at Christmas, a Sweetheart Dinner by the youth of St. Stephen's, the collection of food or money for the food pantry, and an every-member visitation by Stewardship. The church service were taped and given to shut-ins and to homebound members of the congregation. Pastor Bob and his wife Grace led Marriage Encounter Week-ends.

Wendy Betts became our handbell director. Cynthia Doney wrote the Nativity story for the children and youth of St. Stephen's to act out, using real lambs from the farm where Russ and Doris Wagner lived. Val Luedeke photographed the story and presented the slide show at Christmas.

In 1984 Pastor Ken Nicholson left after five years of service to St. Stephen's.

Throughout the 80s, cancelled stamps were collected for the National Lutheran Home in Rockville, MD. Needlepointers made usher badges and the circular inserts for the Alms Basins. The youth were busy attending Youth Encounters and CROSSROADS, planning service projects and going on retreats. The Hilltop Super Stars began their sports challenges to raise money for Hilltop Neighborhood House. The Leisure Class Luncheon started in 1985 with 55 people, enjoying lunch and interesting programs.

Dr. David Blackwelder joined the staff of St. Stephen's as a part-time assistant, helping with pastoral visitation and preaching.

Members were involved with Emmanuel Dining Room, the Food Pantry, Hilltop, Lutheran Campus Ministry and Meals on Wheels. Special Mission Projects were supported financially; monies were given to Navajo Indian Mission, El Salvador Ministry to Displaced Families, Mexican Disaster Relief, World Hunger, and Columbia Disaster Relief.

Seminarian students serving as interns came to St. Stephen's for a year to learn about congregational life. Intern Kris Peterson came to St. Stephen's in 1986 after Intern Dan Borchers left. After Kris came Rob Smith, all the time St. Stephen's aiding in their development as spiritual leaders for a future church.

As early as 1984 members of St. Stephen's were planning committees for the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Renovations to the church were needed to allow those who are handicapped to enter the sanctuary. Mission ideas were also discussed. LCS pointed out the lack of housing for the poor, and Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood House showed the need for a Lutheran church in the Hilltop area. These three projects became our focus for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The Mission Church at Hilltop would receive \$7000 a year for seven years and Habitat for Humanity would receive \$3000 for seven years. Plans were made for church renovations that would include installation of an elevator. An Anniversary dinner was held at the Greenhill Lions Club.

In 1990 Pastor Bob Schmeelcke accepted a call in Florida. Pastor Chris Hagen became our interim pastor.



# 1990

This decade began with new technology called the computer. St. Stephen's expanded the use of the computer to do parochial statistics, membership profiles, financial recordkeeping, and publishing the Courier with the help of several tech-savvy members.

In November 1991 Pastor Andrew Ballentine was called as our next pastor of St. Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Pastor Andy initiated the every Sunday Holy Communion, instead of once a month and special Sundays. He changed the layout of the distribution by moving the communion rail down to the first step of the altar area.

In the Courier were letters from Phebe Hospital in Monrovia, Liberia, from Dick and Claudia Weiss, as they served there with their medical expertise. The Courier also told of the 7<sup>th</sup> Festival of Art and Hobbies; the St. Stephen's team winning 4<sup>th</sup> place at the Hilltop Super Stars event; and a donation to LIFE (Lutheran Involved in Food Emergency) for \$7100. There was lemonade under the beech tree in front of the Frederic Memorial Hall after the service in warmer weather. The Wilmington Garden Center gave the church a Beautification Certificate for the horticulture beautification of the city neighborhood for four years in a row.

The 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee continued to work on the renovation plans. The committee defined the congregation's mission in the century to come as:

“to be a vibrant worshipping community which, by the grace of God, nurtures its members and responds to the Gospel by evangelism and acts of love in the world. ....It is the premise of the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee and a reflection of the will of this congregation that our building will NOT be the limiting factor of our ministry. .... By making the changes suggested by the congregation and proposed by the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee, we provide for the possibility of greater ministry, yet unseen at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church.”

Congregation life was busy with Lenten soup and bread suppers, handbells for children and for adults, and a new recorder group. Dora Knodel was celebrated at a Valentine Love Gathering for teaching 50 years at our Sunday School. Leisure Lunch was going strong. Our Hilltop Super Stars team continued to raise money for Hilltop Lutheran Neighborhood House. A new activity was the Progressive Dinner, with an Irish theme one year and a German theme the next. The Youth

Group wrote, planned and led a Sunday church service. Advent Workshops were offered for adults and children. Members were generous to buy Angel Tree gifts for children whose mothers or fathers were in prison. At Thanksgiving, food baskets were filled for Hilltop families. A new supplemental hymnal was ordered; *With One Voice* offered more contemporary music and multi-cultural songs. Members joined together to enjoy Blue Rocks baseball games at Frawley Stadium. The LCS 5K Walk/Run for L.I.F.E. became a yearly endeavor.

Our third pastor Emeritus was named, Dr. David Blackwelder.

In 1992 Pastor Clarence Petit became the Mission Developer for the Spirit of Life Lutheran Mission church at Hilltop, financially supported by our 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Outreach. Habitat for Humanity built homes for low-income people with the financial help from St. Stephen's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Outreach.

In 1993 Joanne Hench resigned as organist and Dennis Schmidt became our new organist.

Pastor Katherine Cartwright Knodel was called as Pastor of Christian Education and Youth Ministry. Sunday Night Alive became an active youth program. The youth group made yearly treks to Youth Encounter and F.L.Y.P. by selling afghans and candles. Vicar Barbara Melosh offered her gifts at St. Stephen's.



A new additional connecting the sanctuary and Frederick Memorial Hall was , and created new chapel and food pantry space.



The Handbell group, under the direction of organist Dennis Schmidt, went on a tour of Germany, playing handbell concerts at the local churches.

The building program, costing \$1.7 million, raised over \$800,000 in pledges at the beginning of the fundraising. Off to a good start, the project connected the new chapel with the sanctuary and the Frederick Memorial Hall. The elevator connected the top floor of the FMH with the Gathering Area, the Broom Street entrance and the Social Hall. Especially important, the renovation provided space specifically to be used for the Food Pantry, the largest food pantry in New Castle County. The dedication of the new building was celebrated on October 25, 1998.

The new chapel hosted a contemporary worship service, first on Sunday evenings, then on Sunday mornings.

## 2000

In 2001 Pastor Andrew Ballentine accepted a call in Williamsburg VA. Pastor Katherine Cartwright Knodel became our interim pastor.

In 2003 Pastor Matthew Hummel was called as pastor. He initiated the Sunrise Church Service for families with children who are developmentally disabled.

Congregational life enjoyed Leisure Luncheon, children enjoyed Easter Egg Hunts, and Prime Time Adults enjoyed social events together. Some Sundays celebrated the Blessing of the Animals and the Blessing of the Backpacks. Backpacks were filled with school supplies ready for Hilltop children to go off to school well prepared. Amy Phillips became our first director of Family and Youth Ministry.

Vicar Lynell AlJoe-Thurman came to serve at St. Stephen's. Lori Citro became our Contemporary Worship and Music Organist Dennis Schmidt resigned in 2003, Lori Citro left in 2004. Dan Howe became our new organist in 2005.

Pastor Hummel left St. Stephen's in 2009. Pastor David Mueller became our interim pastor.

Under the interim process and with Pastor Mueller's sage assistance, St. Stephen's sought to define itself and to seek direction for the future. In 2012 Pastor Dianne Loufman was called as our new pastor of St. Stephen's. Field Education seminarian Douglas Barclay worked with our congregation in 2012-2013. "Feed My Sheep" has become a theme for St. Stephen's, with a monthly

food drive in the surrounding neighborhood, collecting food and spreading the friendliness of St. Stephen's. Emmanuel Dining room, Thanksgiving Baskets for Hilltop families, the Magi Project, and the food pantry are fully supported by the congregation. A Food Skills Class offers information on healthy eating and cooking to members and clients of the food pantry. Leisure Luncheon, the LCS Walk/Run, For Pete's Sake Walk/Run, Lutheran Campus Ministry, and Family Promise are part of our congregational life. The Rodney Street Building is pending sale, making way for apartments for six families. We continue to be an active and vital ministry in the city of Wilmington!

With Pastor Dianne's leadership and the talents and spirit of the members of our church, St. Stephen's Evangelical Lutheran Church will assuredly continue into the future.

# Thanks

I wish to thank several people for their help working of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration. I would like to thank Ernie Erikson, for his work organizing the Archives Room; Roslyn Seese, who provided her copy of the Courier for 16 years, making a complete set; and Red Ballentine, who as editor of the Courier, documented a complete picture of St. Stephen's congregational life for 16 years, and all the other editors – Marilee Bowersox, Helen Cripe, and Ann Warner.

I would like to thank Carol Lay, Carol Landry, Mike Lehm, Lynn Splittorff, and Betty Sperati for being part of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee and for all their help planning this event.

I would like to thank Sonia Brode for her delicious meal and all her help in making this a celebratory anniversary.

I would like to thank Pastor Dianne for her help and support.

But mostly I would like to thank the congregation of St. Stephen's for their generosity of food, financial support, and spirit.

— *Betsy Zimny*

Early history adapted by Betsy Zimny from *The First Hundred Years* by Barbara Macklem