

A History of the Mauriceville West Lutheran Church

In the 1860's the New Zealand Government under Sir Julius Vogel, introduced an immigration policy to develop the forty mile bush section of the Wairarapa extending from Kopuaranga to Woodville where the scheme would meet the 70 mile Bush to Napier. It was originally intended that Canadians would undertake this development but when the Canadians abandoned this project Vogel was faced with securing an alternative supply of suitable immigrants to undertake the difficult task of settlement and so it was decided to obtain settlers from Scandinavia.

The first Scandinavian immigrants to the Wairarapa arrived in 1872. These consisted of 8 Norwegian, 7 Danish and 3 Norwegian Swedish families. Later in August the same year 10 Danish families and a number of young men arrived in Wellington after a long tedious journey by sailing ship. A temporary camp was established at Kopuaranga, north of Masterton, for these families to live in.

By agreement an area of 4,000 acres was purchased for the settlement of the Scandinavians in the Mauriceville District, and this area was cut into 40 acre sections for which the settlers had to pay one pound per acre. Naturally the new settlers expected the area to be cleared and housed so it was a great shock to find they had to clear their own bush covered land and build their slab huts to live in.

When the Scandinavian Camp at Kopuaranga was vacated in 1873-1874 the immigrants moved out on foot to these sections of land in the bush which had been allocated to them. Roads had been surveyed but were as yet still unformed or cleared of bush. One of these roads leading from the main Masterton-Eketahuna road line led up the valley of the Mangapakihi Stream, the valley in which the Lutheran Church was to stand.

At the head of the valley this road divided into two branches, the right hand branch climbing over the hills to the north, now known as the North Hill, led to the sections reserved for the Norwegian immigrants. While the left hand branch, now known as the West Road, gave access to the remainder of the settlement and was settled by a predominantly Danish population.

This road junction became a convenient spot to establish the nucleus of the settlement. As years passed a school, general store, blacksmith shop, dairy factory and church were established and became known as Mauriceville West.

In 1878, five years later, the settlement was electrified by the unexpected news "a Danish Minister has arrived". From up and down the valley men, women and children thronged to meet him. The newcomer was Pastor George Sass, a Lutheran Minister who had been in charge of a Scandinavian congregation in Queensland and left there to seek out and minister to his countrymen in New Zealand.

The starting point for Sass's ministry to the 7,000 Lutherans dispersed over the great area between New Plymouth, Napier and Wellington had been Norsewood. From here he had travelled on foot and horseback southward through the great forest of the 70 mile bush, struggling through swollen streams and over muddy tracks, visiting and ministering in lonely camps and villages until at last he reached Mauriceville West.

Here in this tall black robed Pastor the people felt that a part of old Denmark had come to them, handsome and robust, young Sass fitted in well into a background of the rugged bush settlements. He brought with him the religious comfort of the old church and restored spiritual devotion of the people.

Sass later recorded: - "the rumours of my arrival went from one settlement to the next and regardless of what day in the week it happened to be when I arrived at a place, the settlers crowded to the meeting in numbers defying the capacity of any private home. It was a strange sight toward evening to see men and women turning up, each armed with a candle in a broken bottle, so that after the service they might find their way back over the muddy track."

The first visits of Pastor Sass so stimulated the Mauriceville West folk that their immediate thought was for a church of their own. Such was their poverty however that it was 1882 before their desires began to take form.

A meeting was then called and sufficient money gathered from their scanty resources to justify the commencement of the building. The site was donated by Lars Neilson on rising ground opposite the school and here the church was built. Logs were donated, a waterwheel set up to drive the small sawmill, and voluntary labour did the rest.

The church with a seating capacity of 150 was dedicated by Pastor Sass on the 24th August, 1884.

The interior was severely plain. There was a row of long wooden pews on either side of the aisle, the men sitting on one side, the women and children on the other. Above the altar was a framed print of the painting by Danish artist Carl Heinrich Bloch, depicting Christ standing with his hand on the head of a child – a very Nordic child with blue eyes and yellow hair.

It includes an inscription in Danish, "whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it". Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17

This was presented by Niels Nielsen and the original can be seen today in the Frederiksborg Castle in Denmark.

The church became the social centre of the community, hosting the festivals such as Christmas and the Christmas tree prize giving and the great annual Lutheran celebration of Confirmation day. Pastor Sass served the Mauriceville West congregation until he was called to serve the Palmerston North settlers in 1886.

The cemetery was dedicated on the 27th November 1887, this was donated by Hedvig Christensen.

The first burial was on the 18 April 1888. There is a recording of one man who committed suicide so he was buried after sunset and was brought over the back fence.

The Lutherans of Mauriceville West were not to be blessed with pastoral care by resident Pastors, principally being served from various parishes of the Manawatu and Wellington Districts to this day.

There were two exceptions. In 1911 Pastor D.G.M Bach was called from the United States to serve the congregation. He remained until 1916, when he departed to the mission fields of Japan, this being the end of regular weekly services at Mauriceville West.

Then in 1990 Pastor Robert Paterson, a Specific Ministry Pastor, & his wife Eunice were called from Adelaide, Australia and lived at Mauriceville West. He was a retired school principal supported by LCNZ in ministry to the area. Unfortunately in 1992 it was deemed unsustainable in such an isolated rural location and the mission was concluded.

A 1936 meeting of the Mauriceville West Lutheran Church Committee and Congregation elected to amalgamate the Church and Cemetery under one Board of Trustees to be named the Mauriceville Lutheran Church and Burial Ground Trust Board.

This Trust Board remains the guardian of the church and burial ground today. It is worth noting here that this trust body remained separate from the Wairarapa Lutheran congregation, though it has mostly always comprised of members of the congregation.

The original church was a stately building with a steeple. However no renovation work was done on it for years and eventually for safety reasons the bell was removed from the steeple. In many sections the timber had rotted and the building was very draughty. In the winter of 1955 services were being held in the homes of members.

This led to discussion on whether something should be done about the church. The building was in too bad a state for repair. They decided to build a new one on the 17 February 1957. Most of the material was donated by Harold Mortensen and the work of demolition and the rebuilding was largely done on a voluntary basis. The cost of the building was fully subscribed by the opening date and the new church was dedicated on the 22 December 1957.

To maintain the link with the first church, the altar, the picture of Christ and the little child, the altar rails, organ, old sacred vessels and bell were incorporated in the new structure. The whole project was financed by the local members only 17 souls. Plaques of recognition were placed on some of the pews by descendants of pioneer families.

The Lutheran congregational members of Mauriceville West appear to have been known simply as the Lutherans of Wairarapa. In 1978 they adopted a new Congregational Constitution and named their group the "Nicholai Grundtvig Lutheran Church". Nicholai Grundtvig (1783-1872) had been a Danish pastor, author, poet, philosopher, historian, teacher and politician and his name was selected because of the link this displayed to their rich Danish heritage.

However, at the Annual General Meeting in 1980, and following advice from Lutheran Church of New Zealand (LCNZ), the name was changed to 'St Francis Lutheran Church', being seen as more readily identifiable with an English speaking community.

With the passage of years the population of Mauriceville West dwindled until hardly any of the original families remained.

By 1984, 100 years following the building of the first church, services were being conducted twice per month, with attendance maintained at an average of 16 members. A Women's Fellowship Group was still very active, and Sunday school was part of the service. Members were also engaged in the 'Religion in Schools' programme at the Mauriceville School.

By the start of 21st century, there were no Lutherans resident at Mauriceville West, and though service attendance was still in the mid-teens, members were travelling out to the church for a single Pastor led monthly service, supplemented by a second Lay led service.

Today the congregation consists of just 6 members, five of whom live in Greytown. A service has not been held at Mauriceville West for over two years and a preaching fellowship has been established with the St Andrews Union Church in Greytown, where Pastor Jim Pietsch leads a Communion Service at 3pm on the third Sunday of each month.

The Trustees of the Mauriceville Lutheran Church and Burial Ground Trust Board will continue to care and maintain the church and grounds, assisted by a local school fundraising group and their sheep, until a more sustainable arrangement has been finalised.

Bruce Farley - St Francis Lutheran Church & The Mauriceville Lutheran Church & Burial Ground Trusts Board, June 2019.

Acknowledgements

Forest Homes by G. C. Petersen

Souvenir Programme from Scandinavian Settlers Memorial Unveiling 1974.

Mauriceville West Lutheran Church 1884-1984 Centennial Souvenir Booklet. Editor Stuart Clausen

Looking ahead.

The St Francis Lutheran Congregation of Wairarapa continue their fellowship in partnership with St Andrews Union Church in Greytown. Regular Service times are;

9.30am – Every Sunday with exception of the third Sunday of the month; led by Rev Bill Ingley 1st & 5th Sundays, supported by alternate leaders 2nd & 4th Sundays.

3.00pm – Every third Sunday of the month; a Communion Service led by Pastor Jim Pietsch from St Pauls Lutheran Church, Wellington.

With the closure of the church building all internal fittings and the bell will be removed and placed initially into secure storage.

It is hoped to include the bell in a monument and information board the Trust plans to erect within the burial grounds in the future.

A proposal to gift the organ to the Norwegian Methodist Mauriceville North Church is being considered and should see it remain in the district.

Some descendants of early settlers have expressed an interest in securing other items of significance to their families. The Trust Board and congregation will work through this over the coming months.

Contact us:

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Pastors who served Mauriceville West Lutheran Congregation

1878-1886 Pastor George Sass

1887-1897 Pastor Mads Christensen

1911-1916 Pastor Bach. Periodic visits were made by Pastor Mads Christensen

1928-1950 Pastor Ansgar Christensen took over from his father and served from his Palmerston North parish.

1933-1934 Pastor Lohe, a young minister from Australia, served the area from his base in Dannevirke.

1950-1959	Pastor Eric Blaess
1959-1962	Pastor R. Schmaal visited from his Halcombe Parish.
1962-1966	Pastor Maurice R.R. Heidrich, stationed at Dannevirke, served the Hawkes Bay – Wairarapa Parish.
1967	Pastor Don W. Heyne served the district from Wellington.
1968-1973	Pastor Robert Strelan, stationed at Marton.
1974-1978	Pastor Byron G. Klein, also working from Marton.
1978-1980	Pastor Robert Wiebush, working from Wellington.
1979-1983	Pastor Ken Jaworski, stationed at Lower Hutt.
1980	Pastor Wiebush and Ross W. Janetzki Associate Pastor, Wellington parish
1984-1989	Pastor Lionel R. Rohrlach, stationed at Lower Hutt.
1989-1990	Pastor Rodney Beh, Palmerston North Parish, assisted by lay readers.
1990-1992	Pastor Robert Paterson, a Specific Ministry Pastor based at Mauriceville West. He & his wife Eunice appear to be the only Pastor ever to reside at Mauriceville West.
1992-1996	Pastor Rodney Beh, Palmerston North Parish
1992-2000	Pastor Mark Lieschke, Palmerston North Parish
1996-2004	Pastor Steen Olsen, Palmerston North Parish Also supported by Pastor David Lipsys, Palmerston North Parish
2004-2014	Pastor Mark Whitfield, Wellington Parish
2014-present	Pastor Jim Pietsch, Wellington Parish