

**PHILADELPHIA EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH**  
**A Brief History**

**“Pioneer Lutheran Church Gives Thanks for the Gift of A Long History  
as a Testimony To God’s Steadfast Love and Grace”**

From a small country church, located three miles north of Dallas, the Lutheran Church in the portion of North Carolina west of the Catawba River was born. Philadelphia, the oldest Lutheran congregation west of the Catawba River, began its life along the banks of the South Fork of the Catawba River in 1767. Hardy German immigrants come to America to escape the harsh economic conditions and religious persecution that had wrecked much of Europe. Many settled in Pennsylvania, along the Cumberland Trail, throughout the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and into the Piedmont section of North Carolina. Among those who settled near what was later to become the town of Dallas was Adam Kastner (Costner) and his family. The country to which they came was an unexplored and almost impenetrable wilderness. An abundance of wild game was available and the Indians of the region were the primary inhabitants. Although the first concern of these pioneers was to build homes and barns for shelter for their families and livestock and to clear fields to raise crops, they soon responded to the need to provide an opportunity for corporate worship. Sometime before the close of 1767, a meeting was held in the home of Adam Kastner, at which plans were made to establish a church in the community. Services were first held in Kastner's home and in the homes of other members for some time. These worship services were led using a limited number of Bibles, hymn books, catechisms, and books of sermons and devotions brought from Germany.



The church was first called "Kastner's" in honor of its founder and upon the rolls appeared the names of Friday, Cloninger, Hovis, Hoyle, Rhyne, Pasour and Lineberger. The Church carried the Kastner name until 1776, when it was renamed "Philadelphia." It is uncertain why the name was changed, but perhaps the congregation desired a Biblical name just as babies born into these German families were often given Biblical names also.

The congregation was served by laymen and occasional visiting ministers until 1785, when the Reverend Johann Gottfried Arends accepted the call of the Catawba area congregations to be their resident pastor. Pastor Arends moved to Lincoln County, about six miles north of Dallas. It was during Arends' ministry and on January 20, 1798 that Mr. John Smith, gave the congregation a parcel of land consisting of one acre and sixty-six poles. The land was located on the banks of the South Fork of the Catawba River near Smith's Ford and was given by Smith "for the great regard that he hath to promote religious worship and education in said congregation."

It was at this spot the church remained for the next 148 years. During this time, a building of hand-hewn logs was erected and served the congregation until 1867 when a new building was erected through voluntary labor of the members. In 1803, the Lutheran Synod of North Carolina was organized, and Philadelphia's pastor, Reverend Arends, was elected president. He served the church until his death on July 9, 1807. After the death of Pastor Arends, Philadelphia was served by the Henkel brothers--Philip and David. David Henkel was instrumental in organizing the Tennessee Synod of which Philadelphia became a part and remained until the reunion of the North Carolina and Tennessee Synods in 1921.

Years passed and in 1845 Philadelphia welcomed her first native pastor, Jesse Reuben Peterson, affectionately known as "Father Peterson." It was during Peterson's ministry that the North and South rose in arms against each other, and many of Philadelphia's young men left home to fight for "the cause." Some of these young men, such as 2nd Lt. James Wellington Lineberger never returned home, leaving behind wives and families.

But, even while they were engaged in this great conflict, many of them thought of their church, as is noted in letters from Wellington Lineberger to his wife Elizabeth dated, June 14, 1862. "I would like to be there with you to go to church tomorrow but it is out of my power. But my heart is with you and I hope if you go to church you will hear some for me as I can't be there. I can hear one sermon a week or two before we leave Goldsborough [N.C.]. Polycarp Henkel, son of David Henkel and a son of Philadelphia, was down there and gave us a good sermon." Another letter dated October 1, 1863, included the following hope, "I would like to get home when the meeting is at Philadelphia. We have at this time preaching regularly and the altar is crowded all the time."

As the Civil War drew to a close and the rift between the North and South began to heal, the congregation of Philadelphia looked to the future. The old log church, which had served faithfully for many years was torn down and replaced by a larger frame building in 1867. This building remained in use until the waters of the South Fork River overflowed its banks on July 16, 1916 and flooded much of the Catawba Valley. Extensive damage followed in the wake of the flood, including the destruction of Philadelphia's sanctuary. Water rose to within eighteen inches of the eaves, sweeping the building off its foundation and destroying all the church's records.

The congregation erected its third building in 1917, which was a frame church located on higher ground and about a half mile further from the river. It was relocated as a precautionary measure in the event of future floods. It is also on this location that Philadelphia's present sanctuary is located. On July 12, 1970, the congregation dedicated a six-sided contemporary brick, wood, and glass structure. Over the years, Philadelphia Lutheran Church has helped shape the history of the Lutheran Church in North Carolina. Philadelphia is a congregation of the *North Carolina Lutheran Synod* of the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*.

Philadelphia's current pastor is The Rev. Gary A. Weant, who has served the nearly 290-member church since 1976. A native of Rowan County, Pastor Weant graduated from Lenoir-Rhyne College, Hickory, N.C. in 1972 with a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics. He is also

a 1976 graduate of the *Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary* in Columbia, S.C. having received the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. He was ordained in 1976 N.C. Lutheran Synod Assembly. In 1999 Pastor Weant received the Master of Sacred Theology (STM) degree also from the *Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary* and in 2001 he received a Doctor of Divinity degree and Citation for Excellence in Pastoral Ministry from *Lenoir-Rhyne College*.

Over the past thirty-three years, Philadelphia has experienced the steady cultivation of congregational lay leadership as well as the expansion and development of numerous ministries both within the congregation as well as in to wider community and around the world. In 1977, Philadelphia joined in partnership with Antioch and Holy Communion Lutheran Churches and sponsored the resettlement of the Say Kao and You Kang Chang family from Viet Nam. During this same period, Philadelphia joined with a number of Dallas area churches to strengthen a local food pantry which soon resulted in the formation of the *Dallas / High Shoals Christian Social Ministry (DHSCSM)*. A second Vietnamese family, The Bounta and Vihn Syboutlan Family, was resettled by the same three churches in 1979. Also in 1979, Philadelphia was instrumental in helping form the Area Lutheran Recycling Ministry in support of hunger relief at home and around the world.

In 1980, Philadelphia joined with eight other Lutheran congregation to form a Campfirmation Ministry Cluster which continues to meet every summer at Lutheridge. Likewise in 1981, Philadelphia joined in partnership with the other Lutheran Churches in Gaston County in the formation of the *Lutheran Support Group of Gaston (LSGG) Inc.* which worked in partnership with *Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas* in developing three local Group Homes for troubled children and youth as well as a local Foster Parent Ministry. By the mid 1980s, Philadelphia had begun the direct support of missionaries in Japan and Namibia, had helped initiate a local *Yokefellow Prison Ministry* at the Dallas Unit of the N.C. Dept. of Corrections, began an *Area Lutheran Confirmation Cluster Ministry* and had laid the groundwork for the formation of special *Endowment Funds* for Cemetery Maintenance, Ministry, Education, Benevolence and Service. During the early 1990s, Philadelphia began hosting an annual Congregational Council Retreat for leadership development and mission planning. A special Long Range Planning Process was begun which resulted in a number of new projects and ministries including the complete interior refurbishing of the Fellowship Hall and Education Building in 1996 and the development of preliminary drawings for a large, multi purpose, educational building and fellowship shall. It was also during this time that Philadelphia joined with Antioch and St. Paul's Lutheran Churches in the sponsorship of an *Area Lutheran Summer Day Camp*.

During 1998 and 1999, Philadelphia helped develop the *Area Lutheran Outreach Ministry* which now supports an ongoing *Hospitality Table* during various season of the Church Year at the local US 321 Flea Market. In the summer of 1998, Philadelphia also became the fifteenth congregation in the N.C. Lutheran Synod to develop and sponsor a congregational Website. In April 2000, Philadelphia became one of the first Lutheran congregations in North Carolina and the ELCA to develop a fully automated, computer generated, multi media slide show presentation suitable for evangelism and outreach which is downloadable from a congregational Website. Also during the spring of 2000, Philadelphia was instrumental in helping forge a county wide partnership among the

fifteen Lutheran congregations in Gaston County in support of education. This effort has led to the inauguration of a county wide after school *Lutheran Tutoring and Mentoring Ministry* which began in October 2000. The county wide Lutheran partnership for education also hopes to help bring to fruition the formation of *Hope Lutheran School* (Grades K-12) which is scheduled to open in the fall of 2003. In August 2003, Philadelphia brought to fruition the most ambitious and significant project in the past thirty years with the Service of Dedication of a 12 stop, 15 rank custom built Ontko Pipe Organ along with the establishment of a Music Teaching Ministry. During 2003, Philadelphia also installed new carpet in the sanctuary and made enhancement to portions of the sanctuary as well as progress toward the completion of a fully functional outdoor picnic shelter. In 2004, Philadelphia installed a new sound system in the sanctuary and laid the groundwork for new outreach ministries. In 2006, Philadelphia joined with other area Lutheran congregations in the formation of *The Gaston, Lincoln, Cleveland Area Lutheran Foundation, Inc.*, whose vision is to partner with *Lutheran Services for the Aging, Inc.*, *Lutheran Retirement Ministries*, “*Twin Lakes*” of Alamance County, Inc. or other Lutheran agencies in the formation of a local ministry to serve the aging population in the Gaston, Lincoln, Cleveland County area.

From a small, humble log church to a large, modern sanctuary, *Philadelphia Evangelical Lutheran Church* has served in ministry since 1767. Despite the Revolutionary War, A Civil War, two World Wars, the Flood of 1916 which destroyed the Sanctuary, the Great Depression, epidemics, The Korean and Vietnam Wars, the 9/11 Tragedy, global tensions, the current economic challenges and various afflictions, Philadelphia has, by God’s Grace, remained an active and viable congregation. Today, Philadelphia is a much more diverse, healthy and active congregation of approximately 290 Baptized members. Our membership represents a cross section of age groups, the community and folks from diverse vocations and all walks of life. Philadelphia is grateful to serve as an instrument and congregation in the mission of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Philadelphia is a congregation in the *North Carolina Lutheran Synod* and the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*.

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