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After 250 years,
Christ Hamilton is still thriving



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By CAROL O'NEILL, Pocono Life Writer

(Excerpted by permission from an article in the Feb. 25 issue of the Pocono Record.)

Not many people can say they've attended the same church all their lives, but Bill Lotz can.

The 71-year-old Hamilton Square resident has been going to Christ Hamilton United Lutheran Church since his parents brought him there as a baby.

One recent Sunday morning he sat with other longtime members in the white farmhouse that used to be his family home and reminisced. The Christ Hamilton congregation bought the Lotz family home in 1994 and converted the rooms to office space. The family barn next to the house became a place for Scouts and youth groups to meet. Now Bill and his wife live across the street.

"I still drive to church in the winter time," Lotz said, laughing. Christ Hamilton has been Lutheran since 1974, but before that two congregations — Reformed and Lutheran — worshipped there with two alternating pastors. "When Sunday came, you dressed up and went to church," Lotz said. "It didn't matter which it was going to be."

Christ Hamilton, then called Christ Church, was part of a four-circuit charge that included churches in Mount Eaton, Brodheadsville and Bartonsville. Today Mount Eaton is an independent church. Zion Lutheran in Brodheadsville is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



and St. John's in Bartonsville is linked with the Evangelical Congregational Church in America.

Lotz remembered the longtime Reformed pastor, the Rev. Adan Bohner, and the Lutheran pastor, Pastor Kellow. He also remembered how the church struggled during that time. "The doors just about closed," he said.

Then the Lutheran synod sent a new pastor just out of seminary, David Ritterpusch, in 1972. Two years after that, the two congregations voted to unite as one denomination — Lutheran.

Annette and Charles Huhn moved to a farm on Manor Drive near Burnley Workshop in the early 1950s. When their son Charles was baptized as an infant in 1955, they decided to join the church. Pretty soon Annette was recruited to teach Sunday school and served in the nursery department for 25 years.

Annette Huhn remembers going to the different churches in the circuit for catechism classes. "And we used to follow all the picnics. When one church had one, we all showed up."

At some point after it was built in 1829, the stone church was covered in stucco, probably added for insulation. Lotz recalled that his father and another member noticed the stucco crumbling off. So, in 1953 they removed it all to expose the beautiful stone underneath.

In 1930, the church installed an organ it had purchased from Stroudsburg Methodist Church. Lotz talked about the Sunday that the electricity went off and the organ wouldn't play. Lotz and another young man decided to pump the bellows by hand. "I tell you, it wears you out," he laughed.

The organist at the time was Velma Hartman. She moved in 1946 from Bethlehem to a big white house on the east side of the church property. In 1951, she started playing the organ and played it faithfully for 39 years.

Lotz's father and Hartman's husband Jacob, a "darned good carpenter," according to Lotz, watched over the construction of Covenant House, the second building added to the property.

Until Covenant House was completed in 1978, Sunday school classes met in every available space in the little stone church.

Besides more space for Sunday school, Covenant House gave the congregation something else it hadn't had for more than 200 years — indoor plumbing. Before that, parishioners used the old outhouse.

Annette Huhn said, "When kids came to Sunday school, you spent a lot of time showing the kids what the outhouse was all about. One would find out and then they all had to go to the bathroom. You know how kids are."

When Pastor Ritterpusch left in 1982, the Rev. Ralph Boyer IV came to pastor the growing congregation. Under his leadership, the congregation has continued to thrive, making it necessary in 1999 to build another new building on the church property. Called the Lighthouse, the structure includes more Sunday school rooms, a stage, a kitchen and a full basketball court.

Now Christ Hamilton has close to 2,000 members.

For the longest time, Christ Hamilton had only one service on Sundays. Now there are three, and on Christmas Eve there are four services to accommodate everyone.

Besides the many buildings used by the congregation, a picnic pavilion has been added and plans are being made to add more parking and possibly fields for soccer and baseball.

Lotz gave credit to pastoral assistant Fred Robertson for the expanded youth programs. And he credited Stephanie Boyer, the pastor's wife, for adding a touch of warmth. "Stephanie, to me, she's the closest thing to an angel. She's one beautiful lady."

"And she bakes," added Hartman.

Picturing all the young people in the Sunday school, or coming up to hear the children's sermon, or playing basketball in the Lighthouse, Lotz said, "I remember when Jake (Jacob Hartman) used to say, 'We need a Sunday school, we need a Sunday school.' Now when I see all these kids, I think, 'Jake, I hope you're looking down.' "