



**A Summary of the
History and the
Life of**

Salem Lutheran Church

1887 – 2024



In the Beginning

Swedish immigrants arrived in the early 1800s to settle in the Bridgeport, Connecticut area. They brought a strong spirit and a longing to worship together. Led by Pastor Axel Lilja of New York City, they conducted their first formal worship service on November 29, 1885. They met for worship three times a month (two Fridays and one Sunday).

On April 26, 1887, the congregation of 58 adults and 10 children organized as the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Salem Church. The Reverend N. J. Johnson accepted the call as the first pastor of this church and the church in Naugatuck. The congregation bought land on Park Avenue in August 1887 but rented space for worship services until they could build their church building.

The new church building was completed and dedicated on September 1, 1889. By the end of that year, membership had grown to 128.

1890's

In 1890, Pastor Johnson accepted another call, and the congregation called Reverend C. A. Blomgren. The Sunday School grew, and members organized Bible classes and various groups within the congregation.

Pastor Blomgren submitted his resignation in 1894. The congregation had grown to 226 members. By the fall of 1895, Pastor Karl Martin accepted the call. By the tenth Anniversary (1897), the congregation grew to 313 and paid off all debts that year.

In early 1899, Pastor Martin submitted his resignation. On October 3, 1899, the Reverend C. E. Cesander accepted Salem's call.

1900's

On December 9, 1904, Pastor Cesander resigned. That same year, a meeting was called to determine whether Salem should continue due to a lack of funds. The congregation never held that meeting, as the members said they would continue supporting the church.

The Reverend Peter Froeberg accepted Salem's call in October 1905. Shortly after, the Sunday School established the Cradle Roll. The Sunday School continued to grow and developed into three schools with 200 children and 36 teachers.

1910's

Salem erected the St. Peter's Chapel at 748 Connecticut Avenue in Bridgeport's East Side in the spring of 1910. Two years later, Salem erected another chapel at 25 Princeton Street in the Black Rock area of Bridgeport. Pastor Froeberg resigned in September 1912. The Reverend Andrew Okerblom accepted Salem's call in July 1915. In 1917, Salem sold St. Peter's Chapel.

1920's

In 1922, the congregation voted to hold English-language services on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. In 1924, due to the expanding Sunday School, Salem added an addition to the church. They added a heating system to the church and the janitor's dwelling and installed earphones in the front pews for the hard of hearing. In 1929, the church installed an Austin organ.

1930's

In 1933, two services were held each Sunday, first in English and second in Swedish. The average attendance was 114 at the first service and 54 at the second that year.

In 1937, Salem celebrated its Golden Jubilee. Membership had risen to 460 adults and 60 children. The congregation published its book "Fifty Years of Progress 1887-1927."

Pastor Okerblom caught pneumonia and passed away in March 1939.

1940's

The Reverend Karl Johansson accepted Salem's call in 1940. He launched a personal campaign of visitations, causing the membership to jump from 400 to about 900. His plans for a significant expansion were halted by the start of World War II. He served during the war years and resigned in 1945. There were 117 members who served in the war, with five paying the ultimate sacrifice. The ending of the war in 1945 saw a reduction of members down to 838 communicants and 168 children.

The Reverend Clarence Granlund arrived in August 1945. He favored smaller community churches over a sizeable central church.

On June 10, 1947, the church's name was changed from The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Salem Church to The Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bridgeport, Connecticut.

In October 1948, Salem organized the new mission congregation in Black Rock and formed St. Mark's Lutheran Church. By the end of 1949, membership was at 789.

1950's

In February 1950, Pastor Granlund resigned, and on September 15, 1950, Pastor Caryl Benson was installed as the new pastor and would serve for twenty-six years.

On June 11, 1951, Salem purchased 2 ½ acres of land on Park Avenue near Westfield Avenue. The following year, Salem bought a parsonage on Sherley Place. On March 6, 1952, members held the first worship service on the new parcel. Attendees included Mr. & Mrs. Herbert Andren with Bert and Larry Andren, Rev. & Mrs. Caryl Benson, Mr. & Mrs. John Donohue, and Mr. & Mrs. Evert Nordstrom. The following week, the congregation held its Groundbreaking ceremony at 3160 Park Avenue. Shortly after, Salem sold the old Salem church but continued to use it until the completion of the new building.

In September 1953, Salem received a donation of 10.7 acres of woodland in Easton. Never used, Salem sold it ten years later. In 1954, Salem bought the lot on Stratfield Place. Herb Andren led the house's construction. Salem sold the North End Chapel in June 1954.

Salem's new building was completed on July 25, 1954. The congregation held a closing service at 1287 Park Avenue and then moved to 3160 Park Avenue. The building's nave holds 292 people, the balcony 104, and the choir section 64. The original Austin organ was rebuilt, enlarged, and installed.

By 1956, Salem's membership stood at 765 adults and 339 children. Beginning in 1956 and continuing through 1971, fifteen interns spent a year at Salem as part of the Augustana Lutheran Church Intern program. In 1958, the 25-bell carillon was added.

1960's

With such a large child population, Salem decided to add additional space for Sunday School. Salem held the groundbreaking ceremony on April 5, 1964, and dedicated the educational wing of Salem on December 6, 1964. Also that year, the parsonage on Sherley Place was sold and purchased a new parsonage on Melville Avenue.

1970's

In June 1972, the Salem Council voted to allow women to serve on the nominating committee and the council. In 1973, Ruth Erickson and Ruth Hammarsted became the first women to serve on the Church Council.

In February 1974, Salem, Our Saviour's, First English, St. Paul's, and St. Mark's formed the Lutheran Housing Corporation to sponsor low—and moderate-income housing for the elderly.

1975 Salem baptized membership was about 1,200, with average Sunday worship attendance at 294.

Pastor Benson announced his retirement effective January 1, 1977. Before he retired, the congregation conferred the Honorary Title of Pastor Emeritus. Pastor Okerlund was named Senior Pastor of Salem. In July, The Reverend Bradley Wolff was ordained at Salem and installed as Associate Pastor.

In August 1979, Liz Frohrip accepted her call as Salem's Minister of Music.

1980's

In January 1982, Pastor Wolff resigned to accept a call in Pen Argil, Pennsylvania. Liz Frohrip assumed additional duties and was commissioned as a Lay Professional Associate in the LCA. In July, Rev. Bryan (Bud) Myers was ordained at Salem and called as its new associate pastor.

In April 1983, Pastor Okerlund resigned to become Assistant to the Bishop of the New England Synod. A year later, in May, Senior Pastor Jack Stevens was installed as Salem's Senior Pastor by Pastor Okerlund.

In 1985, Salem council approved becoming a field education site for seminarians from Yale University. In September, Dagmar Rosenberg, a senior at Yale Divinity School, came as a student assistant. In December, Pastor Myers resigned to become Senior Pastor of Salem Lutheran Church in Naugatuck. Because of his departure, the council asked Dagmar to remain at Salem through 1987 as a full-time intern.

By 1987, Dagmar Rosenberg was ordained and became the Associate Pastor of Salem Lutheran, Naugatuck. Around that time, Salem received Yale seminarian Barry Long to serve as a student assistant for a year. In June, John and Ruth Donoghue retired after 40 years as Salem's custodians. John and Nancy Turechek replaced them.

Salem's 100th Anniversary was overshadowed nationally by the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In April 1987, the ELCA was formed with 5.3 million members, 11,174 Congregations, 16,608 pastors, and 65 synods. Salem formed the SummerSong program that year.

January 1, 1988, Salem membership grew to about 1,000 adults with 50 children in Sunday School

1990's

June 1, 1995, Pastor Stevens resigned to take a call from First Lutheran Church in Clifton, New Jersey. Pastor Henry Morris served as a Vacancy Pastor until an Interim Pastor arrived. Pastor Harry Souders became the Interim Pastor for Salem. Sunday School rose to 61 students.

In April 1997, the Reverend Blake Wamester accepted his call as pastor of this congregation. Sunday School attendance increased to 73 students, and Saturday night services began in September.

In August 1998, Jamie Ryan joined as an intern from the Gettysburg Seminary.

In August 1999, Intern Barbara Reifschneider joined Salem. Salem's Men's Breakfast (later, Prayer Breakfast) started in September. Membership by December stood at 774, and average weekly worship attendance was 189.

2000's

In the summer of 2000, Cathyann Plumer joined as our new intern. The bishop appointed Pastor Wamester as Vice Pastor of St. Mark's in Bridgeport.

In the summer of 2001, Lenny Liptak joined as our new (and last) intern. He also serviced St. Mark's. After he left, Lenny was ordained in December 2002. That same month, Lutheran Housing Corporation closed.

August 2003, Salem received the Petterson Gift of \$367,000.

2004 was the 50th Anniversary of the 3160 Park Avenue building. Bob Reichelt donated the funding for the refurbishment of the Salem Lounge in memory of his wife, Ginny. In October, Pastor Wamester resigned.

By 2005, Salem's membership had dropped to 587. In December, Reverend Dr. Robert Hoffman received the call. He accepted the call in January 2006.

In 2006, Matt Tomasko completed his balcony closet project and earned Eagle Scout. This project became the first of four Eagle Scout projects conducted at Salem. The others were Noah Lansing upgraded the playground; Alex Crawford built the outdoor fireplace; and Kemoy Blair refurbished the Gazebo. In September, Salem began communion every Sunday.

In 2007, Salem removed from the membership list those who moved away and those who were inactive for a long time, bringing the count down to precisely 400 members.

Lena Warren joined Salem in 2008 as an intern and moved into the Stratfield Place house.

St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Bridgeport voted to close with its last service on June 21, 2009.

2010's

In January 2010, Salem held its first annual Reconciling In Christ (RIC) Sunday Worship Service. St. Paul's Lutheran Church closes on May 23. In August, Pastor Hoffman resigned. Average worship attendance for the year was 108.

Pastor Marjo Anderson accepted the call as Salem's pastor with her installation on May 15, 2011.

Average worship attendance in 2013 was 97.

By 2014, Sunday School was down to about ten students.

The last confirmation class was in 2018 with three confirmands. There was no longer a Sunday School.

Average worship attendance for 2019 was 70.

2020's

2020 The COVID-19 pandemic started in March. During the next three years, Salem conducted service either outdoors, in cars using a radio frequency, on Zoom, and indoors with social distancing following CDC guidelines.

2021 Salem started live-streaming of worship services on Facebook in March. On April 15, Salem completed its sale of 3160 Park Avenue to the Seventh-Day Adventists, with the closing scheduled for September. Salem signed a cost-sharing agreement with SDA, which allowed Salem to continue holding services at 3160 Park Avenue.

2022 With an average in person worship attendance of 23 (online of 137) and only about 50 voting members remaining, the council meeting in September recommended looking at other congregations we could partner with or join.

2023 The congregation approved and distributed \$225,000 to local charities and \$50,000 for Jeanette Harris to complete her seminary training.

The Salem congregation attended worship services at the four churches that were candidates for Salem to join. In a straw vote, two churches were dominant but equally split, and many voted not to join another church. This vote reduced the likelihood that Salem, as a whole congregation, could join another congregation. At a Special Congregational Meeting on 10/29/23, the congregation was asked to choose between two options – to:

1. Remain Open in its current form but with a commitment to Live by developing a new mission (with the \$1.5 million we had in the bank); or

2. Pursue Holy Closure.

7 members voted to remain open and provide “status quo” ministry for the older members while also committing to start a new mission focused on reaching the next generation; 28, however, voted to close.

2024 In preparation for Salem's closing, the congregation met in January to decide which charitable organizations our remaining funds (about \$1.5 million) should be distributed over the next five years.

The Inventory Committee, led by Sandra Brown, was formed to identify and find a home for the remaining church furnishings.

Planning for the April 7 Celebratory Service and the April 14 Leave-Taking Service was led by Nancy D'Andrea and Bonnie McWain.

In Retrospect

“...our Salem legacy of spiritual parents in Christ remind us to look to our present needs and opportunities with ingenuity, courage, and, above all, trust in the leadership of Christ through his Spirit.

Mindful of the past that has been given us as a gift, we can join our voices with theirs in a prayer from our Lutheran worship book:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”