

1849

The First  
Congregational  
Church of Etna

1999

ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS

**A Brief History**  
of  
**The First Congregational Church of Etna**  
**1849 - 1999**

Locust and Walnut Streets  
Pittsburgh, PA 15223

Affiliated with  
The National Association of Congregational Christian Churches

1999



*We covenant with the Lord and one with another and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.*

*Salem Church Covenant, 1629*

## Preface

This 150th anniversary marks a significant milestone in the life of our church and the community of Etna. From the perspective of a "newcomer," there are a number of factors that make The First Congregational Church of Etna unique, including the following: 1) the church has been in the same location (although different buildings) for its entire 150-year history; 2) a single minister served the church for over one-third of its entire history; and, 3) the church, on several occasions throughout the past 150 years, has fought vigorously to maintain its founding principles based on the freedom of individual thought and the self-government of the congregation.

This history has been compiled from various sources, including documents written by Martin Leiseder and John D. McIntyre, church records dating back to 1917, and the memories of a number of members of the church. An invaluable source of information, support and direction has been Ruth Stauffer, the daughter of the long-time servant of The First Congregational Church, Rev. Martin Leiseder.

We hope that this history will serve both as a reminder of all the faithful people who have preceded us in the church and as an inspiration to continue to travel the path which they embarked on 150 years ago.

*Raymond F. Luber*  
*Pastor*

*Church Council*  
*First Congregational Church of Etna*  
*1999*

# History of The First Congregational Church of Etna

## German Background



THE Rev. Martin Leiseder, in his account of the first 100 years of The First Congregational Church of Etna, noted: "There is nothing unusual about the founding of new churches. They commonly arise whenever new communities arise. There was something quite unusual, however, about the founding of our church, because of the unusual kind of church our founders meant it to be."<sup>1</sup> He went on to explain that the Protestant Reformation in Germany resulted in the permanent division of German Protestants into two officially recognized denominations: Lutheran and Reformed. Unfortunately, each of these groups considered the other to be heretical and a means of depriving human souls of "the only true faith necessary for their salvation."<sup>2</sup>

The German settlers who migrated to the Etna area reflected the same divi-

sion between Lutheran and Reformed Protestants that existed in their homeland. There were those, however, who sought some pattern of church government which would enable them to appeal to individuals of both traditions to unite in a single congregation. That pattern was found in the German United Evangelical Church which was already established in Pittsburgh and surrounding areas. These churches belonged to a denomination which was founded in Germany for the specific purpose of organizing congregations composed of those Lutheran and Reformed individuals who were determined to practice enough tolerance to come together for the same service in the same church. So, from its very inception, The First Congregational Church of Etna was committed to the principle of tolerance by its founders.



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<sup>1</sup> Leiseder, Martin. *History of The First Congregational Church of Etna*, 1949, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

## Early History

The first entry in the records of the church is dated September 25, 1849, making ours the oldest church in Etna. At that time, what is now Etna was a cluster of hamlets belonging to Shaler Township. The area was referred to as Stewartstown or Centerville, apparently depending on where one lived. Over the years, a number of factors served to attract settlers to this location including the construction of the Pittsburgh-Freeport Road in 1805, the opening of a shop by the Spang family on Pine Creek in 1819 to make hand tools and scythes, the construction of the Pennsylvania Canal in 1828 connecting Pittsburgh with Johnstown, and the establishment of an iron mill by Charles Spang in the early 1830s.

Another attractive feature was a packet-boat, described as "the great wonder of transportation on schedule," which made a regular weekly trip, weather permitting, up the Allegheny River and back to Pittsburgh. Tarentum businessmen were advised that for a mere 25 cents (including bed and breakfast), they could leave Tarentum at "about bed-time and arrive in Pittsburgh at day-break."

Against this background, the founding of our church is well defined. A majority of the first settlers in the vicinity were of German and Swiss background. Some were descendants of earlier settlers in Pittsburgh and Allegheny, but most were new immigrants. On the whole, they came, not for adventure, but to make a living and establish a home. They came as permanent residents. Every Sunday, many of these early

settlers went to Pittsburgh and Allegheny, walking or traveling by canal boat, to attend church services. A number of Etna families were members of the Voegtly Church located on East Ohio Street. A decision by that church to collect money for remodeling its building seems to have provided the impetus for the founding of our church.

Jacob Van Ins, a Swiss settler began the process. He contacted Daniel Hieber, one of the prominent citizens of Centerville, and suggested that the people of the area might be better off to build a little church of their own rather than support a city church's expansion. Mr. Hieber agreed with him and immediately proceeded to use his influence in support of the proposal. He opened his house for the initial meetings. So, in March 1849, seven men met in his residence on Butler Street with Hieber acting as chairman and George E. Jericho as secretary. Eventually, an agreement was reached and signed by the participants regarding the fundamental points of a constitution to be submitted to the new church. No copy of this document currently exists.

By the end of September, 1849, the new congregation was housed in a frame building on the same site occupied by our present building. The total cost of the lot, sold to the church by Jacob Morlock for a nominal sum, and the building was \$300. The congregation called itself "The German Evangelical Church of Centerville." Charles Spang was a generous contributor to the church and his wife and her Episcopalian friends were given permission to use the church

occasionally for Episcopalian services. Spang also donated the small bell which is mounted beside the larger bell in our current belfry.

Another generous gift came from Jacob Morlock in the form of most of the ground which now forms the Etna Church Cemetery. Every member of the church was entitled to a free grave. The charge at the time for digging and refilling a grave was \$1.50 (\$1.00 for a smaller grave). This cemetery became the final resting place for many of those who provided the foundation of the Etna community and of our own church.

The church's first membership lists comprise many of the oldest pioneer families of Etna, Sharpsburg, and the surrounding area. On the membership list of 1853 the following names appear, among others:

Daniel Hieber, Henry Ochse, Jacob Van Ins, George E. Jericho, Jacob Mangold, Samuel Sutter, Christian Hieber, Rudolf Weibel, John Dietrich, Wilhelm Greiner, John Hopfengaetner, Adam Braun, Jacob Keil, Henry Ackerman, Peter Heckman, John Kraus, Casper Hartman, Henry Grau, George Prager, Traugott Obenauf, Peter Klingensmith, George Loeffler, Conrad Loeffler, Michael Matter, John Meyer, Adam Miller, Adam Miltner, Adam Munch, Jacob Naumeister, Jacob Judy, Ludwig Schomberg, Casper Seitz, Christian Siebert, William Siebert, John Trube, Conrad Werner, Henry Werner, Gottlieb Wahler, Christ Wetzels, Henry Wetzels, Erhardt Winterstein, George Ziegler, John George Leibold, John F. Schroth, Gottfried Heineman, Wilhelm Pfuscher, Henry Koch, Michael and George Bauer,

Philipp Thomas, Jacob Stauffer, F. L. Pfirrmann, J. Baumgartel, John Chimbenot, Christian Bickel and Henrich Heinz (father of H. J. Heinz). In those early years, groups of families would join the church together, having come to Etna from other parts of Allegheny County "to work for Charlie Spang."

At the time the church was founded, our current system of public education was in its infancy. Educational facilities were largely operated by churches. It is not surprising, then, that the founders of the church also established a church (parish)-school as well as a Sunday School. Records indicate that in 1851 a fund was established for the construction of a parish school. Many of the early settlers in the area (including H. J. Heinz) received their elementary education in this parish school, taught initially by the minister and then by a specifically employed teacher. The first teacher, hired in 1854, was a Mr. Oetting, who was hired as "regular teacher, organist and choir leader" at the annual salary of \$60, "this sum to include the renting of Mr. Oetting's harmonium."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the Sunday School and the parish school were separate entities is affirmed by the fact that in 1854 a resolution of the church council required each member of the council to visit the two schools at least four times a year. Subsequent records refer to both schools. The Sunday School was supervised by the minister and a committee of the church council. In 1880, the parish school was discontinued and German language lessons were given in connection with Sunday School lessons.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

## A Formative Incident: The Affirmation of Independence

In his history of the church, Martin Leiseder wrote: "Tolerance, although so vital to human happiness, is a difficult thing to implant in our human nature... To reconcile tolerance with religious orthodoxy seems almost altogether impossible. One cannot well be tolerant, without being intelligently liberal-minded. This fact was brought home to our founders by an experience, which came to them soon enough to influence them as to the kind of church they wished to establish."<sup>4</sup> According to church records, this is what happened.

In the spring of 1852 the first pastor of the new congregation, The Rev. Conrad Kuehn, an "orthodox Lutheran," resigned. A few months later, he wrote a letter to his successor, the Rev. Meggers, in which he denounced members of the Church Council as heretics, if not unbelievers. The letter was turned over to the Council, which was compelled to call a special congregational meeting because of the demand that certain Council members be expelled from the church. The congregation, however, condemned the letter and instructed Council to take immediate steps to petition the courts to legalize the church's constitution by incorporating and chartering the congregation under the name of "Independent German United Evangelical Church." Section 3 of that charter read: "This congregation declares itself independent from all ecclesiastical corporations and will not suffer any such to have or use any influence or in any way interfere with its affairs or proceedings."

Further, the text of a congregational resolution passed in 1860, which was meant to establish and safeguard the congregation's independence read: "Resolved, that the German United Evangelical Church of Etna cannot unite with any synodical or ecclesiastical organization as long as at least eight members are opposed to such union."

In later years, the congregation added this resolution: "Resolved, that in matters of faith and doctrine this church grants to every member the right of his own convictions." In light of other actions by the congregation, there is no doubt that the word "his" in this resolution should be understood in an inclusive sense.

These resolutions incorporated two unique principles into the spiritual foundation of our church: 1) tolerance for the individual freedom of religious thought; and, 2) organizational freedom through congregational self-government. These principles have been tested throughout the years but they remain a hallmark of the Etna church.

One of the most difficult challenges to these foundational principles came during the pastorate of Rev. Detleff in 1861. Characterized as a "good preacher and a good Lutheran," Rev. Detleff interrupted a decade of church harmony by seeking to affiliate the church with the Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination, the most conservative and authoritarian branch of the Lutheran Church.

Many members of the church at the time were residents of Sharpsburg as well as prominent and successful businessmen. A substantial portion of this group

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

supported the proposal, perhaps hoping that a church would be established in Sharpsburg. When the congregation voted to remain independent, Rev. Detleff resigned and organized the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sharpsburg. Some have speculated that this "split" diminished the growth and effectiveness of the church as a "pioneer of religious freedom."<sup>5</sup> That may be true. But it is also true that this stand reinforced and strengthened the strain of independence that has run through the heart of this church down to the present time.

In 1893, the Rev. George Dietz made another attempt to bring the church into affiliation with a Lutheran denomination. The challenge resulted from the Council's decision to grant permission to the "home-missionaries" of a Lutheran synod to conduct mid-week services in the church. This led to a series of emotional arguments about the "sinfulness of a congregation keeping itself apart from the 'true' church." These arguments, apparently, made little impression on the congregation, which rejected the effort. Rev. Dietz resigned and, again, a few members left the church.

The congregation's desire for independence was reaffirmed again on May 20, 1923 when they voted in favor of a proposed association of all remaining independent churches with the Congregational churches, which were practically identical in organization and polity. This association presented no compromise to the church's historic principles of congregational independence and spiritual freedom.

This step was reinforced in 1925 when the congregation voted unanimously to join with other independent churches of Pittsburgh and Cincinnati

to establish The Evangelical Protestant Conference of Congregational Churches. In this way, we became associated with the National Council of Congregational Churches. Another resolution passed at this meeting established a special committee, consisting of Martin Leiseder (the minister), Fred Hoburg, C. C. Kurt, Henry Schor, Joseph Lichy and Alex Anders, to revise the church's constitution. The new constitution was submitted to the congregation in 1926 and approved unanimously.

Then, in July, 1929, the court of common Pleas of Allegheny County granted the church a new charter, ratified its constitution and authorized the change in the church's name from Independent German United Evangelical Church to The First Congregational Church of Etna.

The most recent challenge to the church's independence came with the effort to bring the congregation into the merger between the Congregational Church and the Evangelical Reformed Church which established the United Church of Christ in the early 1950s. The first notice of that proposed merger came in 1947. And on February 8, 1948 the congregation took its first step toward maintaining its independence when it cast **82 "NO" votes** and only 11 "Yes" votes for the following question: "Are you in favor of a Merger of the Congregational Churches of America with the Evangelical Reformed Church of America to be effected in the manner proposed by the document entitled: **THE BASIS OF UNION?**"

As the merger effort moved forward, the congregation gave financial support to the Committee for the Continuation of the Congregational Churches of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.



United States (1952), adopted the "Protecting Resolution" to prevent the church from being included in any merger by the action of an outside agency or the action of any of its own delegates (January 15, 1957), and voted

166 - 3 to join the National Association of Congregational Churches (April 15, 1957).

There was no doubt where the congregation stood on the issue of independence!



## Historical Highlights

In 1874, the Ladies Aid Society was organized by the Rev. Huldreich Weber for the express purpose of helping him arrange the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the church. In its original constitution, the purposes of the Society were stated to be: "1) To promote the religious and financial progress of the church; and, 2) to give help and comfort to its members in case of sickness or death." In order to meet the second objective, the Ladies Aid Society established a "sickness and death benefits" plan which provided funds to members experiencing these difficult situations. At a time when insurance plans were inadequate, this assistance was a significant help for many members. The Ladies Aid Society has continued to be an integral part of the church's support and service to the present day.

In 1880, under the leadership of the Rev. Carl Heinrici, the congregation replace the old frame building with our present brick structure (without the annex) at a cost of \$8,023.58. The building committee which guided the project was composed of Rev. Heinrici, George Seel, John Weisert, Henry Ochse Sr., Carl Stroll, William Pfusch, Edward Obenauf, Louis Zoerb, Conrad Weber, and Conrad Metzger Sr. New equipment and decorating was furnished by the Ladies Aid Society in 1884. A pipe organ was installed in the choir loft in 1886.

In 1891, the congregation accepted a challenge it continues to meet this day: the financial support of the Home for the Aged at Fair Oaks, Pennsylvania (presently know simply as Fair Oaks and located on West Liberty Avenue in Pittsburgh). In

1893, the same support was given to the German Protestant Orphan Home in West Liberty, Pennsylvania. Fair Oaks continues to be an excellent facility and has successfully met the challenges posed by the complex regulations governing such contemporary organizations.



Records indicate that in 1899, on the occasion of the church's 50th anniversary, the Rev. Emil Baum submitted the first proposal to establish an adult education class. A graduate of Meadville Theological School and sympathetic to the Unitarian position, Rev. Baum's proposal was a unique and daring suggestion for the times. Perhaps too unique and daring: it went no further than the minute book. Rev. Baum, however, received a call from

a church in Cincinnati where he remained for a long period of service.

In 1900, under the pastorate of Rev. Eugene Ernst, the church undertook a remodeling of the stairs and vestibules and installed new pews and chancel furniture in the sanctuary. The cost was \$3,000. In 1910, the church was redecorated and wired for the installation of electric lights at a cost of \$2,378.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day of

1911 ushered in a new era in the life of The First Congregational Church of Etna (still known as the Independent German United Evangelical Church): the Rev. Martin Leiseder conducted his first service in the church. On February 18, 1912 he was elected to be the pastor from among a slate of four candidates. He was installed on March 18 to begin what was to become a 55-year ministry to the church and community.



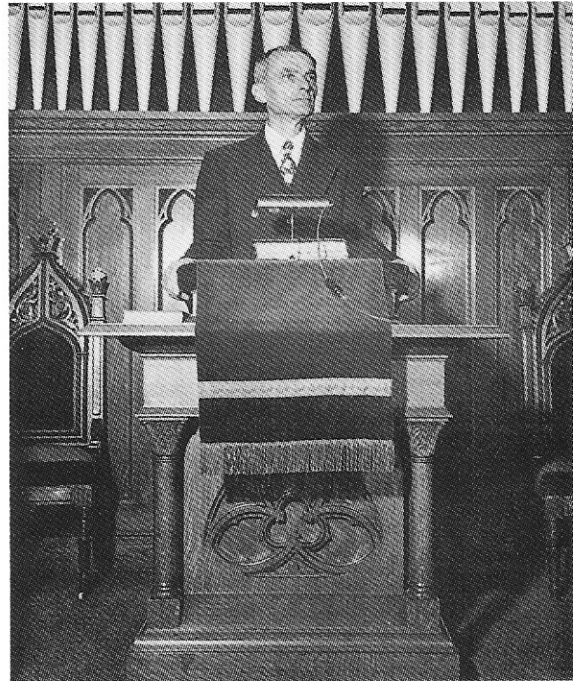
## Martin Leiseder: The Next Fifty-Five Years

It is impossible to write a history of the church without special mention of the Rev. Martin Leiseder whose ministry spanned nearly half the history of the church up to the time of his death in 1967.<sup>6</sup> Martin was a fully ordained Roman Catholic priest who came from Muehldorf, Germany. He graduated in 1904 from a Royal Humanistic Gymnasium with a nine year curriculum in science and humanities. In 1908 he graduated from the Royal University of Munich where he studied philosophy and theology; a year later he was ordained in the Archepiscopal Cathedral at Munich-Freising.

After entering the Novitiate Society near Vienna, he was scheduled for missionary work in Japan. As preparation, Martin was sent to study in the United States at a Catholic Mission in Metuchen, New Jersey. He arrived in New York in January, 1911. During his time at the Mission, he made frequent trips to the public library (without his priestly robes) to study the new movements and ideas in the religious thought of the time, particularly Protestant viewpoints.

While maintaining a high regard for his Catholic background, Martin decided he would not go to Japan. Subsequent contact with the minister of the Smithfield Congregational Church in Pittsburgh led him to investigate "congregationalism;" the freedom and independence of this form of church polity was exactly what Rev. Leiseder was seeking. After spending time at Meadville Seminary, Martin came to the Etna church on that fateful Christmas Eve in

1911. Five years after his installation, on September 6, 1917, Martin Leiseder married Sarah Sutter, a daughter of one of the member families.



Martin's first major project was to convince the congregation to build an annex on the south side of the church to provide additional Sunday School and social facilities. Since the church was still endeavoring to meet a previous debt, this new project was a cause of concern for some members. However, the annex was constructed during the summer of 1912 at a cost of \$6,858, including the installation of a steam heating plant. In 1915, the Sunday School financed the installation of a hardwood floor and metal ceiling in the annex.

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<sup>6</sup> Biographical information was provided by Rev. Leiseder's daughter, Ruth Stauffer, to whom we express our gratitude for her assistance.

Mr. H. J. Heinz and his two sisters were confirmed in the church. And, in May, 1914, as the congregation observed its 65th anniversary, Mr. Heinz addressed the congregation in an afternoon service. He made a tentative offer at that time to the minister to construct a building that would be useful to the church; however, the offer went no further due to a disagreement between the pastor and Heinz over matters of doctrine and church polity.

In 1915 and 1916, Rev. Leiseder introduced a number of changes in policies related to church membership and church dues. He also introduced and guided the passage of a proposal to allow women to serve on the church council. And, in 1916, two women, Catherine Beck and Cecelie Buehler, were elected as full members of the church board. This was an action that was far ahead of its time and had few parallels in other churches regardless of denomination or affiliation. Ms. Beck served as Secretary of Council for a number of years.

On December 12, 1917 the lower floor of the church was damaged by fire. For the next two months, services were held in the Locust Street School until the damage could be repaired. Repair costs were \$4,000.

During World War I, the Etna church gave support to the Red Cross and to many other services provided for those engaged in the war effort. Hundreds of draftees were fed and entertained in the church prior to their departure for the war from the local railroad station. Many from the church served in the armed services and two were killed in action (Charles Koehler and Ralph Young). The church's organist, Fred Haengaertner, died in training camp.

In October, 1919, when the church

observed its 70th anniversary, 106 new members were added to the congregation. At that time, a committee was organized to begin raising funds for the installation of a new organ. Five years later, as the church observed its seventy-fifth anniversary, the organ was installed along with new "art-glass" windows. At that time, the property adjoining the church was purchased and the janitor's living quarters were transferred from the church to that home. The space vacated in the church was remodeled to provide additional Sunday School facilities and a pastor's study. The total cost of these improvements amounted to over \$21,000; the debt was paid off by 1929.

About 1920, The Men's Bible Class was organized. The class was taught by John D. McIntyre from its inception until 1970.

In 1923, the congregation voted to join the Congregational Churches of America.

In 1929, upon the celebration of the church's 80th anniversary, the two large paintings in the sanctuary were donated to the church by Mr. Charles Heusy. The original frames and stretchers were made and donated by Mr. Edward Schor. One picture (currently hanging over the choir loft) represents Jesus telling the Parable of the Sower, the other is a scene of Jesus with children. One of the child models was the artist's only son, Charles Jr., who was later killed in the Philippines at the end of World War II. Other local children and adults, including the artist's wife, Elizabeth, also served as models. Mr. Heusy was a well known artist in the area. His works adorned the sanctuary walls of the English Lutheran Church, formerly located in Sharpsburg, the stage area of the Syria Mosque, formally located in Oakland, and the ceiling of St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Church in Mt. Lebanon. He also executed a number of paintings

in cathedrals in Italy. In 1997, the paintings underwent extensive restoration made possible, in part, by a gift from Sherry Jones in memory of her parents, Mary and Edward Bender. The paintings continue to be an inspirational part of the church's decor.

The cemetery at the top of High Street, owned by the church since its founding, has been both a source of pride and difficulty for the church. Maintenance has always been a problem. Various solutions have been investigated over the years. One of the first efforts was made in 1931 when the Church Council investigated moving all the bodies in the cemetery to Allegheny Memorial Park or Greenwood Cemetery. The cost, however, was prohibitive and this course of action was abandoned. Efforts have also been made to have the cemetery taken over by Etna Borough and by the County. Neither have been successful.

The following years were years of trial for the country, the town of Etna and for the First Congregational Church – the Great Depression, the flood of 1936, and World War II all provided tests and opportunities for the church's faith and commitment. Although strongly affirming its independence, the church did not maintain an isolationist position. In a variety of ways, it sought to address the needs of the community and its people.

During 1930-31, the economic situation led more and more area families to seek assistance and support from the borough. This situation prompted local officials to ask Rev. Leiseder to discreetly investigate what could be done to assist the steadily growing number of cases. Utilizing any public and private funding sources that could be found, he sought to provide as much help as possible to these needy individuals and families.

However, by the fall of 1931 it became clear that the Depression was not going to be short-lived and that an organized approach would be needed to address the problem of local relief. In response, Leiseder arranged a meeting, presided over by the Burgess, Lee Donaldson, and composed of representatives of numerous organizations. He presented a thorough plan for the financing and administration of local relief to the group which established itself as the Etna Relief Organization. An Executive Committee of seven members was authorized to carry out the actual work of the organization with Leiseder serving as the Relief Agent.

Until the effort was taken over by the federal government, the Etna organization assisted with 350 area families and over 1,500 individuals. In addition to contributions similar to those of other churches in the community, our church allowed its minister to spend most of his time (the Church Council relieved him of all duties except the Sunday sermon) at this work for over two years; he continued to perform these duties on a part time basis for several additional years also.

It should be noted that during these years the church did not escape the consequences of the economic disaster. For an extended period, church staff (including the pastor) received only one-half or three-quarters salary; this situation existed from 1934 until 1946. In addition, several programs, including the church's newsletter, the *Etna Belfry*, had to be discontinued temporarily due to limited funds. Nevertheless, in 1932 the congregation did manage to put a new roof of Black Sangor Slate on the building, at a cost of \$1,555, and instituted extensive repairs and important improvements in 1934.

In a lighter vein, in 1931, another unique event occurred in the life of the

church. In the summer of that year, Rev. Leiseder baptized a one year old baby, John Alman, in an airplane 2,500 feet above the church. The boy's father was a pilot and hoped that one day his son would also fly. Twenty years later the son fulfilled his father's wish and received his private pilot's license. In 1951, an article in the *Pittsburgh Press* recounted the incident and commented: "The motor droned a lullaby and the cabin became a chapel as John William Alman, one year old, slept in blissful unconcern while his future was dedicated to the skyways." John Alman's mother, Carrie Alman, and twin sister, Katherine Lange, were aunts of one of our present members, Herman Schmidt.

On St. Patrick's Day, 1936, the area was warned of an impending flood predicted to reach a level of 36 feet. From previous experience, an organized system of coping with local flood situations had been developed which was considered adequate to meet the anticipated crisis. But when the flood reached the unexpected level of 46 feet an emergency greater than anything faced previously occurred. The situation was complicated by a fire, caused when gasoline from overturned tanks were ignited; the fire consumed a row of wooden dwellings in the submerged area. Fire equipment was prevented from entering the area due to the flood waters and nine people died as a result of the fire and flood. An additional 150 people lost everything except the clothes they were wearing.

In this devastating circumstance, our church opened its doors to the community. The Sunday School rooms, already filled with refugees from the flood, were transformed into a hospice. Beds and cots were set up and the injured were treated by a staff of doctors and nurses. Thanks

to the cooperation and efforts of a number of local community organizations, following the example set by our church, the needs of those whose lives were disrupted by this disaster, were effectively and efficiently addressed.

On a lighter level, in 1936 the Church Council voted to post a calendar of church activities and events so the entire congregation would be aware of "what was going on." That tradition continues today. And, in 1938, the church purchased 20 choir robes from the Glenshaw Community Church; cost: \$20!

World War II took its toll on the congregation as it did on churches throughout the country. Three of its sons, Elmer G. Beyerley, Herbert H. Schwartz and Charles W. Heusy, lost their lives in the struggle. Every Sunday, during the regular worship service, a brief ceremony remembering those who were serving in the armed forces was performed. In addition, the name of each member of the congregation enrolled in the armed service was affixed to a white candle and placed in one of the two candelabras on each side of the pulpit. Before each service, the candles would be lighted by a parent, relative or friend of each member while the congregation stood in silent prayer. Throughout the years of the war, Rev. Leiseder served as an organizer and coordinator of the local Civilian Defense effort. After the war, he served as a member of the Reemployment Division of the Selective Service Board.

After 55 years of service to the Etna church and community, Rev. Martin Leiseder died of cancer on June 1, 1967. In his previously cited work, Rev. Leiseder summed up his evaluation of the history of the church with the following words; they could apply to his ministry as well: "The history of our little church is a

genuine bit of American history. The history of the United States starts with their Declaration of Independence. The history of our church starts with its declaration of independence. The purpose of both, our country and our church, is one and the same: Freedom for men and women who are able to govern them-

selves. Thus by their origin and purpose our country and our church are completely one in the very essence of their nature."<sup>7</sup> Martin Leiseder strove to uphold the principles of freedom of individual thought and the self-government of the congregation throughout his entire ministry.



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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.



## The Later Years

The next pastor to serve the church, The Rev. David Wyatt, came in March, 1969 but stayed only 11 months. In 1969, the church sold the old parsonage on the corner of Walnut and School Streets to the People's Savings and Loan (later known as Laurel Savings) to be leveled and used as a parking lot. In the same year a house at 25 Pine Street was purchased to serve as a parsonage.

In May, 1970 Mark P. Jensen was called as pastor. During his tenure a number of significant events occurred. One of the most visible was the completion of the campaign, spear-headed by Laura Pfaub, to raise funds to erect a steeple on the church in memory of Martin Leiseder. The steeple was dedicated on October 24, 1971 in a ceremony attended by John Heinz, whose family had been associated with the church and who later became one of the U.S. Senators representing Pennsylvania.

During this period, the minister's office was constructed and the Board of Deacons, originally established when the church's By-laws were revised in 1969, began its work in 1972. The church's newsletter, *The Belfry*, was also reestablished during this period. Strong ties were also established with the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) during Dr. Jensen's ministry; these ties have continued to the present. Dr. Jensen is currently pastor of the North Congregational Church in Farmington Hills, Michigan and has served as Moderator of the NACCC.

In June, 1973 Dr. Jensen left Etna and was succeeded by Richard Freeman in

October of the same year. During his ministry the Shaler Area Nutrition Feeding Program for senior citizens began meeting twice a week for lunch in the church. That program, in one form or another has continued in the church to the present day. And for over 30 years the program was sustained through the volunteer efforts of two of our members, Alberta Klein and Ruth Luffey. Rev. Freeman accepted a pastorate in Lubec, Massachusetts and is currently located in Lavallette, New Jersey.

In 1979, the Rev. Mark Stauffer was elected pastor in a yoke relationship with the South Hills Congregational Church. In 1981, the Senior Citizens Meal Program was increased to five days per week. And, in 1982, the church served as co-host of the Annual Meeting for the NACCC. Rev. Stauffer left Etna for a position at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School.

Rev. William Pfeifer served the church from late 1982 until mid-1986.

In June, 1986, the Rev. Robert Koch was called as pastor. Rev. Koch served the church until 1990. During his pastorate, the ties to the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC) were strengthened and commitments to community services, such as the Senior Citizen's Meal Program, were continued. Rev. Koch also instituted a Family Enrichment Program and reactivated the Pilgrim Youth Fellowship. In addition, a number of improvements were made to the physical facility including the rebuilding of the pipe organ and the installation of the chairlift, donated by Alex Daniels Sr. in memory of his wife

Ann and an emergency exit and fire escape. Rev. Koch is presently pastor of the First Congregational Church of Durand, Michigan.

From 1991 until 1995, the Rev. Ashley Cook served as pastor. During her pastorate a religious census of Etna was conducted. In addition, the Good Friday *Drama of the Cross*, service was introduced involving all the churches of Etna. It generated a significant amount of publicity in the area news media and has continued each year up to the present time. In 1994, the church participated in the celebration of its 145th anniversary and the 125th anniversary of the town of

Etna. Rev. Cook is presently Minister of Congregational Life at South Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut.

The present pastor, the Rev. Raymond Luber, began as Interim Pastor in December, 1995 and was elected and installed as pastor in 1996. During this time the church has participated in a new Christmas community service, *The Christmas Journey*, has led the way in an effort to maintain the Senior Citizens Meal Program in the face of decreased funding from Allegheny County, and has conducted several adult Christian education activities, including Bible studies and a contemporary film series.



## The Future

The First Congregational Church of Etna has enjoyed a long and rich history. Over the years it has sought, in many ways, to proclaim the love of God to its members and to the community at large. Unfortunately, like all organizations it has been subject to the same influences as the surrounding neighborhood and community. A dramatic change in the economic conditions of the area and a dynamic shift

in population trends have directly effected the church as well as the community. Nevertheless, The First Congregational Church remains committed to its ministry and mission and to the principles upon which it was founded.

We look forward to another 150 years of service to God.

*Revised and Updated by  
Raymond F. Lubber, 1999*



## First Congregational Church of Etna Chronology of Ministers

Name	Dates of Service
Rev. Conrad Kuehn	1849 - 1851
Rev. Meggers	1852 - 1858
Rev. C. E. Zobel	1858 - 1859
Rev. W. F. Dethlefs	1859 - 1863
Rev. Meggers	1863 - 1871
Rev. Huldreich Weber	1871 - 1878
Rev. Carl Heinrici	1878 - 1882
Rev. Wilhelm Ulfert	1882 - 1884
Rev. H. K. Mueller	1884 - 1887
Rev. T. Korm	1889 - 1890
Rev. George Dietz	1890 - 1893
Rev. Alfred Schramm	1894 - 1897
Rev. Emil Baum	1897 - 1900
Rev. Eugene Ernst	1900 - 1902
Rev. C. G. Wagner	1902 - 1911
Rev. Martin Leiseder	1912 - 1967
Rev. Donald Mullen (Interim Pastor)	1967
Rev. David Wyatt	1968 - 1969
Rev. Mark Jensen	1970 - 1973
Rev. Richard Freeman	1973 - 1978
Rev. Mark Stauffer	1979 - 1982
Rev. William Pfeifer	1982 - 1986
Rev. Robert Koch	1986 - 1990
Rev. John Rickloff (Interim Pastor)	1991
Rev. Ashley Cook	1991 - 1995
Rev. Raymond Luber (Interim Pastor)	1995 - 1996
Rev. Raymond Luber	1996 -