

Matteson's Zion Lutheran School Closes after 148 Years

After completing 148 years of service in the Matteson area, Zion Lutheran School has closed its doors. On Friday, June 3 it held the final graduation ceremony for a single 8th grader—a sign of the declining enrollment that forced the Zion Lutheran parish to make the painful decision to end its school ministry.

Early Years

In fact, the school predates Zion Lutheran Church. The parent of both Zion Lutheran Church and School is the Immanuel Lutheran parish in Richton Park. In response to Matteson families whose children had to make the two-and-a-half-mile trek to Immanuel's school on Sauk Trail and Cicero, the Immanuel parishioners voted to plant a new school at 216th Place and Maple Street. Classes at the Matteson "town school" began in September 1868. Ten years later, the dream of the Matteson residents to have their own church services in the village became a reality at a September 29, 1878 meeting that established the Zion Lutheran Congregation of Matteson – daughter of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Richton Park. In the early years, church services were held in the school building (currently a private residence at 3735 West 217th Street, across the street from its original location).

Initially, the school was served by a teacher, and the church shared a pastor with other area churches including Immanuel in Richton Park and Trinity in Crete, IL. Finally, on August 10, 1884 Zion installed a full-time minister who began a 46-year tradition of Zion's pastor serving as both minister and teacher. Zion's first church building was constructed east of the school building and was dedicated in November 1889.

The longest-serving pastor-teacher at Zion was Pastor Christopher Becker, who served the congregation for twenty-six years after accepting his call in February 1905. During Pastor Becker's tenure, children attended school four days a week, Monday through Thursday, which permitted him to prepare his sermons on Fridays and make sick calls on Saturdays. Religion and confirmation classes were taught in German. At this time, Zion Lutheran School didn't accommodate eight grades, so upon confirmation, students began attending the public school.

A Growing School

By the time of the November 27, 1927 rededication ceremony of Zion Lutheran Church, the congregation had grown to 338 members. In October 1931 Zion inducted its first full-time teacher since 1884 to serve in the one-room school that now housed eight grades of twenty-one students. From that time, the school population greatly increased until Zion had to begin plans for a new school building. Groundbreaking for the new Zion Lutheran School building at its current location at 3840 West 216th Street took place in May 1944, and the new building was dedicated on September 3, 1944. A second teacher was added to the staff, and a Kindergarten was also sponsored that year by Zion's Parent Teacher League, whose first "teachers" were all volunteers who served on a rotating basis. By 1958 there were four teachers: one for Kindergarten, one for Grades 1-2, one for Grades 3-4-5 (who also served as school principal), and one for Grades 6-7-8. Also in the late 1950s the school's first basketball team was organized.

With the burgeoning school population and church membership, the Zion congregation began planning for a new church-school complex. Groundbreaking for the new church and a four-classroom addition adjacent to the school building took place in March 1960, and the dedication services for the new

church and school addition were held the week of May 7-14, 1961. A farewell service in the old white clapboard church at 216th Place and Maple culminated in a procession to the current-day site of Zion Lutheran Church and School on 216th Street. In 1961-62, the Zion Lutheran School staff had grown to five teachers: one for Kindergarten, and one each for double-graded classes for Grades 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 and 7-8. A hot lunch program was introduced the same year. In 1978 a preschool program began, the same year Zion Lutheran Church celebrated its 100-year anniversary. In 1977 a committee had been formed to study the feasibility of constructing a multi-purpose building originally envisioned in the 1960 plan for the church-school complex. Dedicated on September 9, 1984, the building known as the Parish Activity Center included a full-sized gymnasium/parish hall and a kitchen.

A Mature Institution

By the late 1980s, parish member school enrollment continued to be on the rise. By the mid-80s, the lower grades had all been split into single-graded classes, with only Grades 5-6 and 7-8 remaining double-graded. As the lower grades advanced however, there was a real risk of having to turn away member students due to overcrowding. The issue was resolved when Zion teamed with its “mother school” at Immanuel-Richton Park under a two-year agreement beginning in 1989. All grades became single-graded, with both schools offering preschool and kindergarten programs, and Immanuel providing primary instruction for Grades 1-2-3 at its Richton Park campus, and Zion offering Grades 4-5-6-7-8 in Matteson. Under this interparish agreement, enrollment for the joint schools jumped from 183 students the previous year to 228 during 1989-90, and Zion’s teacher-principal became a full-time administrator. At the termination of the two-year interparish agreement, Immanuel closed its school, and all grades moved back to Zion.

By the early 1990s the faculty had grown to nine full-time and two part-time teachers. Zion Lutheran School enjoyed its peak enrollment of 220 students during the 1992-93 school year. That same year the school began providing before and after school child care. Computer education and a computer lab had been offered since 1988-89. Early in the new millennium Zion installed new playground equipment, an updated phone system, and air conditioning.

Changing Times

In the mid-1990s Zion Lutheran School experienced a gradual decline in enrollment numbers that began dropping more precipitously by the mid-2000s. The church also saw a corresponding drop in membership which contributed to the fiscal struggles of the school. When the school was forced to return to multi-graded classrooms, there were continuing enrollment losses until the school had to eliminate its administrator’s position. For the past several years the school has wrestled— along with its neighboring communities—with socioeconomic changes in the south suburbs. Manufacturing jobs have decreased and given way to service industries that make it difficult for many area families to afford to send their children to parochial schools. There are also fewer children in millennial families than were seen in the boomer and “boomerang” generations. As a result of this double blow, many south suburban parochial schools have closed in recent years, including St. Paul Lutheran in Chicago Heights, Trinity Lutheran in Lansing, Luther South and Luther East High Schools, and St. Lawrence O’Toole in Matteson. Zion Lutheran School struggled during the past few years to keep open with fewer than 40 students, until finally the congregation voted to closed the school at the end of the 2015-16 school year.

Now Zion Lutheran Church faces new challenges, adjusting to the loss of its signature ministry to the Matteson community. The familiar German Lutheran neighbors have given way to a multi-cultural community with different needs and different traditions. The congregation must learn how to build relationships with the community through other ministries.