

THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH OF PASADENA, CALIFORNIA:  
A BRIEF HISTORY

By Robert K. Johnston

The beginnings of the Pasadena Evangelical Covenant Church extend back to 1902 when E. M. Carlson, pastor of the Swedish Tabernacle in Los Angeles, began to minister to several Swedish domestics who met together for fellowship and Bible-study on Thursday, their day off. He would hold informal preaching services for these ladies who cooked and served for the wealthy patrons of Pasadena. During the next fifteen years or so, this practice was continued sporadically under the leadership of Pastors A. G. Delbon, F. O. Kling of Los Angeles, S. A. Sackerson of Fresno, M. Peterson, and F. Scholander. Often the home of Anna and Christine Mangney was used as a meeting place, and when that was unavailable, the Nazarene Church on Mary Street was used. When Emma Nelson and Marie Hanson rented a home on Pearl Street for the use of several of these Swedish working girls, the meetings were transferred there.

By 1919, Rev. P. B. Wellander of the Los Angeles Church began to travel to Pasadena weekly for these meetings. Under his leadership the group became more structured, and during his visit with them on October 23, 1921, it formed itself into a Ladies Aid Society with eleven charter members. At the second meeting of this group which was later to take the name, Phoebe Society, ten more members were added, and the group decided to continue meeting weekly.

From time to time, the desire had been expressed that a mission church be organized in Pasadena, and this wish was now voiced again. Wellander was asked for his advice, and he consented to serve as chairman of a meeting to discuss the possibility. On April 3, 1922 at the German Lutheran Church in Pasadena the gathering took place, and it was followed by another on April 19, 1922. In addition to Wellander, Rev. Nels Peterson, a retired Mission Covenant minister living in Los Angeles, was on hand to help with the organizing. After a time of singing and prayer, the organization of the Church was drawn up with twenty-six charter members and \$39.45 in the treasury. Of the charter members, close to half were ladies working as domestics and the majority of the rest were married couples whose husbands were tradesmen. Only Haken Lundgren, a retired lumber mill owner, seemed to have any real means. All of the members were sincere, pietistic Swedish folk who were desirous of Christian fellowship and instruction and eager to serve their Lord. Aron Carlberg was elected chairman, and elections followed for secretary, treasurer, two deacons, a trustee, two deaconesses, and a five member constitution committee. Rev. Wellander consented to take charge of the Wednesday evening preaching service, and Hakan Lundgren, one of the newly appointed deacons, was given

responsibility for the Sunday evening service. The group voted to ask admittance to the California Missionary Association at the same meeting.

In organizing themselves into a mission church, these charter members also confessed their allegiance to the Word of God as the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct and declared the Church's purpose to be that of spreading the Gospel among all people and being a help and support in the spiritual edification of its members. On May 6, 1922, the Church was admitted to the California Missionary Association at its meeting in Hilmar and was promised \$50 a month in support as soon as a permanent pastor could be secured. With Wellander and Rev. Carl Anderson, President of the California Association, as elected advisers, the Church met to call a pastor. After two calls were extended and refused, a call was extended to Rev. A. G. Sporrong of Selah, Washington.

Sporrong accepted the call and began his ministry which was to last seven years in Pasadena in February, 1923. He was an enthusiastic, aggressive man who possessed many talents. As the Church was still in its infancy, he became not only its pastor, but also its chairman, choir director, organist, soloist and Sunday School superintendent. The town paper described him as "a forceful speaker and a good mixer." Under his leadership, meetings were held in a nearby church and then in a hall, "The Coffee Cup Inn." As early as October, 1922, the Church had purchased property on Villa Street for their church building, but under the guidance of Sporrong and the vision of several key laymen, this property was sold in order that the Church might be located on a major throughway. After much searching, three adjacent lots were located which fronted onto Lake Avenue, one of the city's main streets. The property also included a large two-story house, and the package was purchased for \$9,500. During the first week of April, 1923, the Church, thus, began meeting in the house which had been remodeled slightly, and it continued there as a church for the next sixteen months.

Under Sporrong's leadership, the Sunday School was soon started with only five children, all from the Bergstrom family. By the end of 1923, however, it had grown to 36 children and an almost equal number of adults. Church membership had similarly increased to 54 by the start of 1924, and the congregation had officially joined the Mission Covenant Church of America the previous June.

In order to build their new church, these Swedish immigrants gave generously of their limited means. This was particularly true of the women domestics who worked six days a week for limited salaries and spent most of their remaining time, energy,

and money on behalf of the Church. From members, over \$6,000 was received for the new church building. To this, another \$3,300 was given by the Phoebe Society who had had a contest to raise money, and over \$1,000 was donated by Mrs. S. J. Anderson who had collected the money in a house to house canvas of her neighborhood. Lastly, Rev. Sporrong, being an accomplished musician, had helped his church by touring other Mission Covenant Churches in America, singing and playing the organ, and receiving almost \$3,000 in gifts. With this money, construction could begin on the new Tabernacle, and work began on it on February 18, 1924. To make room for the structure, the present house on the property was moved to the rear of the lots. The cornerstone laying for the new building followed on April 6, 1924, and the first services in the completed structure were on August 24th. The total cost of the project came to almost \$30,000, but as giving had continued to be generous, there remained a debt of only \$7,000. Architecture in this new chapel was simple in a typical mission style; seating was for about 300 people. One of the members, C. W. Charlson, had drawn the plans, and another, O. P. Anchor, had supervised construction. This pattern of using the construction skills of its members was to be repeated often by the Church in the future as it expanded and as it built sister churches.

Although there were three other Swedish churches in Pasadena, the Pasadena Mission Church grew rapidly. An adult Swedish prayer meeting had already been organized, as had a choir. To this was added a Young People's Society in 1925 and the Covenant Women's Auxiliary. The Church was an immigrant church, organized by them and conducted almost entirely in the Swedish language (It is interesting that at the dedicatory services for the new building, English was the chief spoken language so that the community might be involved.). Its entire ministry was to those of a Scandinavian culture. This is not to imply that the members were not interested in reaching out to the community. As early as 1927, open revival meetings were held in the Church and responsibility was assumed for a monthly evangelistic service at the local Rescue Mission. The Church also encouraged Sporrong to be gone for five weeks in order that he might help several Swedish families in Eureka, California organize a church there. Thus, early in its existence, the Church exhibited two of its most characteristic features which remain true today--an evangelistic desire and an interest in church extension.

In January, 1929, a spontaneous revival began among the juniors and the young people of the Church. In order to counsel with those who desired to know Christ, the pastor was forced to cancel the preaching at a Sunday morning service. This time of

the Holy Spirit's unique presence continued through the next week as Carl G. Westerdahl held evangelistic meetings in the Church.

Rev. Sporrong preached his last sermon in Pasadena on January 26, 1930, having resigned to become Superintendent of the North Pacific Missionary Association. As an interim pastor for one year, the Rev. Axel Nicklason, a former logger, full of zeal, but without formal theological training, was called. By 1930, when Sporrong left membership had risen from 30 when he came, to 113; the Sunday School had 110 members; the Young People's Society, 28; and the Phoebe Society, 70 members. As important, the direction which the Church's ministry would take was beginning to take shape. Strongly interested in their youth: provincial, yet open to all; desirous of being used by God to evangelize and minister in the community; very committed to both home and foreign missions; willing to provide strong lay support and to give generously, yet wanting strong pastoral leadership; the Church, now called the Swedish Evangelical Tabernacle Church of Pasadena, was carving out its character.

During the fall of 1930, a call was extended to Rev. R. C. Dahl of the Galesburg, Illinois, Mission Church. He accepted the call which was to begin as of April, 1931. During his years as pastor, the Church took on for support its first regular missionary, Rev. Joel Johnson, who was serving in China. Unfortunately, it was also during his pastorate and largely at his instigation that the small church had a split in its membership which resulted in over twenty of its members leaving the fellowship. The events are like a tragi-comedy today, but feelings were real and intense in those days. The controversy flared when Dahl received an anonymous letter from a woman in the Church who was not a member, criticizing his wife for being too worldly in her use of cosmetics. Unable to discover the identity of the writer, Dahl pressed from the pulpit for a public confession from the sender. When it was not forthcoming, he announced that the "Spirit had left the Church" and began a series of sermons for several months on Nathan the Prophet who warned David that God's Spirit was absent from the Kingdom. In order to help the Church, a prayer group was formed by Dahl, but only those who called Dahl and first obtained his approval could attend. Finally at a business meeting on September 19, 1935, Dahl resigned in order to establish an independent church in Pasadena where the Spirit would again be present, and about 25 members, mainly from those in the prayer meeting group, left the Church.

The tragedy of the situation is not fully appreciated until it is recalled that the Church was not only a place to worship, but also a second home for the Scandinavians. Those who had been closest of friends no longer would speak to each other. It is

into this situation that Rev. C. J. Ledin, an older Covenant minister who had served in churches for forty years, was called to serve, first as interim pastor, and then as permanent pastor. Ledin was a loving man who immediately began the task of reconciliation between the groups. Within a short time, all but two of those who had left the fellowship had been reunited in spirit with their friends. As a result, after just 9 months Dahl's church folded for lack of support. Because the majority of those in the prayer group lived in neighboring towns west of Pasadena and as a small group of Swedes had begun to meet regularly near them under the leadership of a Biola student, Arvid Carlson, most of them decided it would be best if they gave their support to the new group. With the good wishes of their friends in the Pasadena Church, they, thus, gave impetus to what was soon to become the Eagle Rock Mission Covenant Church.

By the middle of the thirties, the Church began the necessary process of Americanization. With few immigrants continuing to come from Sweden and with pressure from the youth for the Church to use the more familiar English language, the Church recognized that it had to change to meet the situation. By 1936, English meetings were being held in the lower auditorium on Sunday mornings with Roy Johnston who was the young Sunday School Superintendent in charge. That July, the word "Swedish" was removed from the official name of the Church as it became, the "Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of Pasadena." In 1937, the English ministry was expanded to include a united service once a month in the sanctuary. By 1938, this was increased to two united services a month and the Thursday evening praise and prayer service was converted to the English language, as well. Under Pastor Ledin's gentle but forceful ministry, the painful process of Americanization proceeded without undue controversy. His retirement from the ministry in 1938 and the Church's call of his son-in-law, the Rev. Melvin Dahlstrom did not change this process. At the Annual Meeting of the Church on December 12, 1940, it was decided to conduct all of the Sunday morning services in the English language and to buy additional property for the expansion of the Church's ministry. Ludwig Brandt, a deacon who was deeply respected and loved, stood up at that annual meeting and spoke God's word for that moment. He stated that although he dearly loved to hear the Swedish language and the Swedish Bible read, he was in favor of converting all of the worship services into English in order that the Church might grow and minister to more of the people in the community. Brandt's opinion carried the day, and the Church became an English-speaking congregation.

Although it was now the war years, the Church consciously was seeking to expand its ministry. It recognized that one need was for a larger sanctuary in which the growing Church could

worship. Therefore, money for this project was raised throughout the early forties and the building committee prepared preliminary plans. On October 12, 1944, the final plans for the Church's present structure were presented and accepted at a business meeting. Drawn up by a Scandinavian architect from Kingsburg, the plans called for a sanctuary which would seat 500 people and a separate educational building accommodating 300. The Groundbreaking Ceremony took place in February, 1947, with the finished building's dedication being January 18-25 of the following year. Due to rising building costs, the new building and some remodeling came to over \$100,000, considerably more than the original estimate.

Rev. Dahlstrom had served the Pasadena Church from 1938 to 1943. When he left to take another pulpit in Seattle, the Church called one of its former evangelistic week speakers, the Rev. Carl G. Westerdahl, to minister to them in Dahlstrom's place. Westerdahl, during his two years of service in Pasadena continued to move the Church into new areas of ministry. Missions became, for example, an increased priority for the Pasadena Church. Ann Berg, who had previously been a paid Sunday School worker for the Church was able to leave for Belgium Congo in 1944, partially supported by the Church. In addition, the Church held its first missionary conference that same year. Evangelism and community outreach were emphasized by an experimental radio broadcast, by the revitalization and expansion of the cradle roll and by a visitation program.

Rev Westerdahl was forced to resign his pastorate after only a short time, because the Covenant as a denomination elected him as Evangelist at large for the Covenant. Arvid F. Carlson was called in his place and soon the Church was involved in the most exciting five years of its history. From the fall of 1946 when he came, to the fall of 1951, the Church more than doubled its attendance at the morning worship service and at Sunday School (much of this growth happening in the one month following the opening of the new sanctuary), membership jumped from 264 to 363, the sanctuary was built as was a Sunday School building and a parsonage, the Cradle Roll was increased to over 200 babies, and over 500 people came one Sunday to Church school. As important as the statistics were the patterns of ministry for the Church which firmly emerged. Missions continued to be stressed as Church members Virginia Johnson, Bob and Virginia Verme, Dorothy Olson, and Al and Julie Strong were commissioned and given financial support for ministry in Swaiziland, Japan, Bolivia, and Ethiopia. Evangelism continued as a second priority of the Church. Thus, in 1947, it could write of itself: "The tone its (the Church's) ministry perhaps is indicated by the fact that its present pastor, the Rev. Arvid F. Carlson accepted the call to the Church while serving as Conference Evangelist and Field Worker. Its most recent pastor, the Rev. Carl G. Westerdahl, resigned to become Evangelist on the National fields."

Using the cradle roll visitation programs, Sunday School contests, and evangelistic weeks as its tools, the Church consciously sought to escape its ethnic oneness and bring Christ's Gospel to its friends and neighbors in the community around it.

Commitments both to ministry through music and to the youth of the Church and the community became priorities during these five years, standing along side evangelism and missions. First under the leadership of Dick Gehrig and then of Les Hedman, the music program of the Church became a special part of its worship and teaching. Choir festivals and children's choirs became exciting aspects of the Church's ministry, and it came to be known that "good music" was a regular part of the worship services. In 1951, Worth Hedgin was called to be Youth Director for the Church. His ministry was necessary for the Sunday School, which now averaged close to 450 people each Sunday, and the Daily Vacation Bible School, which had over 300 present in 1950, were bringing children and teen-agers into the life of the Church in increased numbers.

Lastly, the Pasadena Church during these five years acted afresh on its desire to serve the Lord by planting new churches. Carlson was particularly strong in his leadership at this point. Just as the Los Angeles Church had offered support and leadership in the founding of the Pasadena Church, so Pasadena became instrumental in beginning other new churches. Thus, in 1950, a large lot was purchased in Duarte for \$4800 as several of the Church families were now living in that area. On this lot, the Monrovia Covenant Church was then built in 1951 at a cost of \$16,907.67 with over fifty volunteer laborers from the Pasadena Church erecting the main part of the structure in one day. As had been true on the construction of the Pasadena Church's sanctuary and Sunday School building, the task was organized and carried out by two of the laymen, Bill Erickson, contractor, and Roy Johnston, Building Committee Chairman. On November 18, 1951, 36 charter members officially met to begin the new work. Of this, 22 were transfers from the Pasadena Church, including its new pastor, William Mays.

In writing about itself during 1951, in a promotional brochure, the Church described itself as part of the Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of America which had "500 churches," "100 missionaries," and "extensive home missions work." Believing, it said in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, the only final authority in matters of faith and conduct, in a regenerate membership only, and in a congregational type of church government, the Pasadena Church stated that its aim was "to please God, preach Christ, and serve Man." Other literature from the Church at this time defined as its chief principles, "the Bible," "the new birth," "a separated walk," "the unity of Christians," "the independence of the local church," "evangelism," and "the missionary imperative."

1952 saw an acceleration and consolidation of these basic thrusts in outreach, youth work, music, evangelism, and missions. In the next 11 years, the Pasadena Covenant Church helped begin 6 new Covenant Churches in Downey, La Crescenta, Covina, Orange, Spring Valley and Montecito. They were helped by the people, the talents, and the money of the Pasadena Church. During this same period, the Church's Youth Ministry also expanded, first under Jon Braun and then under Don Erickson and Phil Axelson. Jon began the Campus Club program which combined singing, skits, and recreation as well as a clear presentation of the Gospel. Through the 50's, the Sunday School continued a strong attendance, though levels fluctuated. As the decade progressed, it became more clear, however, that the youth program had overtaken the Sunday School as a major focus of the Church's ministry to its community. By 1960 there were strong organized programs for Junior, Junior High, High School, and College age youth. Each averaged 30 people in attendance weekly. In order to more effectively minister within this expanded youth program, it was decided that a new youth center was necessary. Therefore, in 1962 as part of the 40th Anniversary Celebration, groundbreaking was held for the new \$250,000 Youth Building, and it was finished the following year.

In the music department, Norman Johnson was hired in 1956 as the Director of Music. Under his leadership there was a constant striving for high quality. Regular Youth Choirs were formed, an orchestra played regularly on Sunday evenings, and the Choir Concerts became events which drew widely from the community. New forms of music were brought into the worship services, and the Church was made more aware of its need to make its liturgy meaningful. This liturgical evaluation continued under the loving and gentle leadership of Roland Tabell who followed Johnson in 1961. Recognizing a value in many forms of church music, Roland sought variety in the type of music used in the worship experience.

Evangelistic meetings were continued in the 50's, often geared for the youth. In addition, the Cradle Roll, the Sunday School, youth groups like the Campus Club, and even the Sunday evening service were strongly shaped by the Church's desire to reach others with the Gospel. As a means of furthering evangelism, the Church donated \$5,000 in 1963 to the Carl G. Westerdahl annual lectureship fund at North Park Seminary. This lectureship was to be on evangelism and was to help train future Covenant pastors. In missions, as well, the Church moved forward. In 1952, for example, a Church instigated clothing drive for war orphans in Korea brought in 1100 pounds of clothing and 200 pounds of food. In 1953, the Paul Gessweins and the Louis Jensens were commissioned as missionaries from the Church; in 1954, Eleanor Pierson; in 1956, Margie Ensign, Rachel Sarason, and the Warren Campbells; in 1958, the Kenneth Henrys, Ralph Eilers and Charles Deweys; in 1959, the Hiley Rainers; in 1960

the Bob Hettekans; and in 1962, the Arthur Carls. What was particularly significant for the Church about these new missionaries was that all of them had been members or attended regularly the Pasadena Church for some time and thus were known to the people. It was not so much a case of supporting some other work although this too was done, but of sending out its own to such places as New Guinea, Japan, Korea, Formosa, the Navajo Indian reservation, Manila, and Germany.

During the period from 1952 to 1963, several other developments in the life of the Church need to be mentioned. In 1953, Rev. David H. Scott, a retired minister from Michigan approached Rev. Carlson and offered his services as a visiting minister for the Church. With Carlson's expanding involvement in interdenominational and community life, along with the increase in membership and activity in the Pasadena Church, Scott's service to the sick and the elderly was a Godsend. By 1960, feelings that the Church needed to better minister to its senior citizens became translated into action, and the Golden Years Group was formed. Soon with over 100 members, this group helped keep the Church's ministry relevant to people in an age group that had been neglected except for Rev. Scott's calling.

By 1963, the Church had seen under Carlson's guiding the membership double, its Sunday School attendance triple, its Cradle Roll expand to 375 babies and its youth department minister to over 150 students each year. It had seen its budget expand from \$20,000 to \$100,000 and its number of supported missionaries grow from one to twelve. Yet all was not well. Some in the congregation felt the pastor was too busy on outside projects. The community around the Church was in transition, and the future direction of the Church was unclear. Lay leadership seemed tired. The machinery within the Church was still grinding on, but inertia was its chief impetus. One manifestation of this was the start of charismatic house meetings by several families in the fellowship who were looking for greater spiritual reality. Spiritual in intent, yet divisive in result, these house meetings were patterned after those of Father Bennett. Twenty-five or more of the members of the Church at various times attended them for Bible study, prayer, healing, and speaking in tongues. Eventually, leaders of this group were counselled with by the Deacons and an attempt at reconciliation was tried. But feelings both for and against charismatic manifestations were buttressed with Scriptural support and no real meeting was possible between those within the group and those outside. Finally, several families left the Church amidst hard feelings and the controversy died down.

In 1963 after seventeen years of service and much fruitful result, even during the difficult years of the early 60's, Arvid Carlson resigned in order to accept a call to the Covenant Church

in San Jose. While another pastor was being selected, Rev. Richard Bennett, an old-style English evangelist, held a series of meetings, and the Spirit blessed his ministry. The Church's evangelistic emphasis was still at the forefront. As several of the membership roles had moved out of town or become inactive, the interim period between pastors also gave the Church an opportunity to review its membership and reassess itself as to who it was. Thus, in March of 1964, when Rev. Paul E. Larsen began his ministry there as the new pastor, membership stood at 435 full members and 89 affiliate members, and most of these were eager for what God wanted to do in the Church.

With the coming of Larsen, his associate Norman Crider, and a Youth Director Gary Copeland, membership spurted within the Church, and youth interest reached a new high. 84 members were added in 1964 and average Sunday morning attendance reached 531. As significantly, in 1964-65, membership in the high school group's Campus Club doubled with the high figure being 68 students. Many of these began regularly to attend the revived Sunday evening service which averaged over 330 people each week. Beginning November 1, 1964, the Church began to have two worship services on Sunday morning, sandwiched around the Sunday School period. Attendance at the earlier hour remained small, but the change permitted new growth and leadership to be exhibited.

Within one more year, average attendance in the morning services had grown to over 600 and the evening service to close to 350. An associate youth minister to work with Junior and Junior High age youth was added and within the year, the Junior High had expressed new life and significant new growth. The college group was also growing, and they were singing regularly as a choir in the early Sunday morning service.

It is difficult to assess with any objectivity these years in the Church's life for they have just passed. Several trends seem to have emerged, however. The rapid early growth during Larsen's ministry was not without its costliness. The strong tradition of lay leadership was often short-circuited and ideas came more and more from the top. This pattern was strengthened with the addition of staff until there were three full time ministers, two seminary assistants, and a full-time music director. More and more, people realized it would get done whether or not they worked and so they became less active. A second trend was the rise of strong participation and interest in the young marrieds. A new Sunday School class was formed for this age group in 1966 and by 1970, over 50 members were attending regularly. Many of these had joined the Church, some sang in the choir or were on Church boards, and many seemed interested in promoting the life of the Church.

During the 60's, interest in missions began to wane in the Church. Although the number of missionaries still supported was as high, and the annual mission's conference was still held, the old excitement was gone. Possibly this is now being overcome by the fact that two of the couples in the Young Married group are just leaving for overseas service and personal ties will again be stronger.

In 1969, the Korean Christian Church asked for and received permission to use the Youth Building on Sundays for its worship service in the Korean language. After one year, attendance averaged about 25. In 1970, Operation Help was launched as an effort to reach out to people in need. Food, clothing, and furniture were collected and distributed, legal and medical help were provided, transportation was given, blood was donated, and other services were rendered. The program is still young, but it already has as its headquarters a nearby house, and it is involving new people monthly in the serving ministry of the Church. Along with the continuing outreach of its youth programs, these three areas of community involvement speak well for the Church as it looks to the future.

In 1972, the Evangelical Covenant Church of Pasadena will celebrate its 50th Anniversary. Although it has been many things through the years, it can best be characterized as a group of people who have been devoted, faithful, united, willing to change their methods while maintaining their objectives, and determined to reach others with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church has been Victor Johnson, always a willing worker as Church chairman, choir member, deacon, secretary, or Sunday School teacher. It has been Alice and Robert Anderson, who with willing and humble spirits served the Church as custodians for 35 years and are still active in its life and ministry. The Church has been John Lund who was always pushing the Church to enlarge its vision and Ludwig Brandt who often had God's soothing word of unity and peace. It has been Ollie Roth who organized and directed the Mother's Club and Cradle Roll for 20 years and had a volunteer staff of 28 callers and workers from within the Church to canvas the city. It has been Roy Johnston who supervised the Church's building and was Sunday School Superintendent for 18 years, and Warren Thompson, who for over 16 years has given twenty or more hours of his time each week to counsel high schoolers. The Pasadena Church throughout its years has combined strong lay leadership such as this, with faithful supporters, and dynamic ministry. It is this combination it seeks to maintain as it looks for a new senior pastor.