

ST. JOHN'S UNITED CHURCH

St. John's, on Sodom Road, has the distinction of being the oldest existing congregation in Willoughby Township. The congregation was organized in 1834 by a Rev. George Keller who was serving a church in Buffalo and did mission work among German immigrants who began to arrive in Willoughby and Bertie Townships in 1830. These immigrants brought very little worldly goods with them, however, their religion was a possession which they did not leave behind. They were an easy group to organize into a congregation, partly because many were related to each other. Three groups of people were drawn together, the Evangelical Reformed, the Lutheran, and the Pennsylvania Dutch.

The site chosen for the church was on Sodom Road north of New Germany (Snyder). This road, although built of logs, was the best and most important road in the township. No pictures exist of this first church except those mentally recorded by folk long since passed on. In 1934, the centennial year of the church, there were still four members living who had been confirmed in the old church. They had these vivid memories. The space between the logs was filled with clay and the windows had shutters, which were closed except at service time. The floor and ceiling were constructed with wide unfinished boards. A small table served as an altar. The pews were crude benches, six of which can still be seen in the balcony of the present church. The services were in German and were held every second week. Living conditions in the area were not good. Dense forest covered most of the township beyond the second concession inland from the Niagara River. People came to church from distances up to 10 miles in wagons drawn over the log roads by horses and oxen. The ministers came from Buffalo for many years, usually serving about two years each. They travelled by boat to Black Creek or ferry to Fort Erie and later by train. They were always met with transportation by church members, sometimes this being horseback.

In May 1845, under the leadership of Rev. J. Althaus, an acre of land was purchased on the east side of Sodom Road for a cemetery. This cemetery, filled with burials, lies adjacent to the one presently used. Rev. Runk laid the cornerstone for the present brick church in April 1861. The church was completed and dedicated that year. The pulpit Bible used by this pastor along with the old Communion Service set is retained in the present historical case of the church. In 1866, during the excitement of the Fenian Raid, a regiment of soldiers marched through the area. One of the soldiers died from exposure.

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Rev. Schornstein became a resident pastor in 1868. A new house was purchased and moved to church property to serve as a parsonage. Rev. Kottler, an energetic pastor, served in the 1890's. During this period the church tower was built, in which was installed a four face clock built by the pastor. It was motivated by 400 lbs. of weight. The time was struck on the three foot wide bell. A shed was erected for protection of the horses and the present cemetery was also purchased. English services were held part time in 1900 and after 10 years, German was completely eliminated. Rev. Oberkirher came in 1914, serving first in Buffalo, then as St. John's resident pastor. A new parsonage was moved to church property and the old one torn down.

Rev. J. S. Huebschmann became pastor in 1922 and served faithfully for 33 years. The one hundredth anniversary was observed in a week of celebration in June 1934.

Following the retirement of Rev. Huebschmann in 1956, the congregation chose to join with the United Church of Canada. A pastoral charge was established with Peoples United Church of Crystal Beach and a manse was purchased jointly on Elmwood Avenue in Crystal Beach. The parsonage adjacent to the church with an acre of land was then sold. The first minister called was Rev. W. H. Martin. During his service a Christian Education Building was erected as an addition to the church. A memorial window was installed in memory of Rev. Huebschmann. A second window was also dedicated to relatives by six other families. Rev. Martin served from 1956 to 1961. During 1962 and 1963 Rev. Alan Barnes was minister for the charge.

The present pastor, Rev. G. Howard Pace came in 1964. The pastor and church offer a full program and opportunity for service to God and His work.