

Final Historic Designation Study Report

I. NAME

Historic: Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
Common name: Bethel Baptist Church

II. LOCATION

2030 W. North Ave.

7th Aldermanic District, Alderman Fredrick Gordon

Legal Description: Schmidt's Subdivision, (J A) of Lot I William's Subdivision in SW 18-7-22 Block 17 Lots 19 thru 25

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Bethel Baptist Church of Milwaukee
2030 W. North Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53205

V. YEAR BUILT: 1883; side towers added in 1908

ARCHITECTS: Carl F. Ringer
Side tower additions: Bruns and Bruns

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Zion Lutheran Church (Bethel Baptist) is a fine example of Milwaukee's German-inspired, Gothic Revival Style architecture. The original German-American parish moved away years ago and today the church is owned by an African-American congregation that takes great pride in maintaining this outstanding structure.

Located at the busy, six points' intersection of W. North Ave., W. Fond du Lac Ave. and N. 21st St., Zion Lutheran church is the architectural focal point of the area. A one-story education center is located about 40 feet east of the church. Standing across the street from the church on the northwest corner of W. North and W. Fond du Lac Avenues is the former Sears department store which is a large, three-story brick structure designed in an early twentieth century commercial style of architecture. A commercial district of small masonry and frame structures wraps around the church on W. North and W. Fond du Lac Avenues.

Zion is a large, symmetrical, cream brick, German Gothic Revival style, tri-tower church. The principal elevation of the church, which faces W. North Ave., is composed of a gabled facade with a soaring, central steeple that is flanked on either side by a pair of smaller, spiky towers. The square, central, gabled tower is topped with an eight-sided,

spire that is surmounted by a sheet metal cross. Zion's symmetrical, tri-tower massing is a feature that is strongly associated with German-inspired church design in Wisconsin. The front facade is fenestrated with large, pointed arch, regularly placed, art glass windows. The gable is trimmed with extensive ornamental brick corbelling. Three sets of double-leaf entry doors are symmetrically placed on the main elevation.

The side elevations facing east and west are similar in character and the main feature of each is a shallow, gabled transept with a small, projecting, side entry pavilion centered upon it. Flanking either side of the entry is a narrow, lancet-style art glass window. A large round window, called an oculus, is centered in the gable. The remainder of each side elevation is fenestrated with four bays of pointed-arch, regularly placed art glass windows. The eaves are also liberally embellished with ornamental brick corbelling, which is one of the hallmarks of German-inspired nineteenth century church design in the Milwaukee area. The rear elevation facing north features a projecting, faceted apse which is fenestrated with two large, Gothic arched, art glass windows. In 1953, a small one-story brick addition to enlarge the sacristy was constructed at the rear, northeast corner of the church, but it is barely visible from the public right of way.

Both the exterior and interior of the church have remained nearly intact over the years. The only major change to the exterior was the addition in 1908 of two spiky German Gothic style towers that flank the central steeple. Milwaukee architects Bruns and Bruns designed the tower additions although it is possible that these features may have been part of architect Carl F. Ringer's original concept for the church but couldn't be constructed in 1883 --when this style was in vogue-- because of budget limitations.

The congregations brick school building, which is located immediately to the east of the church, is a non-contributing structure because extensive changes have been made to it. Originally constructed in 1924 as a two-story, flat-roofed, Collegiate Gothic Revival style structure, the school was severely damaged by fire in 1985 and then rebuilt with significant alterations that included removing the original second story, blocking-down the window openings and constructing a new hip roof. The school was originally built according to the designs of Leiser and Holst, a Milwaukee architectural firm, and reportedly cost about \$75,000.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

Zion Lutheran Church (Bethel Baptist) is architecturally and historically significant to the City of Milwaukee as a fine example of a German-inspired, tri-tower, Gothic revival style church. The architectural and historic importance of the structure makes it an irreplaceable part of the city's unique and nationally significant collection of churches.

In terms of the building's significance to the state's architectural history, the Wisconsin Cultural Resource Management Plan, published by the State Historical Society, has identified a need to preserve good examples of ethnic architecture of which Zion Lutheran Church is a fine example.

The phrase "ethnic architecture" refers to a specific architectural style or feature that is strongly associated with the homeland of an ethnic group. Milwaukee's inventory of ethnic worship structures ranks as one of its most outstanding architectural assets. The preservation of the city's historic ethnic churches, built mainly between about 1855 and 1905 is a top priority because good examples of ethnic architecture in America are relatively rare.

VIII. HISTORY

Architectural History

Compared with other churches in the city that are designed in a German-inspired Gothic Revival style of architecture, Zion is particularly interesting because of its three spiky towers. The church was originally built with a single, central steeple but in 1908 the two smaller, spiky, German-style flanking towers were added. The addition of the side towers enhanced the original German ethnic character of the building and provided more circulation space on the interior. The exterior of the church has remained virtually unchanged since 1908 with the exception of a small addition at the rear of the church that was built in 1953.

The construction of tri-tower design churches was revived in Germany during the nineteenth century and based on German Medieval architectural styles. Zion's towers, bold and decidedly boxy-looking, have traditionally been called a "Westwerk" and one thousand years ago they were often used as lookout posts. The general character of the spiky steeples--sometimes referred to as "Rhenish Style," in reference to a regional variation of German Gothic architecture--is actually an amalgam of the Romanesque and Ottonian styles of architecture that pre-dated the Gothic style in Germany. It was not unusual for early Gothic style churches in Germany to incorporate some of the general character of earlier architectural styles.

During the late nineteenth century Germans were eager to establish their own national identity and one means of doing so was by reviving some of the architectural styles from their past. The design of Zion church, in turn, is an excellent example of the city's German-American community seeking to keep pace with the latest architectural fashions back in Germany.

Another interesting feature of Zion is the U-shaped balcony on the interior that stretches completely across both sides and the back of the church. This type of interior arrangement was often employed for Protestant church construction in Germany during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The U-shaped balcony is unique to German ethnic churches and the example at Zion church is a fine example of the continuation of an Old World, European building tradition in America. Unlike many other older churches in the city, the interior of Zion church has remained nearly intact since it was built. In 1891 the interior of the church was extensively embellished with a decorative paint scheme and a fine set of art glass windows were installed which are still there today. The original altar, plasterwork, pews and other millwork all remain in excellent condition.

Milwaukee Cream Brick

Zion Lutheran church is among the dwindling number of structures made from Milwaukee's unique cream-colored brick which is an inseparable part of the city's history. In the late nineteenth century, the large number of buildings in Milwaukee made from the impressive, golden-colored brick earned the city its "Cream City" nickname. Cream brick, however, has not been made since the 1920s making the remaining structures made of this material an increasingly valuable part of the city's architectural history and its civic pride.

Milwaukee's first brickyard began operating in 1835 or 1836. The first brick makers actually expected red brick to result from firing the red-brown Milwaukee clay, but an unusually high content of calcium and magnesium in the clay gave the brick a unique soft yellow color instead. The cream brick, as it became to be known, grew in popularity in Milwaukee and the city's brick makers were justly proud of their unique product.

In May of 1859, the schooner M. S. Scott sailed from Milwaukee to Hamburg, Germany carrying, among other things, samples of Milwaukee's cream brick to the mayor of Hamburg. The Germans were impressed with the Milwaukee brick and imported a quantity of it for use in ornamenting new buildings. It is not known if there are any buildings surviving in Germany today that feature Milwaukee's Cream Brick. The popularity of Milwaukee's cream brick was reflected by the fact that as late as the 1920s, a large paint manufacturer, headquartered in the east, Pittsburgh Paint and Glass, sold a ready-mixed house paint in a cream color called "Milwaukee brick."

Zion Lutheran Church History

The architecture of the church is a striking visual reminder of a unique period in Milwaukee's history when the city was brimming with German culture. Many of the congregation's founding members were German immigrants and the architecture of the church reflects the homeland they had left behind. Between the late 1840s and the mid-1880s, wave after wave of German immigration to Milwaukee transformed the city into one of the major centers of German culture in the New World. Milwaukee's manifestation of German art, music, literature and architecture was unique in America and the city was often referred to as "the German Athens" during the late nineteenth century.

Zion congregation was founded in 1883 following one of the crests in German immigration to the city. The church began with an overflow group of about 100 families from Immanuel Lutheran congregation, which was then located at the northeast corner of N. 12th and W. Garfield Sts. Immanuel's leaders had considered enlarging their church to accommodate more members, but decided instead to establish Zion as a daughter congregation at 21st and North Ave., which was known then as the "Brownsland" neighborhood.

A lot was purchased for \$2500 and construction began immediately on the present church and a wood-frame, two-story school next door to it. It was a remarkably ambitious building project for a new congregation and it reflects the importance of religion in the city's German-American ethnic community during the late nineteenth century. Although the church was basically finished in 1883, it took several more years to put finishing touches on it that included the construction of the side towers and the installation of art glass windows, a pipe organ and bells.

In 1886, three years after the church opened, a set of bronze bells was purchased and installed in the tower. The individual weights of the three bells are approximately 1900 lbs., 1100 lbs. and 800 lbs. Each of the bells is inscribed with the name of the donor, Johann August Schmidt, who incidentally, was the subdivider of the land on which the church was built. According to the original bill of sale, the bells were priced at seventeen cents per pound for a total cost of \$766. In 1999, by comparison, new bronze bells cost approximately \$20.00 per pound. The bells are a fine example of the craftsmanship of Milwaukee's Campbell Centennial Bell foundry, which is no longer, is business but was one of the biggest firms of its kind in the country.

Throughout its long history, Zion has operated an elementary school. The first school opened in 1884 and just six months later the enrollment had ballooned to more than 245 pupils, which was far beyond the capacity of the building. A large addition had to be quickly constructed in order to handle the overflow and the enrollment continued to grow until it apparently peaked in 1891 at around 500 pupils. The old school was demolished to make way for a new brick structure, which was completed in 1924.

In 1895 an overflow group from Zion founded another congregation, Nazareth Lutheran Church, which is now located at the southwest corner of N. 25th and W. Meinecke Sts. Throughout its history, incidentally, Zion has been associated with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) which today is the second largest Lutheran church body in America with more than 2 million members.

The post-World War II era brought significant changes to Zion Congregation. Membership declined as families moved away to the suburbs and joined different churches. Nevertheless, during the early 1950s the congregation decided to invest in their location and spent about \$140,000 on improvements to the church and school. Zion congregation later re-evaluated its position and decided to relocate in 1966 to a new site in suburban Menomonee Falls at the northeast corner of N. 188th St. and W. Lisbon Road. The church and school were then sold to Bethel Baptist Church, which still owns the buildings today. In 1969 Zion dedicated a new modern style church and school building which are still in use today. As a reminder of the congregation's past, the original urn-shaped, marble baptismal font was removed from the old church and installed in the new sanctuary.

Bethel Baptist Church History

Since 1967, the former Zion Lutheran Church has been carefully maintained by its second owners, the Bethel Baptist congregation. Bethel grew steadily from its beginnings in 1954 when Rev. John Johnson began conducting services in a small commercial building on the city's near north side at 2108 N. 12th St. In 1959 the congregation's increasing membership necessitated a move to another small commercial building about a half mile to the south at 1901 W. Walnut Street.

The death of pastor Johnson in 1959 brought the Rev. Leonard McDonald to the congregation and under his leadership the membership grew to a point that a much larger facility was needed. Bethel found an answer to its long-term needs in 1967 when it purchased Zion Lutheran Church, which seats several hundred people. Bethel made a few minor changes to the interior in order to accommodate their liturgical needs, but basically the building remains the way it was at the time the Lutheran congregation left.

The former Zion school building located immediately to the east of the church has been an important venue for Bethel's busy schedule of educational and social activities. The school was nearly destroyed by fire in 1985, but the determined congregation rebuilt the structure almost immediately. The second floor, which was severely damaged in the fire, was removed during the subsequent rebuilding.

Bethel Baptist is a very active congregation and well known for its benevolent and social work in the city. The church building is a great source of pride for its members who have diligently maintained the structure and preserved its historic character. For example, when the cream brick exterior walls were cleaned several years ago, the congregation

decided to use a chemical cleaning method which is preferred by restoration professionals and preservationists rather than employing an inappropriate and damaging method such as sandblasting.

ARCHITECTS:

Carl F. Ringer

Zion Lutheran Church represents some of the best-known design work of German-American architect Carl F. Ringer (1851-1939). He came to Milwaukee in 1870 after leaving his German homeland and began working as an apprentice in the office of George W. Mygatt who was one of the city's first architects. Ringer then moved on to work in the office of one of Milwaukee's most prestigious nineteenth century architects, Edward Townsend Mix, and then finished up his apprenticeship working as a construction foreman for Milwaukee architect James Douglas.

Ringer opened up his own architectural practice in 1881 and Zion Church, which was built in 1883, was one of the first big commissions for his new firm. Ringer was adept at working in the period revival and commercial architectural styles of his day and his designs were popular with the city's German-American patrons. He is also believed to have maintained strong family and social ties with his German homeland where, incidentally, his sister Bertha lived with her husband Carl Benz, who was one of the designers of the Mercedes-Benz automobile.

Ringer's career took an interesting turn when he was appointed city building inspector in June 1911 by Milwaukee's first socialist mayor, Emil Seidel. About one year later Ringer was dismissed from his post because of a disagreement with a new mayor, Gerhard Bading, who was elected in 1912. Bading reportedly clashed with his inspector over a building permit Ringer granted to make structural repairs to a downtown building that the mayor wanted torn down. Ringer challenged his firing and took the matter to the state Supreme Court where he won a decision in his favor in August, 1912 and was reinstated to his position with full back pay. Feeling vindicated, however, Ringer immediately submitted his resignation. His victory was sweetened after the controversial building was repaired and then kept in service for years after that.

Ringer then resumed his private architectural practice with his son Carl Jr., who, in 1904, had joined the firm which was subsequently renamed to C.F. Ringer & Son. Industrial plants and commercial buildings were the firm's stock in trade, but they also worked extensively in residential design. The father and son partnership lasted until 1934 when the elder Ringer retired. Carl Jr. continued to work under the Ringer & Son firm name until his death in 1938.

In addition to Zion Lutheran Church, extant examples of the firm's design work include the Frei Gemeinde Society Clubhouse (1927) at 2617 W. Fond Du Lac Ave., the Clemens Kalvelage Warehouse (1911) at 316-22 N. Broadway, the E. Wild House (1903) at 2932 W. McKinley Blvd., and the Meinecke Toy Company (1891) at 110 E. Wells St.

Herman H. Bruns (Bruns and Bruns)

In 1908, the firm of Bruns and Bruns designed the twin towers that flank the original, soaring central steeple. It is believed that this was a short-lived partnership

between Herman H. Bruns and his brother Benedict. It is not known for sure which brother had the greater role in designing the towers, but it may have been Herman because he was listed in 1908 as an architect while his brother Benedict held the occupation of draftsman, according to city directories.

Herman Bruns was born on Dec. 27, 1884 in Manistee, Michigan (which is located in the Upper Peninsula) and moved with his family to Milwaukee in 1901. He was one of five children born to German immigrant Benedict N. Bruns and his wife Dora (Kuester) who was a Milwaukee native. Herman grew up in a household of carpenters and his father taught him cabinet making and stair building while his architectural education began with a course from the International Correspondence School of Scranton, Pennsylvania. He then apprenticed three years with the Milwaukee interior design firm of J.J. Joergenson while studying fine art with Julius Seegall, Charles Schade, and F.W. Heine.

During his career he worked as an appraiser for the American Appraisal Company in St. Louis, taught architecture, math and interior decorating at the Milwaukee Vocational School and worked for Milwaukee architects Kirchoff and Rose. In his own private architectural practice he made a specialty of interior design work and developed a fine reputation as a landscape, pictorial and mural artist. Research continues on Bruns' career.

Brunns is known to have been a registered architect in Wisconsin as late as 1954 even though records indicate that he was then living in Chicago. Research has not yet revealed when and where he died. His best-known design work in Milwaukee is the Beth Israel Synagogue (Greater Galilee Baptist) (1925) which is located at 2432 N. Teutonia Ave. and listed on both the local and national historic registers. Other examples of his design work include the Mabel Yahr Residence (1925) at 3340 N. Hackett Ave., Temple Beth El (1923) at 2190 N. 49th St., and Sherman Park Lutheran Church (1923) at 2703 N. Sherman Blvd. (Note: 1928 and 1960 additions by others.)

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that Zion Lutheran Church be considered for designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its fulfillment of criteria e-4, e-5, e-6 and e-9 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e) of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinances.

- e-4. Its portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style.
- e.5 Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen.
- e-6. Its identification as the work of an artist, architect, interior designer, craftsperson, or master builder whose individual works have influenced the development of the City of Milwaukee, State of Wisconsin or the United States.
- e-9. Its unique location as a singular physical characteristic which represents an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community or the City of Milwaukee.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the original roof shape. Avoid making changes to the roof shape, which would alter the building height, roofline or pitch. Retain the historic roofing materials on the church if at all possible.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Unpainted brick or stone should not be painted or covered. This is historically incorrect and could cause irreversible damage if it was decided to remove the paint at a later date.
- b. Repoint defective or deteriorated mortar by duplicating the original in color, style, texture and strength. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles, which were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.
- c. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible. Sandblasting and other abrasive blasting to brick or stone surfaces is prohibited. These methods of cleaning erode the surface of the material and accelerate deterioration and the accumulation of dirt on the exterior of the building. Avoid the indiscriminate use of chemical products, which could have an adverse reaction with the masonry materials, such as the use of acid on limestone or terra cotta.
- d. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new materials that duplicate the hold as closely as possible. Avoid using new material, which is inappropriate or was unavailable when the building was constructed.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials, which are inappropriate or were unavailable when the building was

constructed. The use of vinyl or aluminum trim or siding is prohibited.

C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills, except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings to fit new stock window sash or new stock door sizes. Avoid changing the size or configuration of windowpanes or sash.
2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or doors. Avoid using inappropriate sash and replacements. Avoid the finning-in or covering of openings with inappropriate materials such as concrete block or glass block. Avoid using modern style sash in place of double-hung sash or the substitution of units with glazing configurations not appropriate to the style of the building. The leaded glass windows in the church should not be altered or removed except for restoration.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design and appearance, but not necessarily in material.

E. Additions

All elevations of the church building are integral to the structure's architectural significance. Additions are not recommended and require the approval of the Commission. Approval shall be based upon the addition's design compatibility with the building in terms of height, roof configuration, fenestration, scaled sign and materials, and the degree to which it visually intrudes upon the principal elevation.

F. Signs

The installation of any permanent exterior sign shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign with the historic and architectural character of the building. No internally illuminated box sign will be approved.

G. Site Features

New plant materials, fencing, paving and lighting fixtures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building.

H. Guidelines for New Construction

It is important that new construction be designated so as to be as sympathetic as possible with the character of the church

1. Siting

New construction must respect the historic siting of the church. It should be accomplished so as to maintain the appearance of the church from the street as freestanding structure.

2. Scale

Overall building height and bulk, the expression of major building divisions including foundation, body and roof, and individual building components such as overhangs and fenestration that are in proximity to a historic building must be compatible to and sympathetic with the design of the church.

3. Form

The massing of new construction must be compatible with the goal of maintaining the integrity of the church as a distinct freestanding structure. The profiles of roofs and building elements, which project and recede from the main historic church should express the same continuity established by the historic building if they are in proximity to it.

4. Materials

The building materials, which are visible from the public right-of-way and in proximity to the church, should be consistent with the colors, textures, proportions and combinations of cladding materials used in the church. The physical composition of the materials may be different from that of the historic materials, but the same appearance should be maintained.

I. Guidelines for Demolition

Although demolition is not encouraged and is generally not permissible, there maybe instances when demolition may be acceptable if approved by the Historic Preservation Commission. The following guidelines, with those found in subsection 9(h) of the ordinance, shall be taken into consideration by the Commission when reviewing demolition requests.

1. Condition

Demolition requests may be granted when it can be clearly demonstrated that the condition of a building or a portion thereof is such that it constitutes an immediate threat to health and safety and is beyond hope of repair.

2. Importance

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is of historical or architectural significance or displays a quality of material and craftsmanship that does not exist in other structures in the area.

3. Location

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building contributes to the neighborhood and the general street appearance and has a positive effect on other buildings in the area.

4. Potential for Restoration

Consideration will be given to whether or not the building is beyond economically feasible repair.

5. Additions

Consideration will be given to whether or not the proposed demolition is a later addition, which is not in keeping with original design of the structure or does not contribute to its character.