

**A Corner of San Francisco with a German Past**  
**By Niels Nielsen**

**St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, on the corner of Sixteenth and Dolores Streets in San Francisco, is a tangible reminder of both the city's ethnic evolution and often forgotten German past.**

After the start of the Gold Rush in 1849, people from all over Europe came to San Francisco and the West Coast, including Protestants (Lutherans and Reformed) and Catholics from the German-speaking countries. Despite being an ocean apart and a continent away from their homelands, these immigrants to San Francisco, as elsewhere in North America, found that they wanted to have religious services in their own language and cultural setting. The many ethnic churches in San Francisco are a result of this. Even today, one can find churches that presently or in the past catered to various European groups such as Russians, Scandinavians, Germans, Croatians, French, Greeks, Italians, Irish, and numerous others. Assimilation, political pressure, changing religious fervor, and urban flight have, of course, not left the congregations of these churches unscathed.

Today, St. Matthew's is the only Lutheran church offering weekly German-language services in all of Northern California. Yet in the 1870s there were four German Lutheran congregations in San Francisco alone, as well as one German Reformed congregation, one German Evangelical (a union of Lutheran and Reformed) congregation, and the Roman Catholic German parish. The magnetism of San Francisco for people from the German-speaking world was such that four years after the discovery of gold in 1849 there were consuls in the city representing the interests of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Hanover, Hamburg, Bremen, Austria, and Switzerland. In 1905, German-speaking Lutherans worshiped at St. Mark's, St. Paulus, St. Matthew's, St. John's, St. Andrew's, and at Zion Lutheran Church. The Roman Catholic believers did the same at St. Boniface and St. Anthony's. There were also three Methodist and three Evangelical congregations. German-speaking Baptists also had a church of their own. At least two synagogues, Emanu-El and Ohabei Shalome, also served German-speaking immigrants. Emanu-El was founded in 1851 by members, who came primarily from Bavaria. Although the congregations have changed over time, several of the old church buildings still exist. Unfortunately, the building of St. Paulus is not one of them. The old church building of St. Paulus suffered a fire in November 1995 and had to be torn down.

Pastor Hermann Gehrcke, who was born in 1863 and had studied theology at the University of Göttingen, immigrated to California in 1891. Prior to this he had graduated from the Teachers College at Verden and been a school principal near Lüneburg. In San Francisco he became the assistant pastor to J. F. Fuendling at St. Mark's. Pastor Gehrcke was later ordained in 1893 by the Synod of California at the German Lutheran church in Sacramento. Subsequently, Pastor Gehrcke saw the need to minister to the growing Protestant German community of the Mission District, and, with the support of the Synodical Home Missions Committee, he organized the new congregation of St. Matthew's with twenty-eight charter members. The congregation gathered for the dedication service on February 10, 1895 in a rented church building on Eleventh Street

between Howard and Mission Streets. The congregation grew so much that the building had to be enlarged. In August 1905 the present site of St. Matthew's was purchased in planning for the construction of a permanent home. The first church building was destroyed, like much of San Francisco, during the earthquake and fire of April 18, 1906. This disaster was a major blow to the congregation, as many lost their homes and possessions. Nevertheless, with help from the Board of Home Missions, the cornerstone for the new church was laid on May 15, 1907, and the congregation was able to dedicate the new building, right across the street from historic Mission Dolores, on March 29, 1908. Supposedly St. Matthew's was modeled after Pastor Gehrcke's home church in Hildesheim, Germany. Although St. Matthew's is built almost entirely of wood, the echoes of North German masonry churches are clearly evident.

While St. Matthew's was under construction following the 1906 earthquake, the congregation met at the then Swedish Ebenezer Lutheran Church at 15<sup>th</sup> and Dolores Streets. Dorothy Praeger, Pastor Gehrcke's granddaughter, points out that at the time the Mission District was very Scandinavian. There was a Danish, a Swedish, and a Finnish church. In addition, there were two churches for the Norwegians of the Mission District.

Judging from some members of the early congregation, the German-speaking community of the Mission District on the whole was doing rather well economically and politically at the turn of the century. The stained glass window to the right of the pulpit, showing Jesus ministering to a pair of small children, was bestowed by Henry (1834-1915) and Katharine (1853-1943) Ohlandt, one of the founding member families of the church, likely as a sign of thankfulness for God's blessings. After all, they had two daughters and two sons. Henry Ohlandt arrived in 1852, starting out as a grocer. He and his brothers then made a fortune with their National Ice & Cold Storage Company, which in the days before refrigeration was of great importance. Later, he rose further in prominence as a shareholder in the German Savings and Loan Society and participating in the Hawaiian sugar trade. However, immigrants experienced both successes and misfortunes. Andreas Himmelmann (1828-1881), whose wife Katharine is memorialized in one window, was born in Kassel, Germany, came to California in 1849. At one time he was fairly wealthy but suffered severe setbacks later on. The stained glass window above the altar, depicting the resurrection of Christ, was given to St. Matthew's by a clergyman's daughter who grew up in Römstedt near Bad Bevensen, Germany, named Helene Strybing née Jordan (1845-1926) in memory of her deceased husband, Christian Strybing [Strübing] (1821-1895). He was born in Gnoien in Mecklenburg and arrived in California in 1849. In San Francisco he went from being a grocer to becoming an importer, merchant, and entrepreneur. San Franciscans will more likely remember Helene Strybing for bequeathing the funds for the Arboretum in Golden Gate Park in her will. Still another window honors the immigrant Albrecht Kuner (1819-1906), the father-in-law of Pastor Gehrcke. The pastor had married his daughter Martha (1863-1941). An engraver by profession and a native of Lindau on Lake Constance, Kuner arrived in the eventful of 1849, a few months short of his thirtieth birthday. By his own account, he left his homeland because of the economic downturn resulting from the political upheavals of 1848-1849. Californians may have forgotten that he designed the first gold coins minted in San Francisco, that he made the dies for the medals of the Mechanics' Institute, and

that he did all the engravings for the seals of Wells Fargo Bank from 1852 until his death in January 1906. However, a few might remember him for making the first engraving of the Seal of the State of California.

Alas, the twentieth century would present the German churches and their congregations even greater challenges than mere natural disasters. American involvement in the First World War made being German or being of German ancestry suspect in the eyes of neighbors and employers. Many German-speaking congregations in the United States gave up their German-language sermons and introduced American flags inside their churches as proof of their loyalty. It was at this time that Pastor Gehrcke also started additional English-language services. However, Pastor Gehrcke and the congregation at St. Matthew's were able to maintain their linguistic identity.

Pastor Gehrcke died in 1936, after over forty years of serving his church and community. Pastor Hermann Lucas succeeded him at St. Matthew's during what would prove to be one of the most difficult times for the Germans in San Francisco. His eventful tenure lasted until his retirement in 1961, and his death in December 1972 at the age of seventy-seven was a deeply felt loss. Pastor Lucas, a native of Stuttgart, had studied theology at the Lutheran Seminary at Kropp in Schleswig-Holstein, but in the aftermath of the First World War had a difficult time finding a congregation at home. Consequently, he immigrated to the United States in 1922. He served a congregation in Oregon before receiving a call to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Fresno, where he stayed for twelve years.

All the churches in San Francisco holding services in German ceased to do so in 1941 except for Pastor Lucas at St. Matthew's. "We just did it; it was not an option [to give up German]," said Dorothy Praeger, explaining the reason why St. Matthew's did not follow the trend of the congregations at St. Paulus and St. Mark's. Despite this, "the building was never vandalized," said Praeger, describing how the neighborhood and city treated the church during that awkward time to be ministering in German to people of German ancestry. At this time the present Sunday service schedule was introduced with one service held in English and the other in German.

In addition to his own congregation, Pastor Lucas counseled and ministered on a weekly basis to the five thousand German prisoners of war held on Angel Island, Treasure Island, and at the Presidio in San Francisco. Following the end of hostilities, the congregations of both St. Matthew's and St. Boniface sent over significant amounts of relief supplies to the German-speaking communities in Europe suffering from the ravages of war. "The church hall was filled with bales and bales of care packages for Germany," said Praeger, describing how the congregation of St. Matthew's collected, packed, and sent foodstuffs and clothing to the refugees in Germany. Over an eighteen month period the German Relief Society centered at St. Matthew's was able to gather 220,000 pounds of clothing and collect \$100,000, which was sent to the Evangelische Hilfswerk (Lutheran Relief Society) in Germany.

After Germans were again allowed to immigrate to the United States, many of the new German-speaking immigrants to San Francisco found their way to St. Matthew's congregation. One such immigrant, Hans Kraemer, whose daughter was baptized at St. Matthew's, came to San Francisco in 1961. Originally from Insterburg, East Prussia, he and his wife came to California after first having lived in Canada from 1955 to 1961. Immigrants like the Kraemers gave St. Matthew's a new purpose and lease on life, as the earlier immigrants had, of course, aged. "Most came after the Second World War, and it was a place where we could come together," said Kraemer, explaining the role St. Matthew's played for the new immigrants.

The pulpit of St. Matthew's, which had known only two pastors since the founding in 1895 up until 1961, now saw change much more frequently. Upon the retirement of Pastor Lucas at the end of 1961, he was succeeded by Pastor Dr. Hans-Ludwig Wagner, a native of Hamburg, Germany, who had left Germany before the outbreak of the Second World War and served congregations in Canada and the United States. Prior to coming to St. Matthew's he had served at Zion Lutheran Church in Baltimore, Maryland. Under his leadership attention was paid to ecumenical work and the needs of the surrounding community. Towards the end of 1968 Pastor Wagner accepted a call from St. John's Lutheran Church in El Cajon, California. Pastor Lucas accepted the request of the Church Council to lead the congregation again until a successor could be found. Pastor H. G. Kurt Adelsberger, born in Bärenfang, East Prussia and educated at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Saskatoon, Canada, accepted the call to serve the congregation at St. Matthew's in 1969. Prior to coming to St. Matthew's he had been serving at Peace Lutheran Church in Leduc, Alberta, Canada. The arrival of Pastor Adelsberger in the latter part of 1969 brought unity to the congregation and membership increased again. Many congregation members think back fondly upon his tenure. His untimely death in the early part of 1989 was a source of great sadness. Pastor Dr. Hing Siem, who is an Indonesian of Chinese ancestry and had ministered in West Berlin, stepped in to tend to the congregation as interim pastor until a new permanent pastor was found. Pastor Stephan Kienberger served St. Matthew's from 1990 until 1994, when he accepted a call to the US Virgin Islands. He was succeeded by Pastor Susanne Donahue-Bombosch from 1995 to 1998. She in turn was succeeded by Pastor Andreas Pielhoop, who served the congregation of St. Matthew's from 1999 until December 2003. Pastor Horst Wilhelm Gutsche succeeded Pastor Pielhoop in 2004 until his departure in October 2007. Thereupon Pastor Pielhoop returned to lead the congregation in an interim capacity. His tenure this time lasted until July 2011. The pulpit once again saw a series of guest pastors. On March 1, 2012, Pastor Robin Ressler officially assumed the role of permanent pastor at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church.

Pastor Ressler, who holds a Master's degree in Divinity, is a graduate of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. She is an American of German descent and brings with her a wide range of academic and professional experience from her career in social work, which she gained in New York and San Francisco. Pastor Ressler has also worked in Slovakia, where she was a teacher and a Lutheran missionary. In her new role as the pastor at St. Matthew's, she looks forward to continuing the tradition of the congregation as being a spiritual center of the German-speaking community of the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as reaching out and embracing the neighborhood that does not speak German.

Now, at the turn of a new century, the immigrants of the 1950s and 1960s are growing ever older, and the congregation at St. Matthew's is facing a fork in the road. With an aging congregation, the question is how much of the church's identity will be viable or relevant in this era. "It is very difficult. We need young families. We are the largest church from a geographical point of view, from Santa Rosa to San Jose," said Kraemer, in describing the chief demographic and geographic challenges facing St. Matthew's. The Protestant Germans of San Francisco were as equally affected by the lures of suburbia as their non-German neighbors. Once the Mission District shed the Irish, Scandinavian, and German identity it had had theretofore, St. Matthew's lost its role as a church embedded in the community and assumed one of a church catering to the Lutheran German-speakers of the San Francisco Bay Area as a whole. Regular church attendance reflects this. Many members of the congregation only come to church occasionally. "But at Christmas and at Easter, the church is full," said Kraemer. On these two high church holidays, those who might not be attending services regularly come to hear the sermon in the language of the old country and to be among people of similar background.

Acknowledging the demographic trends at St. Matthew's, the congregation is reevaluating its identity and the vision it sees for itself in the future. As Juergen Fehr, the Council President, wrote in *The Good News*, the church newsletter of November/December 2001, "The Church Council pointed out that growth in membership and offerings is essential if St. Matthew's is to survive long-term as the last German-speaking Lutheran congregation in the Bay Area." It is a difficult question for one of San Francisco's historic if little publicized churches. The question confronting the St. Matthew's is how to maintain as much of its German identity as is possible, yet increase membership from among the English-language community. Fehr went on to write in *The Good News*,

"We can either continue on our current path, which probably will mean a declining membership as the years go on, or we can embark on a growth-oriented journey by trying to attract new and younger members from the English-speaking community of San Francisco. This latter approach will require that we become an aggressive, mission-oriented church but will not mean that we have to give up our German-language heritage."

It should perhaps be pointed out that St. Matthew's receives no material support from the central umbrella organization of the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Germany or Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) unlike some other German-speaking congregations on the East Coast (Washington, DC and New York). Instead St. Matthew's is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). In this regard, St. Matthew's can be viewed as an ELCA congregation with a German-speaking focus.

How the congregation at St. Matthew's decides to go into the future, and with what success, will tell us something about how the religious future of San Francisco will look like. Ethnic change, even radical change, is nothing new to the Mission District. Over the centuries, it has gone from being the home of Native Americans from the Ohlone tribe, to the home of Spanish missionaries, Mexican settlers, pioneers, to an Irish, Scandinavian, and German neighborhood, to what it is today. St. Matthew's Lutheran Church is a link to San Francisco's history and heritage with a unique window to the German-American experience in California. Preserving this heritage and adapting to the new challenges are what will define St. Matthew's in the future.

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church	3281 Sixteenth Street
St. Mark's Lutheran Church	1111 O'Farrell Street
St. Paulus Lutheran Church	999 Eddy Street
St. Boniface Roman Catholic Church	133 Golden Gate Avenue
Zion Lutheran Church	495 9 <sup>th</sup> Avenue
St. John's Lutheran Church	3134 22 <sup>nd</sup> Street

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