

# Churches Approve Merger Proposal

The pealing of church bells on Sunday afternoon, Nov. 3, was the signal to Lutherans, of Ashland, Girardville, Gordon, Lavelle, and Ashland R.D., that they are now members of one Lutheran congregation. At five separate congregational meetings Sunday morning the churches involved considered the "Joint Plan of Consolidation" prepared by a Study Committee made up of two members of each congregation. When the vote was counted it was discovered that 84 per cent of those who cast ballots voted in favor of the merger resolution. The bells were rung as a signal that the resolution had been approved.

The merger grows out of a year and a half of experimentation by these same five congregations. Known as the Ashland Area Lutheran Parish, they combined many of their operations and shared in the same team ministry arrangement. The Rev. Robert Hughes, pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, in Ashland, was named vice pastor of each of the other congregations. Two students shared the duties with him. The first, Pastor Donald Henderschelt, has since returned to Philadelphia for his final year of seminary training. His successor, Pastor Frank Wickert, of Syracuse, New York, has just completed his first six months of work in the parish. The Rev. Freeland Hemmig, former dean of the Hegins District of the Lutheran Church, now retired, has been conducting two worship services each Sunday.

The experiment grew out of a pastoral shortage. The Lutheran Church requires four years of college and four of seminary before it will ordain a man and allow him to serve a congregation. Thus, because of these higher educational requirements, there are normally more Lutheran congregations than pastors. However, a crisis occurred when at one time last year 25 of the 50 Lutheran congregations in Schuylkill County were vacant. In the past it had taken four ordained pastors to serve the five Lutheran congregations in the greater Ashland area. With many larger churches without pastors the chance of filling these vacancies seemed slim, so the experiment was undertaken.

In many ways it is still an experiment. "To the best of

our knowledge," Pastor Hughes stated yesterday, "there is no other congregation like it in the United States, in any denomination." If it proves successful across the course of several years there will undoubtedly be other churches in similar circumstances who will consider the same kind of cooperative action.

The new congregation of more than 1,100 active confirmed members, will be unique in that it will be a single congregation with one charter and all of the assets held in common. At the same time it will maintain five different "chapels" for worship purposes. A single governing board called the Parish Council, with representatives of each of the five chapels serving on the board, will guide the destiny of the new congregation, which will be the second largest Lutheran congregation in Schuylkill County. Local Committees of Trustees, one for each chapel, will oversee the care of the buildings and maintain the worship life of the chapels.

A team ministry, composed of two ordained pastors and a different seminary student each year, will attend to the congregation's spiritual needs. They will each be responsible for different areas of the churches' life and work, and in this way will be able to specialize. When a pastor does resign to accept another call there will still be two men on hand who are familiar with the congregations' people and their problems. They will be able to carry on until another pastor is called. The pastors' salaries and other common expenses will be shared, with each chapel's share of the cost being proportionate to the size of its membership. Local expenses will be met by each chapel out of its own funds.

Many joint projects undertaken during the year and a half of experimentation have proven successful and will be continued. Lutheran churches generally require three years of evening instruction before a teenager is confirmed. Formerly, each local pastor had to prepare three lessons a week and teach his own classes, many of which contained only a few children. The confirmation classes of all five churches are now merged, so that in the future a pastor will have only one lesson a week to prepare for a decent sized class. This will give him additional time for visitation and other duties.

Though several of the chapels have maintained their own youth groups in order to continue activities that are more easily accomplished by smaller groups, congregation-wide youth groups are also in operation. More than 40 Junior High School students are active in the Intermediate Luther League, and about the same number of Senior Highs make the Senior Luther League a real live-wire group. Activities

include: bus trips, parties, work projects, week-end retreats, and discussions of topics vital to those age groups.

Other cooperative ventures include joint activities by the combined Lutheran Church Women's groups of the five chapels, one Lutheran Church Men's organization, a joint Vacation Church School, combined mid-week Lenten services, a bi-monthly parish newsletter prepared by the full-time secretary employed by the new congregation, joint stewardship planning and the sharing of equipment already owned by the former congregations such as motion picture projectors, typewriters, and mimeograph machines.

When asked what the chief benefit of the cooperative experience has been, Pastor Hughes said this: "Working together has been a creative crisis, because it has forced the Lutherans of the area to really come to grips with what it means to be Christians. Difficult travel and poor roads of a century ago led to the establishment of five separate Lutheran churches which, with today's roads, are only a few minutes' travel time apart. Recognizing this our people have put the loyalties of the past behind them in order to unite and attempt to do a better job of serving Jesus Christ today."