

Wittenberg, Founded as the English-speaking University of the Lutheran Church

by Chester C. Winter

In 1845, a small group of pastors in the English Synod of the Lutheran Church in Ohio founded Wittenberg College as a seminary with its main focus to train clergy. The principal founder and first president of the college was Reverend Ezra Keller. Another important mission of the new college was to “Americanize”



Reverend Ezra Keller, Wittenberg's founder and first president.

Lutherans by conducting classes in the English language rather than German, in contrast to Capital University in Columbus. The first class of eight students swelled to seventy-one males by the end of the academic year. The initial faculty consisted of one professor and two tutors, and classes were held in a Lutheran Church in Springfield, Ohio. Land from the Lutheran Cemetery Association in Springfield was donated and the campus buildings sprang up gradually over the ensuing years. Economic factors played a role in selecting the college site over Canton which had seminary aspirations since 1830. Springfield was a booming agricultural and industrial center located on the National Road (Route 40) with a strong railroad presence. Other important decisions were to admit women in 1874 and blacks the following year.

The name for the college came from Wittenberg University located in Lutherstadt Wittenberge on the Elbe River in the northeast sector of Germany. In the sixteenth century, Wittenberg was the capital of the Duchy of Saxe-Wittenberg; later, its state was called Prussia. It is eighty miles northwest of Berlin. Wittenberg's sister city in Ohio is Springfield. The history of Wittenberg, Germany is best known for being the birthplace of the Lutheran Church. Martin Luther was a Roman

Catholic priest and Professor of Theology at Wittenberg University when he nailed his 95 theses on the door of All Saints', the Castle Church, on October 31, 1517. Thus started the Protestant Reformation and the spread of the Lutheran denomination throughout the world.

Today, Wittenberg University (became University in 1957) in Springfield, Ohio enjoys a reputation as a fine liberal arts school offering bachelor and master degrees. An average enrollment of two thousand students pay about \$31,500 annual tuition each plus \$9,500 for room, board and other expenses. There are a few more women than male students with a racial mix of 78.5% White, non-Hispanic, 5% African-American and 1% Hispanic; the remainder are unclassified. The University is best known to the average citizen for its music department and its athletic endeavors. Those educated in the excellent departments of business, social sciences, education, biological sciences and English would beg to differ. All are proud of its



Myer's Hall was Wittenberg's first building, completed in 1848. Today it is a student residence hall.

Carnegie endowed library. The University is private and retains its affiliation with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

In 1978, Wittenberg's Theological Seminary, successively known as Hamma Divinity School and Hamma School of Theology, merged with the Joint Synod controlled Evangelical Lutheran Seminary of Capital University in Bexley, Ohio. This represented an one hundred and eighty degree reversal from the original founders' desire to separate from the German synod and to emphasize use of the English language in teaching. The reunited schools became Trinity Lutheran Seminary as it is known today. It is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It became independent, administratively but not geographically, from Capital University in 1959. It is located at 2199 East Main Street in Bexley, on the edge of the Capital University campus. The seminary cooperates with the Methodist Seminary in Delaware and the Pontifical Josephinum in Columbus by sharing faculty and student courses.

Photos courtesy of Wittenberg University Marketing Dept.