

Bluebonnet is celebrating its 80th anniversary in 2019 by visiting some of the cooperative's earliest commercial members. This month we feature one of the many churches that joined the cooperative in 1939. See a complete list with this story at bluebonnet.coop (click Community, then News).



Our Earliest Members

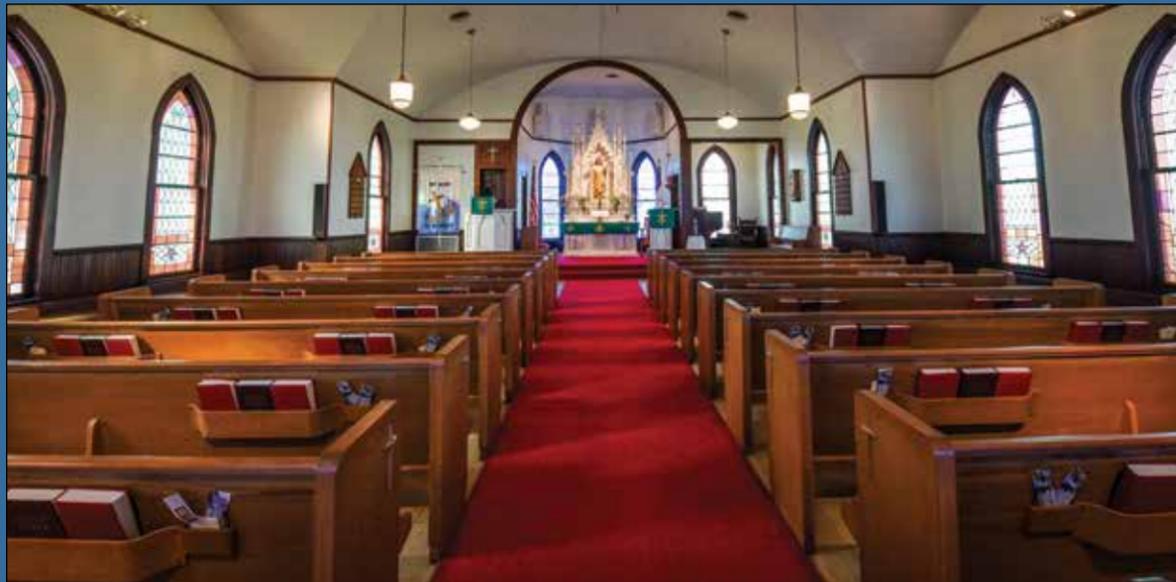
ST. MATTHEW LUTHERAN CHURCH

80th ANNIVERSARY

BLUEBONNET MEMBER SINCE 1939

Historical Texas-German church continues to draw members

St. Matthew Lutheran Church exemplifies a traditional Texas-German Lutheran church, with features such as a carved wooden altar with a statue of Christ and narrow stained glass windows. Sarah Beal photos



By Clayton Stromberger

As you head into gently rolling ranch and farm land northeast of Brenham, just after you turn onto FM 50, you'll notice a sign on the right in a big patch of grass that four Lutheran churches welcome you.

The four distinctive white-steepled churches dot the landscape of this undulating stretch of Washington County countryside. They stand as ongoing places of worship and as historic sites marking the centers of small — and now mostly vanished — rural communities where German immigrants gathered to farm and carve out a rugged new life in the late 1800s: St. John in Prairie Hill, Immanuel in Wiedeville, Bethlehem in what was known as William Penn and, perched in the middle of a triangle made by the other three, St. Matthew on the rise of land known as Sandy Hill.

St. Matthew is one of Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's oldest members. Located on

FM 2621 about halfway between Brenham and Independence, the church once had a family grocery store next door and a little schoolhouse across the road.

Now nature has almost overgrown the old store, and the school is long gone, made obsolete in the early 1950s when school buses began taking children to Brenham.

It's a peaceful spot with a view of surrounding hills and ranch land. The old cemetery lies behind the white clapboard sanctuary, and a Bluebonnet substation rises behind the dilapidated store.

Every Sunday, dozens of members file into the sanctuary, which — like the simply designed but handsome exterior — has

many of the elements of traditional Texas-German Lutheran churches. The carved wooden altar, featuring a large statue of Christ, resembles the ornate front of a European cathedral.

"I grew up in an old German Lutheran church in Indiana myself, and it was a bigger church, with a much bigger altar, but it was the same design," Pastor Kris Brower said.

Narrow stained glass windows bathe the arched ceilings in a gentle natural light, while a warm glow comes from an original and ornate gold-colored chandelier with glass globes that hangs over the center aisle. And of course there is an organ — a newer all-electric one since the older half-electric one was fried a few years back when lightning hit the steeple. There is also a marble baptismal font (a piece of furniture that holds water used in baptisms) and a raised wooden pulpit off to one side, perched slightly above the congregation like the prow of an old sailing ship.

Q&A

with Pastor Kris Brower

On a recent cold and windy morning, we dropped in on St. Matthew to visit with Brower during his weekly office hours and get a glimpse back in time. Brower came to the congregation from the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 2012 as a newly ordained pastor after leaving a business career to follow a calling to the ministry.

Tell us about the history of this beautiful building.



The original sanctuary was built in 1891 a little further down the hill, and it was blown down by a big storm in August of 1915. The congregation decided to rebuild, and this one was dedicated in December of 1915 — so it only took them three months to build it. The only thing they were able to salvage from the wreckage was the bell and the baptismal font, and we still use both of those. The building here is pretty much as it was then. The old church had two of these big oil lamp chandeliers; I don't know where the other one got off to, but we still have one. Now it's electric. So it was pretty poorly lit in those days, and you probably wanted to wear heavy clothes



in the wintertime. They didn't have air conditioning in this building until the '90s, I think, so they used to be able to open these stained-glass windows from the top down or bottom up. We've got them sealed now to keep the wind and bugs out.

You must get a lot of requests from folks who want to get married here.

Our congregation voted a few years ago not to have weddings for non-members. I did have one couple come in that was married here 50 years prior, and they wanted to renew their vows on their 50th anniversary, so that's what we did. They'd grown up here, and they live in New Jersey now.

How large is the congregation these days?

We're averaging about 55, 57, somewhere in there. It used to be up over a hundred many years ago. But with the general

decline in church membership — too many other distractions in life — it's been down some. We've held steady now for the last 20 years. Our average age is somewhere in the upper forties. When I first came here seven years ago, there were a lot more older people. Probably the bulk of the active members are older; the younger people have a tendency to come and go. When I first came here, people (were) telling me, "This church is dying; we're going to close our doors," and I said, "Well, that isn't necessarily true." We've got a highway out here that's paved, didn't used to be. At one time, the attendance was confined to people who lived in the immediate area because they walked to church or rode a horse. Now we have people who come from 25 to 35 miles away. They tell me it's because we teach the Bible, and they like the friendliness of the people.

You have a remarkable wall of confirmation class photos in the parish hall.

The earliest picture here is from 1899. There are some missing because when the church blew down, some of the photos were destroyed. So I went back and found the names of those who were in the classes before that and posted them here. This is like a family tree. Folks come in here and say, "Well that's my grandpa, and that's my grandma, and that's my mom, and that's my dad!" And of course a lot of these people are buried back in the cemetery here. I have put all these photos on the computer here, so when people see their family members, I can say, "Well, if you like that picture, I can email you a copy of it." □