

First Evangelical Free Church of Minneapolis is 125 Years Old

by Ross Olson

The great political, economic and intellectual movements of history influenced our church, but there were also many human factors and actors, with influence that was both positive and negative. And, of course, that is how it is today. Yet the providential hand of God moves over it all. We have inherited not only a remarkable heritage but a compelling mandate.

During the second half of the 19th Century many emigrated from the Scandinavian countries, mostly for economic reasons. First Free was a Swedish congregation but there were parallel stories among the Norwegians and Danes. Some of these immigrants had suffered persecution by the state church in their home countries.



Castle Garden, immigration center until 1892

Lutheranism came to Sweden as more of a political change than a religious reformation. The Catholic Church was the only church in 829 when a German Bishop named Ansgar set up a mission in Sweden. But when in 1519 the Church took sides in a political conflict and supported the reign of Christian II of Denmark over Sweden, the stage was set for revolt. In the 1520s, Gustav Vasa shook off both the Danes and the Catholic Church. A Swedish New Testament was soon published followed by commentaries and a hymnal. This was all done by a man named Olaus, trained at Wittenberg, who believed in persuasion rather than force for the propagation of the gospel.

The seeds of abuse, however, were planted in 1593 when The Diet of Upsala declared that those who did not agree with the State Church could not meet and must be punished. In about 1670, King Charles XI declared the King's sovereignty over the Church and standardized its doctrine. Thus, because it was no longer independent, church control began to fall into the hands of men who were not necessarily believers.

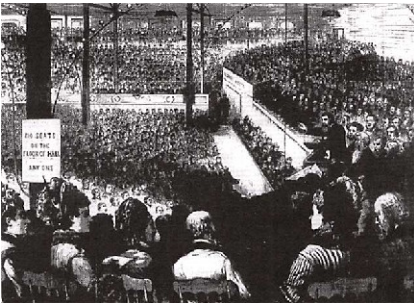
Liberal theology, rationalism and higher criticism, beginning in Germany, were robbing Scripture of its authority. State-supported Lutheran churches in Scandinavia, under secular control, had become watered down. Being territorial, they included all citizens as members and because of secular control, included both believing and un-believing clergy. They also exerted political power, registering births by baptism and enforcing a legal monopoly on religious life. Salvation was felt to be conferred by infant baptism, confirmation and partaking in communion and was scarcely distinguished from citizenship.

Revivals broke out in the late 1800's in Sweden as evangelists proclaimed that salvation involved a conscious decision to repent and by faith accept the grace of God. The new believers, discovering that they were not being fed spiritually, began to meet in homes as missionary societies, often still attending the state church and hoping to reform the church from within. Taking the Reformation one step further, they began to search the Scriptures not only for theology but also for church organization. They saw a congregational form of decision-making in the Jerusalem Church, not an authoritarian centralized authority. They were convinced that membership of the local fellowship must be made up of only believers, but that all believers were

welcome. Differences over infant baptism and re-baptism were tolerated and set the stage for simple statements of faith that allowed for diversity in areas considered peripheral to the gospel. The congregations that formed the Mission Covenant Church in Sweden in 1878 and in America in 1885 felt more strongly that since creeds did not protect the gospel in the state church, the only necessary statement was one defining the local church as a fellowship of believers.

When Scandinavian free church believers were criticized or even arrested for meeting illegally or for performing communion and baptism without the presence of ordained clergy, they responded, "Where stands it written?" At the time of the founding of First Free in Minneapolis, there were "Free" Churches -- meaning free of the state church -- sprouting up across Scandinavia, as the "non-conformists" had done in England and other countries centuries earlier. Free churches thus included Baptist, Methodist and Free Lutheran. Scandinavia had been the target of many missionary efforts, including campaigns by English Methodists, Scottish Congregationalists, German Moravians as well as Baptists from England, Germany and America.

The rebellion against the state church with its emphasis on liturgy, form and rituals had led some to skepticism, but others responded to evangelists preaching personal salvation. Emphasis was on the inner spiritual life, manifested by righteous living and witnessing, grounded in the Scriptures. There was also a great interest in prophecy and an expectation that the Lord was coming back soon. United prayer was considered the lifeblood of a congregation and a sense of urgency motivated them to evangelism and missions.



D.L. Moody Revival Meeting, copied by Frederick Franson, and Erik August Skogsbergh, Swedish evangelists

Traveling evangelists such as Frederick Franson and Erik August Skogsbergh brought the message to America. They adopted the methods of D. L. Moody, giving an invitation at the end of a service, calling for raised hands and then, at an after-meeting, counseling those who made decisions, even including children. Franson went back to Sweden and Norway where this was all considered very controversial.

When revivals began to break out among the Swedes in Minneapolis, they were spiritually open because of the hardships of their new life but they were also intellectually informed about trends, including what was happening in the old country. They read the Scriptures and they read the news. The Swedish language newspaper "Chicago Bladet," published by gifted writer and revival preacher John Martenson, later helped by J. G. Princell, was mailed to subscribers across America and even back to Sweden. It was hungrily read by those who still loved the mother tongue. And in reading, they were well versed on theological, church and political developments. Because of their experience with the state church, they were convinced that congregational church government was best and were even suspicious that an ordained clergy may begin to exert undue influence.

In 1884, a group of 88 Swedish believers, 70 men and 18 women, many quite young in the faith, organized themselves as "The Scandinavian Church of Christ" and began meeting in Freja Hall on 5th and Washington. They were a free church in a nation where all the churches were free. A travelling evangelist named August Davis became the pastor the next year. He was controversial, having been banned



August Davis Pastor from 1884 to 1896



The first building on 12th Avenue and 7th Street

from preaching at evangelistic meetings the year before because of emotional preaching style and "strange demonstrations" associated with his services. A lot was purchased and a small church built on 7th Street and 12th Avenue in Minneapolis the next year. Many came for Swedish language fellowship, especially the 7:00 pm Sunday evangelistic service when the everyday workers finally had some free time. They might have come out of curiosity but many found the Lord.

Also in 1884, representatives from 27 Swedish congregations, including 21 pastors, met for a conference in Boone, Iowa. It was one of a series, beginning with a prophetic conference in Chicago in 1881. It was followed by another Chicago conference to discuss "God's Church" in 1883. The participating delegates in Boone decided to cautiously form an association of independent churches -- not a denomination or synod! They adopted a simple creed, affirming acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God. They cooperated for the purpose of accomplishing things that the individual congregations could not do, such as national conferences and foreign missions. Indeed, the next year they selected a young Danish man named H. J. Von Qualen, who was leading a Bible study among Chinese in Chicago while a seminary student. In 1887, he (accompanied by two of his Chinese converts) went to Canton (Guangzhou) as a Free Church missionary. The focus on overseas missions continued unabated to the present. In 1899 the David Finstroms opened a work in Venezuela. In the 1920's, Titus Johnson surveyed Africa and reported to the churches that a work should be started in the Ubangi district. In about 1948, the Cal Hansons began work in Japan and in the 1950s, a team began ministering in the Philippines. The evangelistic arm of the present EFCA mission is called ReachGlobal and has over 550 missionaries, 120 partnerships, and spiritual influence in over 75 countries. Its humanitarian arm TouchGlobal sends aid wherever needed, including within the United States.



Mrs. David Finstrom
missionary to Venezuela

While some pietistic movements drifted into legalism, in Minneapolis the people served the Lord with gladness. Seeing the importance of music, a choir and string band were instituted. Because they were concerned about the next generation, within a year they established a Sunday School and Confirmation Class. A young people's society developed long before it was officially organized in 1899. In 1890 the Women's Foreign Missionary Society was formed by 15 young women in the church. They were helped by "collectors" whose gender and duties are not specified but can be inferred. This effort resulted in sending Mrs. Renius to China where she served until her death in 1905. When E. A. Halleen arrived as pastor in 1904, membership had shrunk to 100 due to dissension and splits. But evangelistic meetings by Gustaf F. Johnson and the influx of the fourth wave of immigrants, mostly young single



Scandinavian Church of Christ (First Free Church) Choir 1905

adults, produced remarkable growth.

In 1908 the building was reconstructed at the same location and by 1917 membership was 700 and attendance often filled the 1000 seat auditorium. Stained glass windows were donated by the Sunday School, depicting Jesus knocking at the door and Jesus carrying the lost sheep. One of the members, a Mr. P. Benson, who ran a music house, had published a Swedish Hymnal. From 1910 to 1914 the building also housed the Free Church School before it moved to Chicago. The building was well used. Young people met for fun times as well as service projects and a women's group called The Willing Workers was formed. The young men's class was called Immanuel Bible Class. People came by streetcar and often stayed at church all day.



1908 First Free Church at 12th Avenue and 7th Street



Confirmation Class of 1922

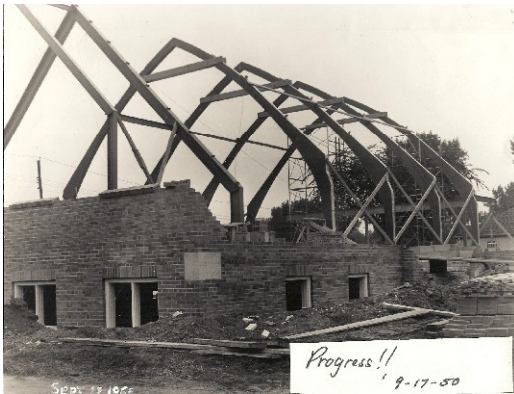
So we see how a group of believers emerged from the turbulence of their era, assured of their inner experience of the Lord Jesus Christ and committed to the trustworthiness of His Word. As a fellowship they responded to the Great Commission and the command to love our neighbors.

During World War I, 53 young men were called to service and 3 did not return. Their families received a Gold Star to hang in the window. By the 1920's the second generation had become thoroughly American and the church became bilingual with alternating services in Swedish and English. For many young people, church youth activities were the focus of their social life. Times were tough in the Depression but they got by and many families gave assistance to the homeless of that day, "the hobos." In World War II, about 81 men and one woman served in the military and none were lost. Many helped in other ways, including the Red Cross.

In 1942, it became apparent that the neighborhood was changing and a building fund was started. Interestingly, the early plans had an apartment behind the balcony and the baptistery in the basement. By 1948 the property on 52nd and Chicago was purchased and a parsonage at 5225 Park was started. There were difficulties in selling the old building but Pastor Arnold Olson had previously worked for one of the large banks and made contacts that led to its sale for three times what the trustees had suggested.

Houses were moved to clear the property and ground was broken for the new church in 1950. The building was completed in 1951. Chris Vatsaas was a carpenter's apprentice at the time and recalls that in digging the foundation an underground river was uncovered, studied by the University and fossils found. Measures had to be taken to prevent water seepage but a couple of years later there was ground movement that required structural re-





pairs. Chris also recalls Pastor Olson coming out to the construction site, looking at the time cards and praying for the safety of the workers. When he saw the name Vatsaas, he told Chris that when pastoring out east his church had supported Chris's family in China. A couple of years later the large parking lot was purchased from the business that is now Mario's Deli.

In 1950 the Swedish Free Church to which First Free was associated, and the Norwegian-Danish Free Churches -- which began their journey towards cooperation of congregations in 1885 -- united to form what we now know as the Evangelical Free Church of America. Pastor Arnold Olson who was also President of the Norwegian Free Church, moderated the merger conference.

As the church grew and the need for more space became apparent, a house north of the church was purchased in 1959 and used as youth and Sunday School space. Then in 1964 a second house was purchased, both houses sold and moved. Then ground was broken for the educational building which was completed in 1965. The then vacant service station across Chicago Avenue was purchased in 1974 for \$50,000 when it appeared that a convenience store would get the property. A \$25,000 donation was made by Albin Anderson, who had directed the choir and played the organ for over 50 years, and the rest was pledged in one Sunday. The building was used for bus maintenance and the lot for parking. It was torn down and a more functional garage built in 1995. Nearby houses were purchased, 5147 Chicago in about 1970 for under \$10,000 and used to house Assistant Pastor Don Smith. Then 5151 Chicago Avenue was acquired in 1983 and 5155 in 2009 so that the church now owns three in a row next to the garage and parking lot. The houses have been used for staff and refugee housing but Pastor Chapman always had a vision for a large building project, possibly a nursing home, similar to Redeemer which had been built by his father. Inquiries have been made into possible purchase of Mario's Deli as a youth building. In 2009 the congregation is again stretching the limits of its facilities and in need of ministry space.



Educational building Under Construction 1964-65

Other improvements over the years were the stained glass windows donated by Albin Anderson in 1959 and moved from the back of the platform to the space over the front door when the Moeller pipe organ was installed in 1981-82. A Yamaha Concert Grand piano was purchased in 1990.

First Free has started a number of daughter churches, not always deliberately and not always successfully, but God still blessed. In 1894, a group of 60 left over differences, called J. G. Princell and started Swedish Mission Temple, which became Central Free. Interestingly, the two churches re-united during the 1920's when transition was made to two languages and they shared two bilingual pastors, Carl Nelson and Milton Nelson. However, they separated again

over Calvinism/Arminianism. In 2003, Central Free dissolved and gave the building to the North Central district and it is now occupied by an inner city ministry. Many members have come to First Free.

In 1900, while Carl Sahlstrom was pastor of a church "discouraged by discord," 30 members started a work to the south and called August Davis as pastor. It did not last but formed the nucleus of the eventual Riverside Free Church. After the membership had begun to increase, an attempt was made in 1910 to start a congregation in North Minneapolis but it was abandoned, probably prematurely. Two Sunday Schools started by First Free people in south Minneapolis united and formed the nucleus of Bethesda Free Church. More recently, in 1987, a group was sent to revitalize Edina Free Church although that work eventually dissolved. Financial support has also been given to church plants in Willmar, St. Cloud and Stillwater. First Free continues to help Salem Free in inner city Minneapolis.



Leonard Hagstrom,
Pastor from 1953 to 1962

While the printed word was crucial in the early years, other media eventually also became important. Services were broadcast on radio from 1948 to 1952 and a ten minute radio "spot" called "Moments With The Master" was broadcast during the pastorates of Leonard Hagstrom and Andrew Johnson from 1953 to 1968. Tapes of the services were made available beginning in 1973. In 2000 a website was developed and audio recordings of the church services eventually placed on the internet along with much up-to-date information about the church and its programs. As internet communication methods diversified, there were young people with the interest, vision and knowledge to make them available to the church.

There has been a continued concern about children and young people with a plethora of methods used to reach them, such as Vacation Bible School (or Camp), Backyard Bible Clubs and in 1973 a bussing ministry. Volunteers visited homes on Saturday, drove the busses on Sunday and prepared the families for visits by the Evangelism Explosion team who recorded up to 30 decisions for Christ per year. Volunteers also maintained the busses. At its peak, there were 200 children, about 60% non-white, on five busses that covered the area from Franklin to the Crosstown and Nicollet to Hiawatha. There were about 50 bussing volunteers and the Sunday School skyrocketed from 314 in 1973 to 604 in 1975 and there was children's church for pre-school through 6th grade. A "behavior management room" was needed to deal with children who may have come from chaotic homes. The program was pared down to two busses with 40 riders in 1979 and discontinued in about 1981 but picked up by Roger Magnusson and several other members who started Straitgate Church.

Christian Service Brigade at First Free was initiated for boys in 1944 and Pioneer Girls in 1945. Eventually, when Pioneer Girls changed to a co-ed program, Adventure Clubs was used from 1985 to 2005 when Girls Rock! was substituted. The club programs have always been a draw in the neighborhood and usually have been made up of more than half non-church kids. The adult



Pioneer Girls Pilgrims in 1958



Stockade Basketball in 1963

mentoring has become even more important for those children who come out of broken homes. The youth groups, junior and senior high, have waxed and waned over the years but at present have been growing in numbers and maturity as the youth bring their friends and willingly use their gifts to help with ministries such as VBC as well as going on more distant mission trips.

Recent specific ministry to women included "Happy homemakers" in the 1970's and 80's, Ladies' Community Bible Study beginning in 1980 and Mothers of Pre-Schoolers (MOPS) in 2005, which has drawn a number of young families into the church. A men's ministry has just begun in 2009, modeled on the monthly breakfast and discussion pattern brought by two "refugees" from the former Central Free. Small groups, also called "covenant groups" have been encouraged.

Over the years we have been blessed by an amazing number of gifted musicians and have developed choirs, chorales, small groups, soloists, pianists, organists, various instrumentalists, bands, orchestras, youth choirs, children's musicals and even have nurtured some who eventually became professional musicians. Yet as one of our music directors said, the emphasis must not be on performance but ministry.



Continental Singers Outdoor concert 1995

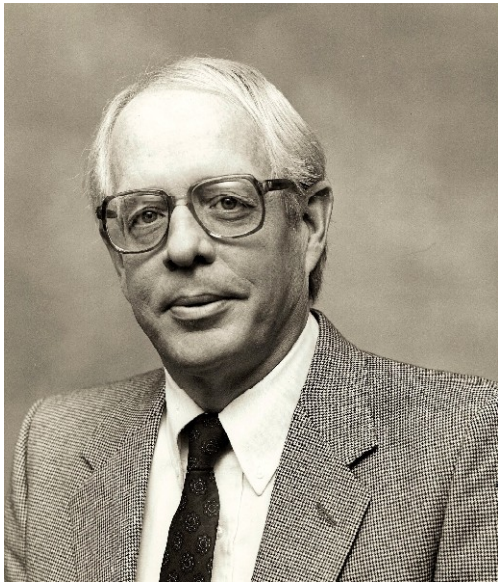
A number of unique attempts to draw in the neighborhood or outsiders have been done over the years including concerts and parties in the parking lot as well as Halloween alternative events in the gym and visiting musical artists such as Sam Rotman. In 1971 and for several years following, an alternative service called "Early Church" was instituted to reach out to counter-culture youth. In 1985 - 1987, because of growth in attendance, there were two identical blended Sunday Morning services. Then in 1996 a contemporary evening service called "The Gathering" began and continued until about 2000. Two identical blended morning services have been run from April 2006 to the present.

We partnered for several years with the predominantly African American inner city Chicago Rock of Our Salvation Church and Rev. Raleigh Washington beginning in 1988. In the 1990's a Liberian congregation used our facilities for baptism, and for several years a Latino Congregation met in our building on Sunday afternoons. We have also partnered with Salem Free over the years in their food and clothing ministry and more recently in ministry to the Latino community. Work and ministry trips to inner city New Orleans by youth and adults even stimulated John Gerhardt to resign as youth pastor to go there full time with his family. First Free members began to host Chinese graduate students coming to the University of Minnesota through China Outreach Ministries in the early 1990's. When several of them wanted to continue to come to First Free, a class was started in the fall of 1998, which has grown into the multicultural "Seekers Class." Now in 2009 it includes a few African and Latino immigrants as well as up to 50 Chinese and organizes help for newcomers and many social activities. New believers

are added regularly to God's Book of Life as a result of that ministry.

It cannot be simply by chance that the most common response by newcomers to First Free is that we are a very friendly church. Organizational things have been done to enhance that, with greeters, an information both, and other modifications of procedures and facilities. But the bed-rock fact remains that there is a friendly, caring and outgoing heart that prevails at First Free. And we are clearly a multigenerational church with attendees ranging from infants to vigorous octogenarians and up. We also have enough ethnic diversity to be noticed. We have progressed far beyond the previously wide gulf between Swedes and Norwegians and now have Chinese Bob Gu on the Council and African American Troy Holliday teaching the Sojourners Class and occasionally preaching.

Involvement of members in moral issues outside the church is not mentioned in the early history although at that time many women in society were involved in the temperance movement. But by the turbulent 1960's, a Social Concerns Committee was formed and began to encourage prayer and involvement in opposing the availability of alcohol, pornography and drugs. Visits to nearby retailers and letters to corporations and government agencies resulted in X rated material being pulled from the shelves in some cases and the denial of a liquor license to a nearby restaurant. In 1974 it was discovered that a teacher at a nearby Junior High had conducted a sé-ance in class and effective protest was made to proper authorities. There was also concern about immoral sex education and about racial tensions in the 1970's. Practical help has been a common response to needs around us participating for instance in Manna Lifeline providing food for the poor and filling and delivering Thanksgiving baskets, Christmas gift boxes, Angel Tree gifts for children of prisoners and other tangible evidences of love.



H. Bruce Chapman, Pastor 1968—1993

Several crises have been faced and the Lord found to be faithful. In 1981 Pastor Chapman had a severe heart attack while on vacation. A few months later he had a life-threatening arrhythmia while preaching but was resuscitated by two skilled church members and made a complete recovery. In 1996 an underlying disagreement about the roles available to women in the church was uncovered and resulted in a number of families leaving the church. It was laid to rest after Ron Olson said at a business meeting that he had friends on both sides of the issue and thought that we could continue to do as we had done, allowing the nomination of women for positions and leaving it up to the majority to elect or not elect.

In the spring of 2000 the senior pastor and youth pastor both resigned under clouds and the minister of music left as previously arranged. But even the transition period was used by the Lord to test and teach us in many ways. It took two years to find our present pastor but the Lord provided in an unusual way in that the family of interim pastor Robert Fallt had a contact with Joel Sutton, who was at the time a youth pastor in a nearby suburban Baptist church and not otherwise "on the radar." The church then entered a phase of steady growth.

Missions continues to be in the heart of the people of First Free. Many have gone out from our fellowship to serve and we have sent support at various times to over 40 missionary individuals and families. At the peak, about 37% of the total budget went for missions with a goal one time stated that it reach 50% although it is now about 21%. A "Faith Promise" system was used for a number of years but exchanged for simply setting a budget in faith and appealing to the church body to meet the needs.

With the advent of relatively easy travel for bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth, short term missions began to increase. A major effort was the "Water People" project in which funds were raised to build houses for missionaries in southern Congo and teams of workers sent twice from the church, first in the summer of 1984 and again in January 1986. Ongoing support of missionary builders the Ken Landruds was begun at that time. Since then both youth and adult groups have increasingly gone on short term mission trips, generally coming back with a new vision for ministry both at home and away. We have also participated in interdenominational events such as Billy Graham Crusades. In 2005, Parish Nursing was begun with Dee Huanca and Maureen Juarez serving with other volunteers.



Mexico Mission Trip Construction

Sunday School Classes for adults have been a regular ministry of the church since the beginning. Typically a new class will be started for young adults or young couples and they will progress in their life and grow older together. The youngest class is always a bit disconcerted to

hear that a younger class is being started, thinking that *they* were the young people. Classes have tended to be groups for fellowship and mutual support as well as teaching. Although for a time in the 1990's there was a concern that they looked like cliques to newcomers, classes have usually made efforts to fold in newer people whose age and sta-



Maranatha Class at First Free Church 1983

tion in life are similar. The classes have been called Adult Bible Fellowships (ABFs) over the past few years.

There have also been many interesting and humorous incidents over the years. Rev. John Kalson was criticized for jumping off the platform to emphasize a point. It is also said that he was in the habit of speeding and when stopped by the police, his name was invariably written incorrectly as "Carlson" which he never corrected so that his real name would not appear in the newspaper. E. A. Halleen would sometimes stop preaching and sit down in the middle of a ser-

mon if he felt he had lost his audience. Carl Nelson had trouble recognizing people and did not know his deacons.

In the 1920s, First Free's "Sterling Quartet" gave a 28 concert tour ending at Angeles Temple, with Aimee Semple McPherson herself standing behind them, her hands on the shoulders of tenor Herb Nordin and a small boy holding the train of her gown. Once, when Herb Nordin was singing a solo in the 12th Avenue church, his music mysteriously rose off the stand, went out the top of a window and back in the bottom. Some of his friends had rigged up an elaborate string and pulley system.



First Free's Sterling Quartet mid 1920s

In 1950, when the cornerstone was laid at 52nd and Chicago, the 1907 cornerstone was opened so contents could be examined and transferred. Despite the assurance of the old timers that significant items would be found, the stone was empty.

Our founders responded to the challenges of their time. What are we facing? Our neighbors and friends are mostly secular in their viewpoint and many are not only unfamiliar with the Bible and its core message but may even be hostile to Christianity, indeed to all religion. Yet, ironically, there is a great interest in "spirituality." Cults and counterfeits abound, especially pantheistic, pagan and spiritistic beliefs, probably falling under the category of "New Age." And some of their un-Scriptural ideas even infiltrate the evangelical church while the mainline denominations have already, for the most part, capitulated to the spirit of the age. Some prominent Christian leaders have fallen into theological error, love of money or sexual sin.

The cultural moral consensus that existed up to the 1950's has dissolved and talk about right and wrong is perceived as arrogant and intolerant. While most "people on the street" would not use philosophical terms, many are convinced that there is no ultimate truth or if there is, it cannot be known. They live their lives in pursuit of "the good life" or "the American Dream." Yet there are tides that can turn them to consideration of ultimate meaning when they really think about the challenge of terrorism, economic uncertainty, the possibility of global pandemics and concerns about the environment -- whether based on real evidence or hype. But we as God's people are not in general as well informed about the essentials of our faith or the nature of the attacks

of the enemy as were the founders. And we have also perhaps become too "conformed to the world" to even notice what has happened. We may even have lost sight of the needs around us, the urgency of evangelism and the fact that Jesus is coming back.

But we amazingly have the opportunity of reaching out to large numbers of immigrants living right next door. They are experiencing the same sorts of adjustments the Scandinavians did, except that most are not bringing the seeds of evangelical Christianity with them. Yet we have the opportu-



Seekers Class Celebrates Chinese New Year in 2008

nity to win their confidence by acts of love and present the gospel in a culturally sensitive way. The nominal Catholic Latinos have the basic facts of Christianity but not the understanding of a relationship with Jesus by grace through faith. The Somali Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet and healer, although not as God. Both groups are very relational and hospitable. Chinese students have excellent English and many are very curious about Christianity and its relationship to America's origin and present condition.

In addition, we have the availability of modes of communication undreamed of even 25 years ago. The question is, will we meet the challenges? Do we sense the urgency of the Lord's soon return? It is obviously now closer than it was 125 years ago. If the Lord delays, will those who follow be able to look back with pride on how we carried the baton in our leg of the race?

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Recollections of:

Della Olson, Herb and Ebba Nordin -- transcribed in 1984

Chris Vatsaas, Vi Fjellman, Ron Olson, Gen Erickson -- transcribed in 2009

And suggestions by many others.