



Concordia University's Center for Volga German Studies Saves a Piece of Northeast Portland History

Portland, Oregon – **SAVED!** The Center for Volga German Studies (CVGS) at Concordia University is the proud new steward of *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, a large-scale painting by Northwest artist Colista Murray Dowling. The painting depicts Christ holding a lamb, tending both a literal and figurative flock of sheep and children, with his “followers” waving pennants and marching forth on a path in the background. Until recently, the painting adorned the apse behind the choir loft of a church on the northeast corner of the intersection at Eighth & Failing Street in the King/Sabin neighborhood of northeast Portland.

The building was most recently the home of the Gethsemane Church of God in Christ, but back when the painting was new the congregation of St. Paul's Evangelical & Reformed Church worshiped there. The Sabin neighborhood was originally founded by immigrant families, predominately Volga Germans – ethnic Germans from the Volga River region of Russia. A history of the church's roots is detailed on Steve Schreiber's website *The Volga Germans in Portland* (volgagermans.net/portland/st_pauls_church.html). The church was founded in 1904 by several families, many of whom were originally from the Volga German colonies of Brunnenal and Grimm in Russia. Rev. Jacob Hergert, the first pastor of St. Paul's, was also an immigrant from Brunnenal. He led the congregation for its first 17 years.

His brother Rev. Elias Hergert became pastor of the congregation in 1925. Under Rev. Elias' leadership the building was expanded with an addition to the east of the original building. The addition created a new, larger sanctuary and Sunday School rooms in the corresponding basement. On November 6, 1938, the congregation held a *Kirchweihfest* – a celebration to consecrate the new church building with programs in both English and German. Shortly after the *Kirchweihfest*, a new work of art was presented at the church and dedicated on Christmas Eve, 1938, by the children of Jacob & Amalia Erdman in honor of their parents.

The work is a large-scale painting (6 ft. by 12 ft.) on canvas and was mounted directly against the wall, giving it the appearance of a mural. A painted border on the wall surrounded the canvas, framing it with the phrase *Der Herr Ist Mein Hirte* along the top in German, and the corresponding translation in English *The Lord Is My Shepherd* repeated below. Dowling was born in Waverly, Kansas, and studied at the Art Students League in New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Drexel Institute in Philadelphia. After moving to Oregon in 1890, she studied art at University of Oregon, Oregon State University, and the Museum Art School (known today as Pacific Northwest College of Art). Dowling was a commercial artist, working in a painterly post impressionist style, and is best known for her watercolors, book illustrations, and murals in Portland area buildings.

Commissioned by the Jacob Erdman family, as the painted scroll in the lower right corner proclaims, the painting decorated the apse of the church for nearly 77 years. The Erdman family

emigrated from Grimm, Russia and arrived in Portland in 1913. Husband Jacob, wife Amalia (maiden name Felte), and their eight children Emma, Al, August, Molly, Mary, Emily, Jake, and Wally lived across the street from St. Paul's. Valerie Miller, CHS '74, and Jacob Erdman's granddaughter, was baptized at St. Paul's. Valerie's mother, Emily, was 16 years old in 1938, when the work was created. Artist Colista Murray Dowling was a friend of the Erdman family.

Family legend has it that the two girls at the fore of the painting might be two of Jacob Erdman's daughters, Emma and Mary. Their faces are gently detailed, and it is possible, although not certain, that Dowling could have worked from photographs of the girls. Mr. Erdman was firmly rooted in his community, and served as Church Board Chairman from 1939 until his passing in 1964. He worked as a boiler maker for Union Pacific Railroad until 1922, and then became a watchmaker with Lipman-Wolfe & Co. Later, after retiring, he was a sausage maker at Lehl & Popp Grocery, a Volga German family business two blocks south of the church. Most of the Erdman children were married at St. Paul's and most of the Erdman grandchildren were baptized there. Many other Volga German families also had long-time relationships with St. Paul's and made it their church home for generations.

Beginning in the 1940s with WWII, younger Volga Germans felt increased pressure to disassociate with their cultural and ethnic roots. The demographics of the neighborhood once known as "Little Russia" became increasingly African American in the 1960s as the Volga German immigrants and their descendants moved to other parts of the city. Historically excluded from owning property in Oregon, African Americans were refused home loans from banks except in neighborhoods like "Little Russia."

By 1973, the St. Paul's congregation had dwindled to 21 members, and the decision was made to disband and sell the building to the Gethsemane Church of God in Christ, a predominantly African American church led by the Rev. R. L. Menefee. The new owners kept the painting in its original place of honor on the wall behind the choir loft at the front of the sanctuary. The Gethsemane congregation thrived in its new facility. Pastor Menefee died in 1991, and his son, the Rev. Winfred Leon Menefee took charge of the congregation. The demographics of the neighborhood continued to change and attendance began to decline. Upon Pastor W. L. Menefee's death in 2012, the property was put up for sale.

The King/Sabin area continues to change, and neighborhood churches are changing as well. Many originally hoped that the building could be saved, but the property had such serious structural issues that this was not feasibly possible. The land is zoned for small scale residential development.

While the St. Paul's/Gethsemane Church has been demolished, its story will live on in the community through the painting. The artwork was donated to Concordia by Peter Kusyk of Firenze Development. Valerie Miller approached Mr. Kusyk about saving the painting when she heard that he had purchased the property. Valerie, Steve Schreiber, and Mick Hergert, all with family ties to the original St. Paul's Volga German congregation, wanted to ensure that this work of art could be saved because it is important not only to the Erdman descendants, but to many other people who have lived in the neighborhood and attended both congregations over the years. They approached Dr. Brent Mai, Director of the Center for Volga German Studies (CVGS) at nearby Concordia University, who was also interested in preserving the history of the St. Paul's congregation. Together they asked Mr. Kusyk to consider donating the painting to the CVGS. Mr. Kusyk agreed and *The Lord is My Shepherd* has a new permanent home and is under the care of Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University where it will be enjoyed by new generations of those who live in northeast Portland.

Nina Olsson, part of Heritage Conservation Group, will oversee the cleaning, repair, and displaying of the painting in Concordia's George R. White Library & Learning Center. "Overall the work is in fair/good condition with no tears," stated Ms. Olsson, "a testament to the care it received in its church home." However, some of the paint is flaking, and over the years it has acquired surface grime, which will require conservation care. To restore the large painting to its former glory will require around 80 hours of work.

Neighbors, community members, and descendants of the former members of St. Paul's are showing their support and honoring memories of the church and pastors by donating to the restoration fund for the painting. The cost for restoration is around \$12,000, a significant amount, and Concordia is grateful for financial support toward this effort. The long-term care of the painting will be provided by Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia.

The completed restoration of the painting will be celebrated with an unveiling in the George R. White Library & Learning Center on Concordia's campus. An open invitation to the dedication will be announced for the unveiling in late summer.

Contact:
Dr. Brent Mai, Director
Center for Volga German Studies
Concordia University
Portland, Oregon
503.493.6460
bmai@cu-portland.edu