

Founder of Aptos church retiring after 24 years

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

When the Rev. Neils Carlsen arrived in Aptos to start Christ Lutheran Church, he had no building and no congregation.

"I didn't know anybody," said Carlsen, who is retiring Sunday from the church he founded 24 years ago.

Carlsen, who had been at Bethany Lutheran Church in Pasadena, was sent here by the Board of American Missions to found a Lutheran church. He recalled that he "knocked on a lot of doors" to recruit parishioners.

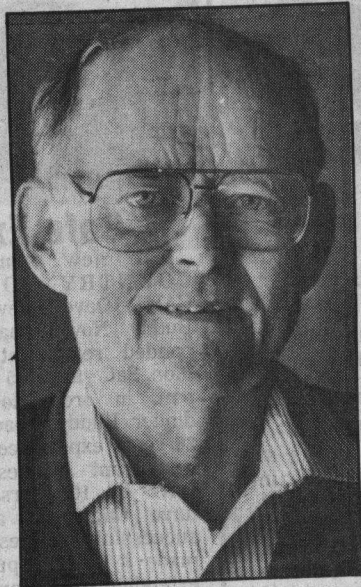
His efforts paid off. Two months after he arrived, Carlsen held the first service of Christ Lutheran Church, for 40 people at a Grange hall. A year later, the church building was built off Soquel Drive near Freedom Boulevard.

The congregation has grown over the years, but Christ Lutheran is still not a big church. There are 265 members and an average Sunday attendance of 125.

"It's always a real challenge" to keep building the membership, Carlsen said, because the area hasn't always grown as quickly as some people predicted.

Ruth Liebe, a charter member of Christ Lutheran and now the church secretary, said Carlsen is a "very caring man" who talks to his parishioners, not at them.

Liebe called Carlsen "an excellent speaker" who "hasn't changed with his style" over the



NEILS CARLSEN
Founding pastor

years.

Liebe said Carlsen has had a strong interest in social issues. The church has been active in local efforts to shelter the homeless and world anti-hunger projects.

Beginning in 1979, the church began sponsoring Vietnamese refugees who had emigrated to the United States. Christ Lutheran has sponsored three families and three individuals, helping them get started in America. The family of Thanh Nguyen, who is now a production supervisor at Seagate Technology in Scotts Valley, still attends Christ Lutheran.

Carlsen had spent the early part of his career as a chaplain in the Air Force, and was recalled several times for short stretches of active duty as a

chaplain in 1968 and 1969 at Cam Rhan Bay Hospital in Vietnam.

Although he had been to Vietnam, it wasn't Carlsen who brought up the idea of Christ Lutheran sponsoring Vietnamese people. The suggestion came from Carlsen's son, Paul, now 36, who was working for a U.S. State Department refugee-placement program in Malaysia 10 years ago.

Pastor Carlsen remained active in the Air Force Reserve, retiring several years ago as a colonel.

After his retirement here as pastor, he said, he plans to do some part-time ministry. He and his wife, Natalie, also plan to find time travel. The couple has three children: Paul, who is with the State Department in Hong Kong; Susan Churchill, 31, a nurse at the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala; and JoAnne, 25, who lives in Aptos.

The Carlsens are leaving Aptos, but they're only going five miles south, to a condo at Canon Del Sol in La Selva Beach. Carlsen said he and his wife gave a lot of thought to leaving the area after retirement, but decided against it.

"We have roots here," he said.



A reception for Pastor Carlsen will be held at 3 p.m. Sept. 30 at the La Selva Beach Clubhouse.

His replacement has not been selected yet.