

# Grace Oasis

A Christian Recovery Program

Jon Enter  
Senior Church History  
Professor Brenner  
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In 1996, Pastor Phil Merten was a chaplain for Milwaukee County's Inpatient Drug and Alcohol Treatment Program. He was also running recovery sessions for Milwaukee County. After ministering to people during their twenty-eight day recovery program, he would wish them well on their recovery back to society and also encourage them to join a church. However, Pastor Merten knew it would be a big jump for these addicts to go straight from treatment into church. He knew it would be difficult for them to feel comfortable even joining a church and almost impossible for them to immediately start regular attendance at a formal worship service. Therefore, Pastor Merten began brainstorming. He wanted to create a program that would serve as a bridge to connect the new lives of recovering addicts with the spiritual recovery they also needed in church.

Pastor Merten's original idea was to rent a storefront location at 26<sup>th</sup> and State Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. This storefront was planned to have a Christian coffee house setting. However, the coffee and snacks would be offered free of charge. The goal was to have a drop in center where people would feel comfortable going to escape life on the streets. They would also be able to receive spiritual guidance.

While Pastor Merten's idea was still in its early planning stages, Pastor Jim Sonnemann from Salem Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, held a meeting with Tom Watts, his evangelism chairman. The two men discussed where the "typical family" was located in the neighborhood around the church. They were looking for the conventional one father, one mother and 2.5-kid family with a dog and a station wagon. These men realized that type of family was no longer in the neighborhood of Salem Lutheran. While they were talking, a hungry, homeless person came to the church and asked for help. They stopped their meeting and gave the man some food, a bus pass and

sent him on his way. Pastor Sonnemann then remarked to Tom Watts, “That is who God is sending us to be serving.”<sup>1</sup> The neighborhood around Salem had many people who were addicted, homeless, down on their luck, mentally ill, distressed and recently released from jail. At that time, Salem Lutheran Church was minimally helping with its small food pantry and with some bus tickets. However, Pastor Sonnemann and Tom Watts knew that it was time for Salem Lutheran to re-examine the focus of their church’s ministry within the community.

Shortly after this meeting, Pastor Sonnemann sat next to Pastor Merten at a pastor’s conference. Pastor Sonnemann shared this experience with Pastor Merten who was still looking to find a location for his recovery program. God made a WELS connection. Immediately, these two men worked together to develop the recovery program at Salem Lutheran Church. Pastor Sonnemann soon made the pitch to Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministry that Salem Lutheran Church was a neutral location <sup>for</sup> ~~to~~ this new program. Salem is located at 2400 North Cramer Street just off a trendy strip of cafés and bars on Milwaukee’s East Side. Pastor Sonnemann hoped the church’s location near a busy part of town would help people feel safe inside and outside the recovery program. However, the church was still close to the rough life of the inner city, which help the addicts feel comfortable because this church would understand what they see and endure everyday. Salem also had the advantage of being located near several major bus routes and was equipped with a large kitchen and dining facility to accommodate future growth. With all these factors combined, Salem Lutheran Church was chosen as the location of the program.

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<sup>1</sup> From an interview with Pastor Jim Sonnemann, November 17, 2003.

Now that the location was set, the founders had to name the program and design the meetings. After some discussion, the name Grace Oasis was chosen. Pastor Merten explained why this name was selected. “Grace is the main message that we wanted to push at the meetings. Addicts live, eat and breathe law. ‘I should be trying harder.’ ‘I should do more.’ ‘I should be able to beat this thing.’ They know the ‘shoulds’ but they don’t know grace. As for the Oasis, it’s a desert out there. It’s a bad environment out there. There are all kinds of ways to get yourself in trouble. An oasis is a safe place. It’s a place you can rest.”<sup>2</sup> Since the founders of the program wanted to create a place where addicts could escape the troubles of the world, the meetings originally were very informal and relaxed. The doors opened at 6:00 pm. Snacks, coffee, cards and games were offered. People were encouraged to just hang out and talk until 7:30 pm. Then, about an hour-long interactive Bible study based on recovery took place. Following the Bible study, the church would remain open as long as people wanted to stay and talk.

After advertising at various recovery programs across Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the first meeting of Grace Oasis was held in July of 1996. Five volunteers eagerly waited to see if anyone would come. Pastor Sonnemann recalled, “We sat around being a little discouraged for a while. We did all this planning and no one was coming. Then, Pam Merten, Pastor Phil Merten’s wife, suggested that we take this time to pray about it. So, we did. And then somebody did drop in.”<sup>3</sup> In the history of Salem’s Grace Oasis, only two times has the program not had anyone show up. Eventually, more and more people began coming to the program.

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<sup>2</sup> From an interview with Pastor Phil Merten, November 14, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> From an interview with Pastor Jim Sonnemann, November 17, 2003.

Positive feedback was flooding into the ears of the founders and into the community. The addicts who were attending the Grace Oasis recovery program were not only receiving loving help for their addictions, but they were also receiving loving help for their souls. This Christian approach was different than other approaches. Pastor Merten focused and is still focusing his devotions on God being a God of Grace. He reminds the addicts repeatedly that God loves them and that God showed them just how much he loves them when he sent Jesus to die for their sins. This is a new concept for many addicts. In fact, one addict told Pastor Merten, "I've heard about God and about his love before but I didn't think that it applied to burned out, hippies like me."<sup>4</sup>

God's love worked within the recovery and renewed the faith life of Bill Schoenleber. Bill started attending Grace Oasis as an alcoholic. He commented on his impression of the devotions held at Grace Oasis. "I [once] thought that if God had a choice, he would have sent everyone [to Heaven] but me...Then I heard Pastor Phil talking about God and God's love...I never realized before that God loved me. He's waiting for me. He made me. It made such a difference."<sup>5</sup> The Holy Spirit has worked within the heart of Bill. Currently, Bill is a very dedicated member of Salem Lutheran Church. He is also the coordinator between Salem Lutheran Church and Grace Oasis. Bill makes sure everything runs well at each Grace Oasis meeting. This involves lining up volunteers, having the building unlocked and other miscellaneous jobs. Over the years, Bill has changed his personal recovery program. Bill explained, "I serve others at

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<sup>4</sup> From an interview with Pastor Phil Merten, November 14, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> From an interview with Bill Schoenleber, November 7, 2003.

Grace Oasis but really I come more to be helped than to help. My service helps me in my program [of recovery].”<sup>6</sup>

Bill Schoenleber is just one of many addicts who has been delivered from a dependency by God. Many of the Grace Oasis attendees who successfully recover from addiction do not leave the Grace Oasis program. Often they continue to attend weekly and offer their help to others who are struggling with their own addictions. More than likely, Grace Oasis would not be running without their support. In the early years of the program, there were often more volunteers present at meetings than addicts. As the years passed by, the number of addicts attending Grace Oasis steadily grew in numbers. Now, on a slow night there are 20-25 addicts in attendance and 40-45 addicts on a busy night. As the number of addicts increased at the program, the original volunteers slowly stopped helping. This gave opportunity to the Grace Oasis attendees to gain ownership by helping run the program. Currently, most of the volunteers of the Grace Oasis program were once attending Grace Oasis as addicts.

There is one notable exception to this fact. In the summer of 1996, there was a notice in the church bulletin at Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church in Brownsville, Wisconsin. In that announcement, Don and Dianna Zastrow read that the Grace Oasis program was starting at Salem Lutheran Church. The Zastrows began to volunteer. For about five years, Don and Dianna attended Grace Oasis once a month. In early 2000, some friends asked the Zastrows if they would be willing to take other people from the Brownsville church with them to volunteer. Currently, seven people from Brownsville, Wisconsin, faithfully and enthusiastically volunteer once a month at Grace Oasis. They make a meal for about 50 people in their homes and then bring it to Grace Oasis. The funding <sup>for</sup> from

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<sup>6</sup> From an interview with Bill Schoenleber, November 7, 2003.

their meals primarily comes from donations from their Lutheran church. These seven helpers donate their time preparing, serving and cleaning up the meal, the gas money to make the two and a half hour round trip and any other last minute expenditures to make their meals a tasty treat. These volunteers really make an impact in the lives of the addicts who attend Grace Oasis. The Brownville volunteers not only make wonderful meals, but they also join in food and fellowship with the addicts. Bill Schoenleber described the Brownsville volunteers,

They are there for service. They sit down and they talk to you. They care. They don't say, "Now all you have to do is get a job. Start looking good. Get a suit on so you can blend in with us real Christians...As long as you're looking good and smelling good you can't be a problem."<sup>7</sup>

It is obvious that the Brownsville volunteers have made a positive impact on Grace Oasis. On the other hand, Grace Oasis has also had a positive impact on the Brownsville volunteers. Dianna Zastrow shared her experience of volunteering at Grace Oasis.

It wasn't difficult to sit down next to someone who was struggling with addictions. It was a safe environment. It was difficult finding something to talk about at first. Ordinarily, someone would ask, "what do you do for a living?" or "where do you live?" Often these questions do not apply to Grace Oasis attendees. It has made me count my blessings over and over. It has also helped me [with the ability] to share the good news of Jesus outside of Grace Oasis.<sup>8</sup>

The Brownsville volunteers have certainly helped Grace Oasis flourish over the years!

Don and Dianna Zastrow have not only watched addicts grow in their individual recovery programs at Grace Oasis, but they have also watched the format of Grace Oasis grow over the years. In October of 1998, some volunteers approached Pastor Merten and asked if Grace Oasis could serve a meal with its recovery program. Charlie Hallberg, who once attended Grace Oasis as an addict and now volunteers at the program,

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<sup>7</sup> From an interview with Bill Schoenleber, November 7, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> From an interview with Dianna Zastrow, November 21, 2003.

explained why the volunteers wanted to serve a meal. “Here we have people coming in hungry. Paul basically admonishes us, ‘don’t try and spread the good news to someone whose stomach is growling and they can’t even hear you.’ It took us years to work out some of these logistics. [The structure of] Grace Oasis is a growing thing. It grows with the people here.”<sup>9</sup> Every Friday since this idea was brought to Pastor Merten, Grace Oasis has filled the growling stomachs of the Grace Oasis attendees with a hot meal.

Grace Oasis not only changed by adding a meal, it has also altered the format of its meeting over the years. Pastor Merten explained that

the original idea of the Grace Oasis program was not to turn anyone away at any time. If someone came in who was using that day, they were simply asked to be respectful and quiet. That did not work. At one time, a domestic dispute broke out between a husband and wife because the husband was drunk. He ended up slugging his wife. Some Grace Oasis helpers and I wrestled him into submission, called the police and pressed charges.<sup>10</sup>

This incident demanded that a new policy come into effect. From then on, there were three rules displayed and enforced (with police assistance if necessary) at Grace Oasis meetings.

1. Do not come here if you have been using or drinking today.
2. No “13<sup>th</sup> Stepping”. This is not a singles bar.
3. No threatening or abusive language.

However, the addition of printed rules was not the only change. Over the years, the format of the meeting was altered. As of December of 2003, this is the current outline of the Grace Oasis meetings, which are held every Friday evening.

5:30 - 6:45 pm - There is a small group meeting led by Clinical Therapist, Pam Merten. This group normally has 5-10 people who regularly attend. It is designed follow the basic format of Alcoholics Anonymous. There is a topic given along with what the Bible says about that topic. After the counselor presents this material,

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<sup>9</sup> From an interview with Charlie Hallberg, November 7, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> From an interview with Pastor Phil Merten, November 14, 2003.



then the addicts go around the room talking about the topic. There is no cross talk, which frees people up to say what they need to say. They can be open and honest about how the topic has affected their lives.

7:00 - 7:45 pm - A hot meal is served.

7:45 - 8:45 pm - Pastor Merten takes prayer requests and the group prays for God's help and grace. After prayer, Pastor Merten leads the group in song on his guitar. Finally, there is a devotion centered on God's grace. During this devotion, Pastor Merten explains the Christian Twelve Step Program of Recovery and how God alone can help someone recover from addiction.

8:45 pm – Each Grace Oasis attendee may receive one grocery store brown paper bag full of food.

The basis of the Christian Twelve Step Program used with the Grace Oasis program is taken from the basic Twelve Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous. The term *alcohol* is simply changed to *dependencies*. This broadens the Twelve Steps to fit the scope of Grace Oasis. Grace Oasis is designed not just for those with an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Grace Oasis is a Christian Recovery Program. It is designed treat any kind of addiction that takes a person's focus away from God. With this broad focus, the devotions within Grace Oasis are applicable also <sup>to</sup> the helpers who do not suffer from chemical dependence. The Christian Twelve Steps are listed below.

1. We admitted we were powerless over our dependencies – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand him.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people, wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. We continue to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out.
12. We, having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, tried to carry this message to addicts and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

There are two points within step three of the Christian Twelve Steps that need further explanation. The phrase “God as we understand him” is the wording within the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. This wording naturally brings up the question during each Grace Oasis meeting, “Who is God?” This gives Pastor Merten a natural sag way into explaining who God actually is. Therefore, he really uses it as a teaching point.

People might also be concerned with the “we made a decision” wording of step three. This terminology in no way shows that decision theology is being taught at Grace Oasis. During the first point of the Twelve Steps, Pastor Merten stresses the fact that all people are powerless over dependencies, and also that all people are powerless over God’s love. God showers love whether the world likes it or not. God demonstrated his love by sending his Son into the world. Jesus died. No one can do a thing to stop that fact. After this explanation, Pastor Merten asks if anyone is tired of being addicted to dependencies. Of course, they all are. Pastor Merten tells them, “Why not say, ‘Okay God, if you want to love me, go ahead and love me. I give up. I’m licked. God, what are you going to do with this mess?’”<sup>11</sup> Again, this is not an altar call to make a decision for Christ. This is surrendering to the God of Grace.

When God takes Grace Oasis attendees and guides them through recovery, they get excited. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, they become impressively committed to the Lord. Commonly, these attendees of Grace Oasis then began attending church on

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<sup>11</sup> From an interview with Pastor Phil Merten, November 14, 2003.

Sunday mornings. Historically, this transition can be difficult. These excited Christians from Grace Oasis are comfortable singing God praises to the tune of a guitar and not to the bellow of an organ. These excited Christians are comfortable interjecting thoughts and questions during Pastor Merten's devotion and not listening quietly to a sermon delivered behind a pulpit. These excited Christians are comfortable with the adjustable, free flowing format of Grace Oasis and not the formalism of the Sunday morning liturgy.

The transition of Grace Oasis attendees into Sunday morning worship has been difficult for some of the members of Salem. There was a viewpoint held by some at Salem Lutheran Church that Grace Oasis was negatively altering Salem. Pastor Sonnemann explained,

[When] Salem talked about starting the Grace Oasis program, no one really knew exactly what to expect. We could have done a lot more to educate the congregation about the characteristics of addicted people and how to respond to them... Be aware that dysfunctional people don't right away become functional. Their dysfunctions are going to affect your life as a congregation. There are things that you can do to prepare for this through education.<sup>12</sup>

In retrospect, Pastor Sonnemann concluded that more education at Salem could have prevented some of the hard feelings harbored by some of the members of Salem. Pastor Sonnemann also shared how he would educate a congregation seeking to begin a Grace Oasis program.

1. Invite the alcohol counselors of Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services to run some sessions about chemical dependencies.
2. Take interested people from the congregation to a Bible study for people struggling with addictions run by Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries. Get your members intermingled and experience what it is like to be around someone who is chemically dependent.
3. Visit Grace Oasis at Salem Lutheran Church and visit with both the leaders and the addicts in attendance.
4. Go to other recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

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<sup>12</sup> From an interview with Pastor Jim Sonnemann, November 17, 2003.

5. Encourage the leaders of the congregation to show no fear even if they are afraid. If they do so, the congregation will pick up on that fear and not be accepting of the program.<sup>13</sup>

These insights into education could help a congregation start a Grace Oasis program with open arms.

Some people need very little or even no education to be completely supportive of the program. One such person from Salem was Mary Schowalter, the church organist. Pastor Merten described Mary's technique. "[Mary] has done a wonderful job assimilating the former Grace Oasis attendees into formal worship. "She would approach them and say, 'Join my choir.' But they'd say, 'I can't sing.' And she'd say, 'It doesn't matter.' It would turn out that they were both right."<sup>14</sup> The choir at Salem is primarily made up of former Grace Oasis attendees. When they join the choir, they feel involved in worship on a similar level to their experience within Grace Oasis.

There are 16 members of Salem Lutheran Church who joined Salem through the Grace Oasis program. There are many more who are regulars at Grace Oasis and are showing interest in Salem Lutheran Church. Therefore, Grace Oasis is accomplishing the purpose for which it was originally founded. Grace Oasis "serves as a bridge to connect [addicts'] new lives in recovery with the spiritual recovery they also need with the Lord."

Due to the success of Grace Oasis program at Salem Lutheran Church, it has become a model for other Grace Oasis programs. Waukesha, Wisconsin; Crown Point, Indiana and Neenah, Wisconsin, have all begun programs within the last few years based on Grace Oasis at Salem Lutheran. Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, is also currently

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<sup>13</sup> From an interview with Pastor Jim Sonnemann, November 17, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> From an interview with Pastor Phil Merten, November 14, 2003.

laying the groundwork to begin a program. These congregations were aided by the pilot program of Grace Oasis at Salem Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The Grace Oasis program has benefited many people in numerous ways. Friends have been made. Addictions have been overcome. Faith has been given by God. Congregations have grown. Stereotypes have been changed. Attending Grace Oasis alters people's perceptions about the chemically dependent and homeless. Pastor Sonnemann detailed what Grace Oasis has done for him.

It's shown me that a lot of people who have been rejected by society, who have been looked down upon by so called well-functioning people, aren't as "scary" as they might appear to be when they're on the street. They are hurting people who are looking for help. When Jesus was eating with the tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes and thieves, they were not people who had their act back together yet or were totally functional. They were people who were still struggling with their sins and addictions. Jesus met them where they were.<sup>15</sup>

Grace Oasis benefits its helpers while it also changes the lives of the chemically dependent.

Every person in the world could be checked into the Grace Oasis program. Everyone has a pet sin, which is really an addiction. Whether that pet sin is chemical dependency or a "nice, clean sin", the message of Grace Oasis is applicable. May God continue to bless all in their recovery!

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Included in the following pages are the Twelve Steps of the Grace Oasis program (for photocopy purposes) and also the transcripts from the five interviews performed to gain knowledge on this subject. There is also a VHS videotape with these interviews and a recorded Grace Oasis meeting at Salem Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

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<sup>15</sup> From an interview with Pastor Jim Sonnemann, November 17, 2003.

## The Christian 12 Steps of the Grace Oasis Program

- 1 We admitted we were powerless over our dependencies – that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2 We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3 We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand him.
- 4 We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- 5 We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6 We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- 7 We humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings.
- 8 We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- 9 We made direct amends to such people, wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- 10 We continue to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- 11 We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry it out.
- 12 We, having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, tried to carry this message to addicts and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

# Questions for an Attendee of Grace Oasis

Time on the video: 0:00:00 until 0:17:03

## **What is your name?**

Bill Schoenleber

## **How did you first hear about Grace Oasis?**

He was visiting a friend at a mental health facility. Pastor Phil Merten had given this friend a business card about Grace Oasis.

## **How long have you been attending Grace Oasis?**

6 years

## **What was your experience at your first meeting?**

“I was very much impressed...when I heard Pastor Phil talking about God and God’s love...I never realized before that God loved me. He’s waiting for me. He made me. It made such a difference.”

## **What did you first like about Grace Oasis?**

He stressed fellowship, Pastor Merten’s devotions and the openness of the people who help and attend the meetings.

“The helpers are there for service. They sit down and they talk to you. They care. They don’t say, ‘now all you have to do is get a job. Start looking good. Get a suit on so you can blend in with us real Christians...As long as you’re looking good and smelling good you can’t be a problem.’”

## **What caused you to come back?**

When Bill was sick, Pastor Merten came to visit him even after Pastor had only met him a few times.

## **Did you have any religious background before attending Grace Oasis?**

Yes – This is not characteristic of everyone attending Grace Oasis.

## **What was it like to hear a Christian approach to kicking your habit?**

“I thought that if God had a choice, he would have sent everyone [to Heaven] but Bill.”

## **When was the turning point for your recovery?**

“Recovery is ongoing. There have been slips. They are always steps as I grow in the faith.”

## **What is your fondest memory of Grace Oasis?**

Bill enjoyed the times when Pastor Merten played the guitar and everyone sang. It gave Bill time to sort out his thoughts and focus on his recovery.

**What is your current affiliation with Grace Oasis?**

Bill is the coordinator between Salem Lutheran Church and Grace Oasis. He makes sure everything runs well. This involves lining up volunteers, making sure the food is prepared, having the building unlocked, etc.

**How long did you attend Grace Oasis before attending a Sunday worship service?**

Year/year and a half

**Was it difficult to make a transition from the Grace Oasis setting to a Sunday worship setting? Why?**

No – He had been in church settings before.

No – He was welcomed right away by the members and he immediately felt at home.

**How has the message of Grace Oasis changed your life spiritually?**

His Christianity used to be on the shelf. No one knew that he was a Christian. Now, everyone knows that he is a Christian. Bill does a great job inviting people to both Grace Oasis and to worship services at Salem Lutheran.

**What advice would you give a church thinking about starting a Grace Oasis program?**

“It’s not for every church.”

**What is the best part about Grace Oasis?**

“I’m at ease [at Grace Oasis] because I’m one of those people...I relate to the survivor mentality. I serve others at Grace Oasis but really I come more to be helped than to help. My service helps me in my program [of recovery].”



**Questions for an Attendee of Grace Oasis**

Time on the video: 0:17:04 until 0:44:59

**What is your name?**

Charlie Hallberg

**How did you first hear about Grace Oasis?**

“When I was delivered from alcoholism by God, one of the things that I wanted to do was to reach out to other recovering people. I walked into County...where I met a long time, everything abuser. He was bewildered and holding a business card for Grace Oasis. I started recommending people to go there. Then the Spirit convicted me that I shouldn’t be sending people to something I had never been to.”



**How long have you been attending Grace Oasis?**

About 8 years

**What was your experience at your first meeting?**

“I didn’t say anything to anyone for the first few months of attending. And no one forced me to talk. No pressure. Total acceptance.”

**What did you first like about Grace Oasis?**

Pastor Merten was willing to leave his prepared material in his devotions to talk about questions that people had about God. He allowed himself to get side tracked into the issues people were dealing with at that moment.

**What was difficult about attending Grace Oasis?**

“Seeing others in need and wanting to do more for a person than is good for them. Wanting to do more for them than they desire. They need to do the recovery.”

“There is no absolute outline to recovery. If I do this every time, if I do that every time, then my problem will be gone. It doesn’t work that way.”

**What caused you to come back?**

“I felt that there were a good Christian Twelve Step Program here. I took three months off once. Someone was concerned for me and asked if I was ever going to come back. But I didn’t feel that there was pressure there.”

**How often did you attend Grace Oasis?**

“There is no regular attendance for Grace Oasis. Grace Oasis is here for the people who need it when they need it.”

**Did you have any religious background before attending Grace Oasis?**

“I was brought up backyard heathen and later attended a Missouri Synod church.

**What was it like to hear a Christian approach to kicking your habit?**

“Here we have people coming in hungry. Paul basically admonishes us, ‘don’t try and spread the good news to someone whose stomach is growling and they can’t even hear you.’ It took us years to work out some of these logistics. [The structure of] Grace Oasis is a growing thing. It grows with the people here.”

**When was the turning point for your recovery?**

When he realized that salvation is first and what he did was in response (including recovery).

**What the worst thing you witnessed/endured at Grace Oasis?**

An abusive husband followed his wife into Grace Oasis, which she used as a safe place to escape him. He started beating her up during one of the meetings. It was broken up. Pastor Merten called the police. The husband was arrested and charges were pressed for two reasons. It would demonstrate to the attendees that

this form of action is not tolerated. It would also help keep the attendees feel that this is a safe place for recovery.

**What is your fondest memory of Grace Oasis?**

“There was a Grace Oasis attendee who was a schizophrenic who abused crack and LSD. He also was recovering from being a Satan worshipper. We just caught the end of a Christmas Grace Oasis meeting. Some of the attendees sang ‘Silent Night’ with me and this man.”

**What is your current affiliation with Grace Oasis?**

Charlie helps with organization and provides free transportation for attendees.

**In your opinion, is that the norm for most Grace Oasis attendees?**

“I try to make it a point to tell people, we are not trying to force you to be Lutherans. We are not trying to fill our pews. We are trying to tell you about the Lord. If you want to want to come to the service here, here are the times.”

**What advice would you give a church thinking about starting a Grace Oasis program?**

“Don’t have a whole list of rules. Rules make it less a growing organism and more a bureaucratic institution.”

**What other insights into Grace Oasis would you like to share?**

“Because this is a drop off point for people and their addictions, we have to have a gentle, hands off approach. When someone walks out that door, if they don’t want to come back, they don’t have to.” However, they know they are welcome back at any time.

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## Questions for a Founder of Grace Oasis

Time on the video: 0:45:07 until 1:32:22

**What is your name?**

Pastor Phil Merten

**What is your current affiliation with Grace Oasis?**

He is a chaplain with Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries. Grace Oasis was his idea back in 1996. Pastor Merten leads the spiritual portion of the Grace Oasis program.

**In what year did Grace Oasis start?**

July 1996 – Pastor Merten had the idea for a long time. He was a chaplain for Milwaukee County’s Inpatient Drug and Alcohol Treatment Program. He started running recovery sessions for Milwaukee County. After ministering to these

people during their twenty-eight day recovery program, Pastor Merten would basically tell them, “God bless. Try to hook up with some church out there.” But Pastor Merten knew that it would be a big jump for these addicts to go straight from treatment into church. It would have been difficult for them to feel comfortable joining and regularly attending a formal worship service. So, he thought that it would be a good idea to create a program that would serve as a bridge to connect their new lives in recovery with the spiritual recovery they also needed with the Lord.

The original idea was to rent a storefront location around the 2400 block of North Avenue in one of the toughest parts of Milwaukee. This storefront was originally going to have Christian coffee house idea. The goal was to have a drop in center where people would feel comfortable coming and then also administering spiritual help.

**Was it always called Grace Oasis?**

YES – “Grace is the main message that we wanted to push at the meetings. Addicts live, eat and breathe law. ‘I should be trying harder.’ ‘I should do more.’ ‘I should be able to beat this thing.’ They know the ‘shoulds’ but they don’t know grace. As for the Oasis, it’s a desert out there. It’s a bad environment out there. There are all kinds of ways to get yourself in trouble. An oasis is a safe place. It’s a place you can rest.”

**What research prompted starting Grace Oasis?**

There was not another program that they knew of that was like this. They simply visited other recovery programs.

**Why did Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries pick Salem?**

Pastor Merten had an idea to create a bridge program between people starting their recovery and formal membership in church. While he was still searching for a location, he happened to sit next to Jim Sonnemann, the pastor of Salem Lutheran Church, at a pastor’s conference. Pastor Sonnemann had recently met with Tom Watts where they discussed changing the focus of Salem to minister to people who were addicted and/or homeless. Soon, Pastor Sonnemann met with the board of Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries to show that Salem was the best place to host Grace Oasis.

“As it turns out that having it in a church was a good idea. Addicts are normally intimidated by formal worship service. However a church building is perceived as a safe place.”

**What advertising methods were used for the first meeting?**

Pastor Merten handed out information at the recovery programs he was involved in running and any other recovery program that would allow him to advertise.

**How many addicts attended the first meeting?**

One addict attended the first meeting along with 4 or 5 volunteers. In the first year, only twice no addicts came.

**What was the format of that first meeting?**

The doors opened at 6 pm. There were snacks, coffee, cards and games. People would just hang out and talk until 7:30 pm. Then, there would be a recovery oriented Bible study. It was a very open discussion on recovery. Often people would stay until 11 pm. "However long people wanted to talk, we'd talk."

**Why was this format chosen?**

From talking to addicts, they discovered most addicts just wanted a place to hang out. The addicts complained about how tough it was out on the streets. They wanted a place where they could relax, not worrying about what was happening on the streets. The more relaxed they were, the more they were willing to work on recovery.

**What was the reaction of the addicts in attendance?**

They liked it. They came back. They brought friends. Word of mouth was and currently is the best form of advertising.

**What was the reaction of the helpers in attendance?**

The helpers from the church were excited at first. They helped to get the program started, but they slowly dwindled in numbers. This really opened the door to get the addicts to take more ownership in the program.

**Who funded Grace Oasis at first?**

It has never really needed that much funding. However, the funding that is needed comes out of Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries. The money is spent to buy bus passes, to supply food for the hot meal and to stock the food pantry. Funding is also needed to help Salem Lutheran with utilities to cover the energy used during the Grace Oasis meetings.

**Who funds Grace Oasis now?**

The funding is a cooperative effort of Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries and Salem Lutheran Church. A donation basket is also passed around at the meetings to help cover a small portion of the cost.

**What was the scariest thing about trying Grace Oasis?**

In the early days, some people came to the program who were real veterans of recovery. They had been in and out of numerous programs. Pastor Merten said that he was concerned they would attend and heard the same old thing.

**What was your worst memory of Grace Oasis?**

The original idea of the Grace Oasis program was not to turn anyone away at any time. If someone came in who was using that day, they were simply asked to be

respectful and quiet. That did not work. At one time, a domestic dispute broke out between a husband and wife because the husband was drunk. He ended up slugging his wife. Pastor Merten and other helpers wrestled him into submission, called the police and pressed charges. After that point, there was a new rule. You cannot attend if you are under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Sometimes the leaders of Grace Oasis have to make a decision on one individual. They have to decide if this person is here for the recovery program or simply hurting other's recovery efforts.

### **What is the greatest success story of Grace Oasis to you?**

Pastor Merten said that greatest successes are when he sees people realize that God loves them despite that fact that they are addicted and have messed up their lives. In fact, one addict told Pastor Merten, "I've heard about God and about his love before but I didn't think that it applied to burned out, hippies like me."

### **What struggles has Grace Oasis endured?**

One problem that is still ongoing is kids. Sometimes addicts will bring their kids along. They are often a distraction to those who are trying to pay attention to the recovery program. Many ideas have been tried to care for the kids and remove them as distractions. There was a paid caretaker for a while. However, the funding ran out. Then volunteers from Wisconsin Lutheran College filled the caretaker position. However, the students had breaks during school and were unavailable over the summer months. In addition, sometimes they were not always reliable.

There have also been personality clashes among the volunteers. It is tough when two helpers who both do tremendous volunteer work start fighting. Usually one of them will demand the other person leave Grace Oasis. Eventually one helper will stop coming and then all the help they gave is gone.

### **How is the current Grace Oasis program run?**

Every Friday, from 5:30 pm until 6:45 pm, there is a small recovery group meeting is led by Clinical Therapist, Pam Merten. This group normally has 5-10 people who regularly attend. It is designed to be closer to the format of Alcoholics Anonymous. There is a topic given along with what the Bible says about that topic. After the counselor presents this material, then the addicts go around the room each one taking turns talking about the topic. There is no cross talk. They can be open and honest about how the topic has affected their lives.

From 7:00 pm until 7:45 pm, a hot meal is served.

From 7:45 pm until 8:45 pm, Pastor Merten takes prayer requests and the group prays for God's help and grace. After prayer, Pastor Merten leads the group in song on his guitar. Finally, there is a devotion centered on God's grace and how God alone can help someone recover from addiction.

At 8:45 pm, each Grace Oasis attendee may receive one grocery store brown paper bag full of food. (NOTE: The times given in the interview were not the same as the times printed at the Grace Oasis meeting. The times listed above match the times posted at the Grace Oasis meetings.)

If there is ever a Friday that Pastor Merten cannot lead a meeting, the meeting is run by some of the “seasoned veterans” of Grace Oasis.

**Where did the Christian Twelve Steps come from?**

The basis of the Christian Twelve Steps is taken from the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. One notable exception is that the term alcohol is changed to dependencies. This broadens the Twelve Steps to fit the scope of Grace Oasis.

**What does “God as we understand him” mean within these Twelve Steps?**

It is the wording within the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. This wording does not offend and thereby cause anyone to leave who has come simply for the recovery part of the program. This wording naturally brings up the question during each Grace Oasis meeting, “Who is God?” This gives Pastor Merten a natural sag way into explaining who God actually is. It is really a teaching point.

**On average, how many addicts are in attendance each Friday night?**

On a slow night, there are 20-25 addicts. On a busy night, there are 40-45 addicts. Pastor Merten guessed that about half of the attendees are currently chemically dependant and the rest have some mental health issue ranging from stress to depression.

**What parts of the program have worked well?**

The third step has been the most successful. “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understand him.” The terminology “we made a decision” in no way shows that decision theology is being taught at Grace Oasis. During the first point of the Twelve Steps, Pastor Merten stress the fact that all people are powerless over dependencies, and also all people are powerless over God’s love. God showers love whether the world likes it or not. God demonstrated his love by sending his Son into the world. Jesus died. No one can do a thing to stop that fact. After this explanation, Pastor Merten asks if anyone is tired of being addicted to dependencies. Of course, they all are. Pastor tells them, “Why not say, ‘Okay God, if you want to love me, go ahead and love me.’” “I give up. I’m licked. God, what are you going to do with this mess?” Again, this is not an altar call to make a decision for Christ. This is surrendering to the God of Grace. “Cast all your cares on Jesus...”

**What ideas have you tried at Grace Oasis that have flopped?**

The totally peer led Alcoholic Anonymous meetings, admitting people who are drunk into meetings and solving the problem of occupying the kids of attendees have all flopped. The Christmas parties have also been a mess because it often turns into a greed fest with the few gifts that are available.

**What effect has Grace Oasis had on you personally?**

He said it is a wonderfully humbling thing to find out that these addicted people are relying on him for help. The recoverees befriended Pastor Merten and Pastor Merten befriended many of them. He even described some of the recoverees as his “right hand guys.”

Grace Oasis has also caused Pastor Merten to realize that he has to work the same recovery program on his own life. His program is not focused on recovering from a chemical dependency; it is focused on recovering from his pet sins that he is addicted to committing. (All people could check themselves into the Grace Oasis recovery program for their pet sins.)

**What effect has Grace Oasis had on Salem Lutheran Church?**

It is still a work in progress. Some members are still not comfortable with the attendees of Grace Oasis becoming members of Salem. On the other hand, the organist of Salem has done a wonderful job assimilating the former Grace Oasis attendees into formal worship. “She would approach them and say, ‘Join my choir.’ But they’d say, ‘I can’t sing.’ And she’d say, ‘It doesn’t matter.’ It would turn out that they were both right.”

**Are there any plans to copy Grace Oasis in other cities?**

Waukesha, Wisconsin, has a program, which has been running for a couple of years, but it is struggling. “They do not have a great location but they soldier on.”

Crown Point, Indian, also started a program a couple of years ago. Pastor Merten was not too sure how they were doing.

Neenah, Wisconsin, recently started a program. It is already meeting weekly but they struggle with a bad location.

Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin, has recently laid the groundwork to start a program.

The current goal is to take the Grace Oasis program nation wide. Of course, this is subject to funding.

**What warnings/advice would you give a church planning to start a Grace Oasis program?**

People need to be aware that a Grace Oasis program will change their congregation. The members and especially the leadership must be educated and supportive of this fact before the program should begin.

“Don’t try to bite off more than you can chew. Know your limitations. Don’t try to be the all-purpose social worker. You can only do so much. Don’t feel guilty if you can’t solve all their problems.”

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## **Questions for a Founder of Grace Oasis**

Time on the video: 1:32:23 until 1:59:42

### **What is your name?**

Pastor Jim Sonnemann

### **What is your current affiliation with Grace Oasis?**

He is the pastor of Salem Lutheran Church where the Grace Oasis program is held. He takes interested Grace Oasis attendees through Bible information classes and into membership at Salem Lutheran Church.

### **What events or research prompted starting Grace Oasis?**

The evangelism chairman, Tom Watts, and Pastor Sonnemann were meeting in church discussing where the typical family was in the neighborhood around the church. They were looking for the typical one father, one mother and 2.5-kid family with a dog and a station wagon. That type of family was not in the neighborhood of the church anymore. While they were talking, a hungry, homeless person came to the church and asked for help. They stopped their meeting and gave the man some food, a bus pass and sent him on his way. After this man left, Pastor Sonnemann said, “That is who God is sending us to be serving.” Pastor Sonnemann explained, “Our neighborhood has a lot of people who are addicted, homeless, down on their luck, mentally ill, distressed and recently getting out of jail. We were minimally helping with our small food pantry and with some bus tickets. But then Tom Watts and I came to the realization that is who the community is presenting to us and that is who the Lord is calling us to serve.”

A few weeks later, Pastor Sonnemann was sitting next to Pastor Phil Merten at a pastor’s conference. Pastor Sonnemann told Pastor Merten about this experience. Then Pastor Merten shared his idea to create the Grace Oasis program. These two men worked together to develop the program at Salem Lutheran Church.

### **Who helped plan its inception?**

Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministry members - Don Borgwardt and Sarah Owens & Salem Lutheran Church Council members - Tom Watts, Ron Biffel and Fred Scheutke



**Why did Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries pick Salem?**

Pastor Sonnemann made the pitch to Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries that Salem Lutheran Church was a neutral spot to host Grace Oasis. Salem is located just off a trendy strip of cafés and bars on Milwaukee's East Side. Pastor Sonnemann hoped this fact would help people feel safe attending the recovery program. Yet, the church was close enough to the hard life of the inner city to help the addicts feel comfortable at a location which would understand what they see everyday. Salem also had the advantage of being just off several major bus routes and was equipped with a kitchen and dining facility to accommodate future growth.

**What was the reaction of the addicts in attendance at the first meeting?**

Only one person came. He seemed a little disappointed that he was the only attendee there.

“When it's a new thing and especially if it is a church thing, people are reluctant to try it until positive word of mouth gets to them.”

**What was the reaction of the helpers in attendance at the first meeting?**

“We sat around being a little discouraged for a while. We did all this planning and no one was coming. Then, Pam Merten, Pastor Phil Merten's wife, suggested that we take this time to pray about it. So, we did. And then somebody did drop in.”

**What was the scariest thing about trying Grace Oasis?**

Financially, it was not scary. There was not much risk involved in starting the program. The only cost involved was purchasing snacks for each meeting.

The scariest part for the congregation was wondering who was going to be coming. They wondered, “What's going to happen to our building?” But after it was apparent that the ministry was working in people's recoveries and God's Word was working in people's hearts, most of the skeptic's fears were settled.

**How many skeptics were there?**

“There are always going to be some. Some members always hoped that the congregation would go back to what it was 50 years ago. They would actually say, ‘Pastor, are we always going to have Grace Oasis?’ They seemed to look at the recovery program as a wart that needed to be removed.”

**What is the greatest success story of Grace Oasis to you?**

The greatest success story to Past Sonnemann was great number of the people who have been touched by the gospel and the Lord created faith in their hearts. Some of these people have died. By Christ's redemptive death and through their God given faith, they are now in Heaven. Even though they were still struggling with their addictions while on this earth.

**What struggles has Grace Oasis endured?**

Other WELS churches did not understand what Salem and Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries were intending to accomplish with the program.

Another struggle was the ongoing fear of the members of Salem worrying about the attendees of Grace Oasis ruining their “little Salem”.

The final struggle Pastor Sonnemann listed was getting the attendees of Grace Oasis to gain some ownership in the program. Unfortunately that has often resulted in “empire building.” Certain individuals would believe that they were in charge over everything and everyone. They would treat other attendees as lower than they were. It drove some regular attendees away for a while.

**What are the current struggles of Grace Oasis?**

One regular attendee is a sexual predator.

**What effect has Grace Oasis had on you personally?**

“It’s shown me that a lot of people who have been rejected by society, who have been looked down upon by so called well-functioning people, aren’t as scary as they might appear to be when they’re on the street. They are hurting people who are looking for help. When Jesus was eating with the tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes and thieves, they were not people who had their act back together yet or were totally functional. They were people who were still struggling with their sins and addictions. Jesus met them where they were. And as Pastor Phil [Merten] says, ‘we are all recovering from something whether it is a messy addiction or a nice clean sin.’”

**What effect has Grace Oasis had on Salem Lutheran Church?**

“It is testing the tolerance of the congregation. It makes people more aware of the struggles of other people as we welcome them into the church. “The church still has more ground left to cover here on accepting the new faces of Salem.”

**What warnings/advice would you give a church planning to start a Grace Oasis program?**

“Salem talked about starting the Grace Oasis program. However, no one really knew exactly what to expect. We could have done a lot more to educate the congregation about the characteristics of addicted people and how to respond to them.”

“Be aware that dysfunctional people don’t right away become functional. Their dysfunctions are going to affect your life as a congregation. There are things that you can do to prepare for this through education.”

“There should be a governing board to deal with problems that arise right up front. Don’t let them fester.”

**How would you educate the congregation?**

“WLCFS [Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services] has alcohol counselors. I’d invite them to come in and run some sessions.”

“Take interested people over to a Bible study run by WLIM [Wisconsin Lutheran Institutional Ministries] for people struggling with addictions. Get them mingled in to experience it.”

“Go to recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, etc.”

“Leaders of the congregation have to show no fear even if they are afraid. Otherwise the congregation will pick up on that fear and not be accepting of the program.”

“Communicate, educate and keep on keeping on. Don’t give up. It’s not a picnic but it’s definitely a blessing.”

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**Questions for a Helper at Grace Oasis**

Time on the video: 1:59:39 until 2:14:14

**What is your name?**

Dianna Zastrow

**How did you first hear about Grace Oasis?**

There was a notice in Dianna’s church bulletin at Saint Paul’s Lutheran in Brownsville, Wisconsin, announcing that the Grace Oasis program was starting. For about five years, just Dianna and her husband, Don, volunteered once a month at Grace Oasis. In early 2000, some friends asked Dianna and Don if they would be willing to take other people from the Brownsville church with them. Currently, there are seven people from Brownsville, Wisconsin, who come once a month. They make a meal for about 50 people in their homes and then bring it to Grace Oasis. The funding for their meals primarily comes from donations by their church. These seven helpers donate their time preparing, serving and cleaning up the meal, the gas money to make the two and a half hour round trip and any other last minute expenditures to make their meals a tasty treat.

No one from Grace Oasis has ever traveled to the church in Brownsville. Yet, the church and especially these dedicated volunteers continue to generously support Grace Oasis. Occasionally, a thank you card is sent around during one of the recovery meetings. All the attendees express their heart-felt thanks for all that these volunteers have done to help them. This card along with all the smiles and hugs these volunteers receive fuels them to come again.

**How long have you personally been helping out at Grace Oasis?**

Eight years

**What was your experience at your first meeting as a helper?**

There were only a few attendees there at her first meeting. The attendees were very friendly and appreciative of the help.

**What was difficult about attending Grace Oasis?**

“It wasn’t difficult to sit down next to someone who was struggling with addictions. It was a safe environment. It was difficult finding something to talk about at first. Ordinarily, someone would ask, ‘what do you do for a living?’ or ‘where do you live?’ Often these questions do not apply to Grace Oasis attendees.”

**What is your fondest memory of Grace Oasis?**

“There are so many people over the years that you got to know and care for. Some aren’t here anymore. You wonder what happened. You don’t know. But when people come back, you are so happy! If they don’t come back, you hope that the seed is planted. You never really know if you are making a difference in these people’s lives. You hope you are. You just have to show that you care.”

**How has helping out at Grace Oasis changed your life spiritually?**

“It has made me count my blessings over and over. It has helped me to share the good news of Jesus outside of Grace Oasis.”

**What advice would you give a person who is thinking helping at Grace Oasis program?**

“Don’t be afraid. Pray. Just be open and friendly. You don’t have to say much and they’re happy that some is paying attention to them. And treat them as an equal by not looking down on them.”

**What advice would you give a church thinking about starting a Grace Oasis program?**

“In the beginning, everyone is eager to help with the program. However, you need to have a core of dedicated people, some continuity, so they can get to know the attendees. It’s important to know their names and what the person is struggling with or focused on in their lives.”

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**December 5, 2003 Grace Oasis Meeting  
at Salem Lutheran Church**

Time on the video: 2:14:14 until 3:04:46

Led by: Pastor Phil Merten