

*A Half-Century of Grace at
Riverview Evangelical Lutheran Church
Appleton, Wisconsin
1945-1998*

by Charlie Vannieuwenhoven

*Professor James Korthals
Senior Church History Paper
April 24, 1998*

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)" So many changes have taken place in our world since the time when the Apostle Paul closed his letter to the Corinthian congregation with this wish. There is one thing, though, that has remained constant throughout the centuries-that grace which our God has poured out on his people. This undeserved love of God has kept his church constant and founded securely on his Holy Word through difficult times. God has richly provided for his flock and sustained his children. By means of his Word and Sacraments, the Lord has brought people to faith. God's grace led him to offer to the sinful people of this world the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. The joy which this wonderful gift has produced in the hearts of God's people has led them to share that grace with friends and acquaintances and to pass the wonderful news of Christ crucified down from generation to generation. Living 2,000 years after the time of Christ, we can look back at the history of the New Testament Church and give thanks to God that through the centuries he has sustained his pure Word we might be able to know of Christ's works for us.

I have been privileged to be a member of Riverview Evangelical Lutheran Church in Appleton, Wisconsin for a major part of my life. I thank God that over 50 years ago he led a core group of people in Appleton to come together to worship him and to establish a church to reach out to others with the saving message of Jesus Christ. The joy and thanks that these founding brothers and sisters had knowing that God had opened the kingdom of Heaven for them caused them to found a church where they could share that message with those around them and those who would come after them. In so many ways, the members of Riverview Lutheran Church in 1998 have benefited from the faithfulness and diligence of these people. It is easy forget about the hard work our ancestors and predecessors went through to start a church and keep it going. It is easy forget how we or those before us struggled through troublesome times to be faithful to God's and keep the church together. As faithful as these people were, they could not have kept this church going by themselves.

As God's grace can be traced through the history of the Church, so his grace can be traced throughout the history of Riverview Lutheran Church. The Lord has richly blessed and sustained his people in the 53 years of Riverview's existence, through the good times and the bad. For all the grace

our Lord has shown to Riverview Lutheran Church and its members, may he be praised. As we take time to study the history of Riverview Lutheran Church, may our God convince us, as he convinced those who have gone before us, that grace received is grace to share.

I. God's Grace in the Early Years

In 1944, Appleton, Wisconsin was home to four Wisconsin Synod Lutheran congregations-St. Matthew's, Mount Olive, Bethany and St. Paul's. All of these congregations were located on the north side of the Fox River, which now runs almost directly through the middle of the city. At the conference of the Northern Wisconsin Mission Board in the winter of 1944 held at St. Paul, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, the need was voiced that a mission church be started on the south side the Fox River in Appleton. The south side of Appleton was expanding tremendously. The opportunities for outreach were plentiful. At this time, there was only one church on the south side of the river, Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The Mission Board recognized the need and the opportunities which this area presented for a new mission church. It instructed Pastor Paul Bergman of Menasha, representing the Mission Board, to have the growing south side canvassed to see what, if any, interest there was in starting a new Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church.

On January 29, 1945, Pastor Bergman along with two other pastors from Appleton, Pastor A.F. Herzfeldt and Pastor A. Geiger, began the work of canvassing the south side of Appleton. In their canvassing, they found that there was a considerable number of people interested in starting a new mission church in that area. On Sunday, March 11, 1945, a nucleus of 36 south side Lutherans (21 families), some members of St. Paul and Mount Olive who lived on the south side of Appleton, gathered at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Kuhn at 1422 River Drive "to promote the organization of a Lutheran mission".¹ At this meeting, the above pastors reported to this small nucleus that there was a great interest shown in starting a mission church and stressed the urgent need to continue the work they had begun. A number of decisions were made at this first meeting. Already, a Planning Committee was delegated to start the project of a new church building and to find a possible site on which to build this

¹"25th Anniversary", a brochure celebrating the 25th anniversary of Riverview Evangelical Lutheran Church.

church. This committee was chaired by Herman Zschaechner and consisted of Herman Rodencal, Henry Kuhn, Earl Wichmann, and Clyde Demand. This small group of Christians decided to hold their first service the following week at the same place. One week later on March 18, the first service was held with 44 people in attendance at residence of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Kuhn with Pastor Herzfeldt presiding. For the next seven weeks, this newly formed group of Christians gathered at the same house to worship their Lord for his wonderful goodness.

It is truly amazing to see how God blessed this little group over the following weeks. So many exciting things were happening in the life of this young church. Each week brought something new for these Christians. By the grace of God, this little nucleus of people, which started with 36 people, steadily increased. At the Palm Sunday service on March 25, 45 people were in attendance. By the Easter Sunday service the following week, April 1, that number had increased to 52 people. On April 8, Ellen Ann Poppe, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Poppe, was the first child to be baptized in this group. (Throughout the first year, the Lord brought nine other babies into his flock through baptism.) April 15, brought even more excitement as Pastor Ernst Lehninger was installed as Riverview's first full time pastor in a service held across town in St. Matthew's Lutheran Church. On April 22, Pastor Lehninger preached his first sermon to a group numbering 70 people, all gathered in the Kuhn's basement. Pastor Lehninger recalled this exciting day, "I remember turning around from the altar in my first service in the Kuhn's basement and having to share a hymnal with Mrs. Frank (Mrs. Theodore Frank Sr). It was so packed in that basement, that people had to sit on the wash tub and the steps to be able to fit. The Lord really blessed us in those first years."²

Indeed, the Lord did bless these people. Their numbers were growing so fast that an informal meeting was held to discuss the possibility of holding two services. The decision was made to continue holding one service at the Kuhn residence and to begin holding another service at the home of Milton and Gertrude Theimer located at 915 East Fremont Street on May 13. Ninety-one people were present between the two services that day. Pastor Lehninger related some of the jokes that came about because the Theimer's house was located right next to the ninth hole of Reid Municipal Golf Course. These

²Interview with Pastor Ernst Lehninger.

jokes, referring to the Theimer's house as the 19th hole or referring to the golf course as the perfect place for council meetings, helped to show the light-hearted, yet enthusiastic attitude of this group. God had set the hearts of his people on fire with the great news that Jesus Christ was their Savior. It did not matter to them that they had to worship in a home of one of the members or hold council meetings at Pastor Lehninger's apartment. God had brought them together to share and encourage each other with his Word and they were extremely enthusiastic. Pastor Lehninger described the people with whom he was privileged to work as "fantastic, very enthusiastic". In fact, 53 years later, he said, "I still get excited thinking about those early days."³

This excitement which God had given to his people led them to start other things. Sunday school was started for the children almost immediately. Twenty-six children attended the first Sunday School classes, a number which doubled within the first year of the church's existence. In those early months until a church was built, the Sunday School classes were held in the Theimer's garage, in their yard and at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Frank, Sr. Many times we take for granted the blessings which God has given to us, until we stop to remember how we started out. It matters not where the Word is taught, but only that the Word is taught in its truth and purity. God blessed these members with the desire to teach that Word to each other and to their children wherever it was they could do that.

May 20, 1945 is a significant date in the history of Riverview Evangelical Lutheran Church. On this date, the early members held an organizational meeting at the Theimer's home and at this meeting made some important decisions. They voted to become a legally incorporated church body, to become a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and to formally recognize the call now officially given to Pastor Lehninger. They officially voted the name for their new church as Riverview Evangelical Lutheran Church. They elected the first official Church Council, consisting of Henry Kuhn-President, Raymond Loppnow-Secretary, Herman Rodencal-Financial Secretary, Herman Zschaechner-Treasurer, and Theodore Frank, Sr., Earl Wichmann and Carl Zuelzke-Trustees. On April 19, the Building Planning Committee had contacted Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tilly about an option on 2 3/4 acre lot located on Seymour Street. This option was presented to the congregation at this meeting and was

³Ibid.

selected as the site on which they would build a new church building. They entrusted the newly elected Trustees to acquire this piece of property. Because of a generous donation by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tilly, these men were able to acquire this property immediately. Sixteen charter voting members signed the constitution on that day. They were: Theodore Frank, Sr., Chester Peters, Earl Wichmann, Russell Antes, George Gambsky, Ray Loppnow, Henry Kuhn, Louis Tiedt, Milton Theimer, Carl Zuelzke, Carl Abig, Jr., Lester Poppe, Robert Tilly, Clyde Demand, Herman Rodencal, and Herman Zschaechner. By the one year anniversary, celebrated on May 26, 1946, the Lord had increased this group of believers to 141 souls, 81 communicants, 35 voting members, 15 lady members, 10 baptisms and 3 adult confirmations.

As Riverview Lutheran Church began to get off the ground, the first main project was to construct a building where they could worship. They recognized the need for a building both for practical purposes, i.e. worship, Sunday School, Bible Class, meetings, etc., and as a place to invite new people to join them for worship. Having purchased the 2 3/4 acre lot on Seymour street as early as June of 1945, the Building Planning Committee began to work at a plan for their new building with Edgar Stubenrauch, an architect from Sheboygan, Wisconsin. They soon began to realize that the price of a permanent building would be too high for this small group. They began to explore other options. Included in the many different options was the idea of building a Quonset hut chapel. The Quonset hut was a half-domed metal building used almost exclusively by military at that time, but it was cheap and economical. After discussing the many options, they finally decided to go ahead with the Quonset hut. Much of the construction was done by the members themselves. In all, the members donated over 2,000 hours of their time in the building of this facility. On December 8, 1946, the members of Riverview Lutheran Church dedicated the first civilian Quonset hut church in America to the Lord with services in both the morning and the evening. After twenty-one months of labor, the members of Riverview were finally able to worship in a building of their own.

Although this building was designed and built specifically for worship, it came to be used for many different functions. Almost every Friday night during those first years, a curtain was pulled across the front of the building to close off the altar area and the members met to enjoy a fish fry and a number of other different sorts of programs. Almost from the beginning, Riverview had an active Men's Club,

Ladies Guild and Youth program which involved most of the members in a number of different social and service-minded activities. All of these groups met at the newly constructed church building. Pastor Lehninger recalls, "Everybody was really enthusiastic. We had active clubs, guilds, councils and an active youth program. The kids loved meeting together." Truly the Lord had blessed these people by bringing them together to encourage each other and to share with each other the joy that they had in their Lord and Savior.

The growth in the number of members at Riverview during those first years came from a couple of different areas. Some people who lived on the south side of Appleton transferred to Riverview from the other Wisconsin Synod churches in town. Riverview had an active Evangelism program right from the start. Much of the Evangelism work that was done in those early years was done by the members sharing their faith with friends and acquaintances and inviting them to come to church. They also did a lot of canvassing going door to door. Almost every day, Pastor Lehninger would get on his bike and begin canvassing where he left off the from the previous day. He went right down the street one house after the other inviting people who had no church home to come to the services at Riverview. Some days he would have members join him, other days he would not. "The Lord really blessed our efforts in those early days. He had given us such a large harvest field, but it was a field that was ripe for the harvest."⁴ Within a few years they had been able to canvass the entire south side of Appleton. By May of 1950, the congregation had grown to 365 members, 242 communicant members and 101 voting members. At this time, Riverview was taken completely off mission status and became an entirely self-supporting congregation.

The Lord decided that it was time for a change at Riverview. In 1950, after faithfully serving the congregation for five years, the Lord led Pastor Lehninger to accept the call to serve at Grace Lutheran Church in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Pastor D.E. Hallemeier served Riverview as the vacancy pastor until the call was accepted to replace Pastor Lehninger. The vacancy was filled in early part of 1951 when Pastor Theodore J. Hartwig accepted the call to serve at Riverview.

⁴Ibid.

Pastor Theodore J. Hartwig was installed on February 11, 1951 as the second pastor of Riverview Lutheran Church. As the Lord had greatly blessed the ministry of Pastor Lehninger at Riverview, so he poured out his grace and blessed Riverview through the ministry of Pastor Hartwig. By 1950, it seemed initial excitement had tapered off some and there was a little lull in the outward growth of the church. Much of the attention of the members had become focused on building a permanent church building and parsonage on their property. Pastor Hartwig remembered a strong interest in the expansion of the physical plant and in acquiring the property adjacent to the golf course just to the north of the church's property. So during those early to middle years of the 1950's, Riverview made a determined effort to achieve these two goals. (The details of these endeavors will be covered in more detail in the next section of this paper.) As Riverview celebrated its Tenth Anniversary on May 8, 1955, its members looked forward toward the upcoming building projects. Pastor Hartwig, however, would not be around to see the completion of these projects. On September 12, 1955, he accepted a call to serve as a Professor at Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota and left Riverview. The lull in outward growth during the first half of the 1950's is evident in the statistics recorded for the anniversary of the church. In May of 1955, Riverview had 438 members, 292 communicant members, and 108 voting members.

Pastor T. W. Redlin filled the vacancy at Riverview until the fall of 1955 when Pastor Frederick E. Thierfelder, who had been serving at Immanuel Lutheran Church of Black Creek, Wisconsin accepted the call to serve at Riverview. Pastor Thierfelder was installed on November 13, 1955 at the 10:15 a.m. service.

II. God's Grace Leads a Growing Congregation into Expanded Facilities

Pastor Thierfelder was installed at Riverview in the middle of the building project. His first job was to help the congregation finish the project which had been started many years earlier. The church was growing so fast that it needed adequate facilities for its pastor and its members. The next twenty years saw tremendous growth in the facilities at Riverview. Some of this project had been started nine years earlier. The Building Planning Committee that had been established in May of 1945 had decided to build the Quonset hut as a temporary worship facility of the church until they could afford a

permanent facility. In November of 1946, as the building of this temporary facility was in the process, the congregation purchased a parsonage on South Lawe Street in Appleton. Although this house adequately housed the Pastor and his family, the members felt that this would be sufficient only until the congregation could build a parsonage on its own property. Both of these projects, a permanent worship facility and parsonage, would be undertaken during the 1950's.

In April of 1951, a planning committee headed by Henry Kuhn was appointed to determine the location of the proposed parsonage and church on the property. Although this committee determined the sites for both of these buildings, the plans were tabled until funds could be found to pay for their construction. On October 20, 1953, the congregation began to make plans for a permanent building. It appointed a new committee to oversee the various aspects of building new facilities. In a letter from the Promotion Committee of the Building Committee passed out to the congregation at services on January 17, 1954, the Chairman of this Committee, Lawrence Below, stated the objective of the Building Committee. He wrote, "In October of 1953, the congregation voted the President the power to appoint a building committee to check on the various phases of construction relative to our much needed church." This newly formed Building Committee, headed by Herman Rodencal, sometimes meeting once a week, worked diligently at gathering information on sizes, seating capacity, types of structures and approximate costs. They also gathered as much information as possible as to how to raise money to finance such a project. It was important to this committee that in every decision that was made, "there be a harmonious feeling among all members".⁵

On January 19, 1954 at the quarterly voter's meeting, this committee brought the question to the congregation of whether to engage a professional fund raising organization to direct a fundraising drive or to do it themselves. After much discussion on this matter, the congregation voted against having an outside fund raising organization involved in raising money for new buildings. Pastor Hartwig wholeheartedly agreed with this decision. He stated his agreement publicly in a letter to the congregation dated January 21, 1954 saying, "Giving money to church is a matter of love to Christ. Let

⁵January 17, 1954 Letter to the Congregation.

Christ convince us to give, no more ought to be necessary, and then our giving will also be in the right spirit..."

Having arrived at this decision, the congregation needed to develop a plan of how they would raise the money to finance these new facilities. They estimated the total cost of a new church at \$75,000. They decided that a goal of at least \$50,000 needed to be achieved over a three year period to be able to go ahead with the building project. The committee's plan to raise this money was to begin a campaign with a kick-off banquet at church and follow that banquet up with visits to every member by volunteer workers. The Kick-off Banquet was held at the church on March 14, 1954 with Pastor Erwin Scharf of Rhinelander present as the motivational speaker. The response of the members was tremendous. The goal of \$50,000 was achieved by January 1, 1956, in just over a year and a half.

During this period, the question of a parsonage again came up. There was a debate about which building should be built first, the church or the parsonage. From the minutes of a meeting held on December 12, 1955:

The committee was of the opinion that we must build the church within the next few years, but at the same time, we must not let the parsonage question be tabled indefinitely. It was suggested that we could perhaps borrow from the building fund for parsonage construction and repay this back from current revenues, or borrow from a bank to put up the parsonage, make payments on the parsonage from current revenues and then pay off the parsonage loan with a part of the proceeds of a first mortgage loan when the church would be completed and the old parsonage sold. Doing this would permit us to get a new parsonage in 1956 while at the same time, we could be giving consideration to the preliminary phases of our church construction program.

In January of 1956, the congregation decided to proceed with the latter and to give the plans to a builder and architect. The Building Committee contacted Tom Kemp of Steffan & Kemp Architects of Milwaukee and asked him about the possibility of working on a design for both the parsonage and the church. They met with Mr. Kemp on January 26, 1956 and discussed many different aspects of the buildings. As they talked with Mr. Kemp, they took into consideration a number of different aspects about the church, including seating capacity-both regular and overflow, size and number of meeting rooms, a kitchen, basement size and layout, Sunday School facilities and the degree of conformity between the church and the parsonage. They decided to proceed immediately with plans for the

parsonage and to begin preliminary plans for the church. It was the goal of the committee to begin construction on parsonage within 60 days of this meeting.

To get an idea of various church designs, structures, styles and modern trends in construction, Pastor Thierfelder, Chairman Rodencal and five other members of the Building Committee went on a church viewing trip in late February of 1956. These men reported to the rest of the Building Committee on March 4, 1956 about what they had discovered on their trip. Considerable favor was voiced for the design of the "modernistic-gothic Bashford Methodist Church in Madison".⁶ On March 9, they discussed with Mr. Kemp the possibility of his company designing the same type of church building for a price in line with the Madison church, which cost \$135,000 to build in 1954. Mr. Kemp agreed that it was a lot of church for the money and suggested that maybe the architects who had designed that church would be proper architects to contact. The Building Committee met with Mr. McMullen of Weiler & Strang & Associates of Madison the following week. The committee liked what they heard and asked Mr. McMullen to bring slides of that church before the congregation at a meeting the following week. At that meeting, held on March 22, the congregation appeared to be in general agreement that a church similar to the Bashford Methodist Church of Madison would best meet their needs.

Mr. McMullen drew up a preliminary sketch of a church and fellowship hall sketched in behind and to the west of the Quonset hut and with a parsonage on the southwest corner of the property. He presented this sketch to the congregation in early April, 1956. He had also drawn up a rough sketch of a four bedroom parsonage, but with an indicated cost of \$30,000, which was felt by many to be greatly disturbing. One of the committee members, Lawrence Radloff, who was a builder by trade, offered to draw up his own plans and have them ready in a week. The congregation liked the plans that he drew up and decided that Mr. Radloff and Ed Krueger should figure out the price of his design. They arrived at a price of \$27,000, \$3,000 cheaper than the previous design, but still felt by many "to be too rich for our blood".⁷ Their idea was to have Mr. Radloff's crew get the house under roof and then let the congregation do whatever work it could, like the lathing and insulating, before he would come with a plastering and finishing crew. The committee felt that they would not save that much money by having

⁶Building Committee Minutes, March 4, 1956.

⁷Building Committee Minutes, April 16, 1956.

donated labor. They felt that additional time would be consumed and that such labor, or lack of it, would be a source of grief to the committee. Although there was little enthusiasm about bringing the figure of \$27,000 to the voters, they decided that this would be the best avenue for the congregation to take.

Before this figure was brought before the congregation, Mr. Radloff did some redrawing and presented a floor plan with four bedrooms and a single car garage. The plan met with favor, but it was pointed out that this was the absolute minimum they could have for a parsonage. He felt that it could be done for \$25,000, the price the committee had suggested prior to any plans being made. The congregation decided to go ahead with this project on April 29, 1956. The project was completed by the middle of summer, and the new parsonage was dedicated on July 29, 1956.

All during the time when the parsonage was being planned and built, the members of the Building Planning committee met periodically with the architect concerning the plan of a permanent church building. When they had made the final sketches to the plans in November 1956, the congregation passed the necessary recommendations so that the borrowing of money and the construction of the church could begin at any time. With bids totaling \$117, 889, the congregation hired William Tiede & Sons as the general contractor. The ground-breaking ceremony was held on November 11, 1956 with Pastor Thierfelder turning over the first shovel of dirt. The cornerstone-laying ceremony was held on March 10, 1957 and the church itself was completed by late June of 1957. On July 21, 1957, the members of Riverview Lutheran Church and members from neighboring WELS churches gathered to dedicate this beautiful new worship facility to the Lord. What a glorious day it was! Just twelve years after beginning from scratch, the members of Riverview had their own permanent church building in which they could worship their Lord and Savior.

With a beautiful facility in which to worship, the congregation experienced tremendous growth over the next decade. By 1968, the membership of Riverview totaled 725 baptized souls, 499 communicant members and 176 voting members. With this steady increase of membership, a greater need arose for ministry towards the young children of the congregation. The church had an active Sunday School, Youth Group and even a Lutheran Pioneer program which had begun in 1964. In spring of 1968, a fact finding committee was appointed to gather information towards the feasibility of

establishing a Christian Day School at Riverview. This committee also was given the responsibility of determining what additions would be necessary to the church building to accommodate an elementary school. At the time this committee was appointed, the rooms of the church building included the church proper, the kindergarten and hearth rooms, the kitchen and the fellowship hall, with the entrance to the fellowship hall through what is now known as the counting room. After reporting to the majority of Riverview's members in several group meetings, the congregation voted by a great majority on May 5 of that year to begin a Christian Day School for its children. Another meeting was held on May 28 where the congregation decided to begin classes for kindergarten, first and second grades the following September.

That summer, the Hearth room and the Sunday School room were remodeled to make it possible for classes to be held in them. Riverview Lutheran School opened its doors on September 3, 1968, beginning with a special church service to praise God for this gift he had given to them. Ms. Carol Kirschke, a graduate of Dr. Martin Luther College the previous spring, had a total of 18 children in her classroom, 9 in first grade and 9 in second grade. Mrs. Ruth Schmidt, a member of Riverview, had 8 kindergartners in her classroom. The rather large school which we now know began with just a few classes and a handful of children. God blessed this group of children and their teachers and the members of Riverview by giving them the necessary leadership, finances and facilities to continue to build the school into a full elementary school.

As one looks back at the beginning of Riverview Lutheran School, what becomes readily evident is the strong leadership provided by Pastor Thierfelder. Christian education was a high priority for him. Pastor Thierfelder's love for children was evident in his enthusiasm for the school. Some have called him the Father of Riverview Lutheran School. So strongly did Pastor Thierfelder view the importance of a Christian education that he would not let anyone use the excuse that they could not find a way to get their children to school. To solve this problem, Pastor Thierfelder bought a van specifically with the purpose of transporting children to and from school. Every day, he picked children up in the morning to take them to school and then drove them home in the afternoon. He worked diligently and faithfully in his service to the Lord to provide Christian education for the children of Riverview. During that first

year of the school Pastor Thierfelder prayed almost every Sunday for the school. Each Sunday he prayed:

O Lord Jesus Christ, who wouldst have all children come unto Thee, we praise Thee that Thou hast guided us by Thy Word and filled us with love for Thee and Thy children, and hast been pleased to look mercifully upon us, causing a Lutheran school to be established among us. Enable us all, we beseech Thee, to realize the great blessings that can grow out of a Christian day school, that we may put forth our best efforts for its maintenance and faithfully employ this agency for the training of our children. Give us wisdom and insight so that we may do nothing amiss. Give us willingness and zeal to extend Thy kingdom. Give us love to bind us together in our common service. Bless all who teach and bless all who learn in Riverview Lutheran School, so that Thy name may be glorified. Hear us, Lord Jesus, for in Thy name we pray. Amen.⁸

His efforts were not alone. Without the support of the entire congregation, the school would never have succeeded. Riverview Lutheran School would never have gotten off the ground if it were not for the dedicated members and parents whom the Lord also led to see the need and importance of Christian education. Mrs. Ruth Schmidt remarked,

I think there were many members that desired a Christian education for their children, but few had the actual push to get things started in a practical way. Most families who wanted their children to have a Christian education would send them to a day school of a sister congregation or simply join a congregation that did have a Christian day school. It took Pastor Thierfelder to show the steps that needed to be taken and that these steps were in our grasp.⁹

May we give our praise to God that he provided Riverview with dedicated called workers and members, especially during this time in the church's history, who worked diligently to provide a place where the children of Riverview could be taught the Word of God every day in all its truth and purity.

The goal of the congregation was to work its way into a full elementary school of grades K-8. To be able to grow to a school of this size, proper facilities were needed. Throughout the first part of that first year of the school, the Building Committee worked with the architectural firm Boettcher & Ginnow to have plans ready by October to expand the facilities to house a fully functioning grade school. William Tiede & Sons were hired as the contractors for the school addition and ground

⁸Typed prayer from Pastor Thierfelder saved by Mrs. Ruth Schmidt.

⁹Notes received from Mrs. Schmidt.

breaking for the new school took place on November 17, 1968. It was generally pretty busy around Riverview during that year. With school in progress and construction underway, it was an exciting time for everyone. Many changes were taking place. Mrs. Schmidt recalls a nice-sized spruce tree growing approximately in the middle of the east school entry, almost where the present trophy case is located. The tree was cut down in construction, and used in the church that Christmas as the Christmas tree.¹⁰

The new school was finished and ready for classes by the following fall. This new facility which included four classrooms, a library, an office, restrooms and two large storage areas was completed for a cost of \$110,000 and dedicated on August 17, 1969. That year, the 1969-70 school year, the congregation called Mrs. Joyce Baer to teach kindergarten while Ms. Kirschke taught first, second, and the added third grades. The following year, Riverview added grades four and five and called Mr. David Wendler to be its first principle. In 1972, grades six and seven were added and by the 1972-73 school year, Riverview added the eighth grade to have a fully functioning K-8 elementary school of 121 students. In June of 1973, Riverview Lutheran School graduated its first eighth grade class of nine students.

This period of Riverview was truly an exciting and joyous time at Riverview. This church which had begun with a nucleus of 36 people had grown to over 800 members. It had its own church and school buildings and had built its own parsonage. The faithful members of Riverview excitedly heard the word of God and taught it to their children. As these many things were happening at Riverview, as it was growing and expanding, it experienced its first major setback. On July 29, 1976, our Lord called Pastor Thierfelder to himself in heaven. Late in the afternoon of July 29th, Pastor Thierfelder experienced a major heart attack through which our Lord took him from the church militant and brought him to join the church triumphant. Pastor Thierfelder was a tremendous blessing to Riverview. His 21 years as pastor of Riverview places him as the longest serving pastor in Riverview's history. He helped build the church, the parsonage, and the school. Through his faithful work, the church membership grew steadily. The Lord used this faithful man to share with many people the wonderful news of salvation. Through the diligent work of Pastor Thierfelder the Lord guided many of his people safely

¹⁰Ibid.

through the trials of this life to the joys of eternal life. To God be the glory for all of Pastor Thierfelder's efforts.

III. God's Grace Leads a Growing Church to Expand its Programs

When Riverview installed Pastor Lyle Luchterhand as its fourth pastor in October of 1976, the entire focus of its ministry had changed. Until this time, Riverview was growing both in buildings and in numbers. The major efforts of the congregation had been focused on Evangelism. By the end of 1979, the congregation's growth began to slow and level off at 976 souls. The congregation had expanded its facilities to accommodate that large number of people, but it was now faced with the dilemma of how to minister to all of them. Without forgetting about Evangelism, the main focus of Riverview's ministry had turned to nurturing the faith of those whom God had called to faith. In the late 1970's, Riverview sought ways it could expand its ministry by adding a number of different programs. There was a great deal of activity at Riverview. The congregation's leaders attended leadership training classes and began short-term and long-term planning for the congregation's ministry. Bible classes increased. At one point, 4-5 Bible classes were running each week with up to 164 attending "Life with God" classes.¹¹ The school had become well established and reached its peak attendance of 148 students during these years. Various committees were formed to expand the congregation's ministry. In addition to these, the congregation had an active Ladies Guild and Altar Guild as well as a Couples club.

Many activities were taking place in the school also. In 1979-80, Riverview opened the first WELS¹² Pre-school in the Fox River Valley under the direction of Mrs. Joyce Baer. In that same year, David Wendler accepted a call to teach elsewhere and Jonathan Winkel accepted the call to replace him as Riverview's principle and upper grades teacher. A Christian Education Association was established as well as an Athletic Association. The Lutheran Boy and Girl Pioneer programs were still running strong. With everything that was happening around Riverview, the work load was becoming too great for one pastor.

¹¹Notes received from Pastor Lyle Luchterhand.

¹²WELS-Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

The leaders of Riverview had to decide what could be done to help Pastor Luchterhand minister to the members of Riverview. For a few years, the congregation provided preaching help for him by having the pastors serving at Fox Valley Lutheran High School preach once a month, but this only gave Pastor Luchterhand limited help. In 1983, the congregation took a major step in getting added help for Pastor Luchterhand and in increasing its ministry efforts. The congregation felt that the best way it could best meet the needs of all its members was to request that a vicar be assigned from the Seminary to Riverview.

That request was granted by the District President of the Northern Wisconsin District and the Assignment Committee assigned Mark Albrecht as Riverview's first vicar. He was installed into his office at Riverview in August of 1983. This program brought great variety to the ministry of Riverview. Pastor Luchterhand reflected on the value of the vicar program to his ministry.

People love variety. The vicar program brought variety to the ministry at Riverview. Every year a new vicar. More than that, I believe that Riverview always had one of the more talented men in each class. Every vicar we had was extremely faithful and hard-working. They had to be good, because they wore two hats. Our vicar was shared with FVL (Fox Valley Lutheran High School). Besides serving at Riverview, they also taught religion at FVL.¹³

Having a vicar program at Riverview proved to be good for the spirit and moral of the congregation. In those early years, it helped to give the people of Riverview another spiritual leader. But the help that the vicars were able to provide to Pastor Luchterhand was limited. Since the vicar was shared with Fox Valley Lutheran High School, Riverview did not receive the full help it needed. Because the men were faithful and hard working, they did help to decrease the load somewhat, but their work load had to be kept lighter because of their duties at the high school. From August 1983 to August of 1992 nine faithful men served Riverview as vicar. 1986 was the last year that Riverview's vicar doubled as a teacher at FVL. After that, these men served full-time as assistants to the pastors at Riverview. In addition to their other duties, the vicars especially became the overseers of the youth program at Riverview, teaching Teen Bible Class on Sunday mornings and being in charge of the

¹³Notes received from Pastor Luchterhand.

Lutheran Youth Fellowship group at church. This provided young leadership for the teens and freed some of the time for the pastors to carry out other areas of their work.

IV. A Growing Congregation Faces Turmoil

Although many programs at Riverview were expanding and many of its members were taking active roles in the ministry of Riverview, Riverview was headed for some rocky times. Both the church and school hit their peak attendance by 1979 and were beginning to experience losses in membership. Underneath the flurry of activity, a problem was beginning to fester. In 1985, this problem was brought out into the open when Riverview's fifth and sixth grade teacher, Ken Fogelsonger, was charged with 12 counts of first-degree sexual assault involving five of his former students, dating back to the 1980-81 school year. In 1986, he pleaded no-contest to four of the counts and was sentenced to one year in prison and fifteen years of probation. Because Ken had been well-liked and because of his strong interest in the activities of the church, many were shocked and dismayed. Many experienced anger and shame. Some members were disturbed by the way the situation had been handled. Pictures of the school and church nightly were displayed on the television. Until this point in the church's history, it had never experienced any type of public turmoil. The members of Riverview until this time had not had to handle any situation like this and were not sure how to react. The membership and church attendance dropped some. The inactive members for the most part remained status quo, now having an excuse to stay away from the church. Approximately 8-10 families left the church because of this incident.

God used this incident to bring the members of Riverview together. Though the inactive members remained status quo, the active members of Riverview began to draw together around the Word of God. Bill Shaw, a member of Riverview since October of 1966, states, "Approximately 70% of the remaining active membership really looked to the Lord for comfort and direction."¹⁴ The healing process was slow. Although some of the school officials had some knowledge of the activities while they were happening, nothing was brought out into the open until after Ken was charged. This caused a

¹⁴Notes received from Bill Shaw.

lack of trust for some of the called workers of Riverview. It took some time for the members to straighten out the facts and sort through their feelings. It took some time to rebuild the lost trust and respect. But under the direction of the Lord, the members who remained at Riverview began to rebound. Jerry Glaze, also a member of Riverview, noticed the way that this situation brought the people of Riverview together and how they worked their way through this problem. He said,

As the issue started to wane and when the departure of the families was completed, the congregation and school did rebound. Working with togetherness to build a new foundation of trust, everyone seemed to put the matter aside as past history. The test of faith definitely established new character in our congregation...The hand of the Lord was working through this event to strengthen the church and school as everyone worked together in action and prayer, helping to heal the wounds.¹⁵

Feeling that a new pastor might help the congregation break with the past and get a new start, Pastor Luchterhand took a call to serve in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. In March of 1986, Jim Cloute was installed as the pastor of Riverview and brought with him a new optimism for the future and a renewed spirit of enthusiasm in the congregation. The excitement and enthusiasm brought by Pastor Cloute helped to heal the wounds in the members and to produce a new zeal within them. Bill Shaw commented about that time when Pastor Cloute first came to Riverview:

Jim Cloute brought a whole new level of enthusiasm and dedication to the congregation in 1986. He was extremely sociable and concerned about everyone. Both he and Mrs. Cloute were extremely well-liked. Church attendance increased about 40%. People liked his sermons and the new things he added to the worship service. We were becoming a very enthusiastic congregation. We were trying many new things in worship and church/school events. The church choir increased in numbers and did many new hymns in our worship services. Volunteerism for church and school functions was high.¹⁶

For two years, Pastor Cloute inspired the people of Riverview through his ministry. He established a bond of trust with the members and his zeal for the Lord's work gained the respect of the congregation. His love for people and the Word of God drew the people close to him, closer to each other, and most importantly closer to the Lord. Many had let the previous problem remain in the past

¹⁵Notes received from Jerry Glaze, member at Riverview.

¹⁶Notes received from Bill Shaw.

and began to look forward again with optimism. Pastor Cloute led the congregation to explore new areas of music for worship and let them to try different worship methods. The group of Christians at Riverview began to move forward as a congregation under the leadership of Pastor Cloute.

In March of 1988, the enthusiasm at Riverview and trust for Pastor Cloute which he had established with the members of Riverview was crushed. On March 14, 1988, Pastor Cloute admitted to stealing money from the offering envelopes and was asked to resign from his office. It was in early 1987 that Roger Kusserow, Financial Secretary of the congregation, and Robert Becker, who kept all the financial records at Riverview, began to notice discrepancies in the weekly offering envelope totals. In reviewing the records, they noticed that this had taken place as early as October 1986. Pastor Cloute resigned as pastor at Riverview and in May of that year was indicted for theft. Although only \$3,867 could be documented as missing, it is possible that a total of over \$15,000 had been stolen during this time. In addition to this charge of theft, other incidences occurred during his ministry at Riverview that help to completely discredit Pastor Cloute before the congregation. On September 30, 1987, Pastor Cloute had been arrested on the charge of Operating a vehicle While Intoxicated. He had lied to the Church Council and to the members of Riverview making up false stories about what really had happened. When he was convicted in December, the whole story came out. This man who had been so faithful to his work and to his Lord had betrayed the confidence and the trust of the people at Riverview.

When all of this became public knowledge, the congregation was in shock. The feelings of the members ranged from disbelief to hatred. Many asked, "Why us again?" (Referring to the previous incident.) There were some members who blamed God for the troubles at Riverview and left the church for good. Many had problems understanding how a man who was God's representative could give them communion and then steal from the Lord. The people of Riverview really had to struggle with the thoughts of how an incident like this with a called worker could happen again. These problems plagued the members of Riverview for some time.

One would think that another event such as this one that caused such an uproar in the church would tear the church apart. This was not the case. The leaders and members of the church had already dealt with a public issue such as this and were much more prepared to handle it. As soon as the information broke, the Church Council presented all the information it had to the congregation so that

nothing was left uncovered. Giving the members this information proved to be tremendously helpful in sorting through their feelings. Although both of these events hurt many, if not most of the members at Riverview, the Lord's gracious hand remained with them and led them to struggle and fight through these difficult times. Bill Shaw comments, "More than half of the remaining active membership turned to God in prayer for help and direction. We wanted to save Riverview! There was major concern and support for one another for those that stayed and prayed together."¹⁷ No matter what situations had happened, the Lord remained constant. Jerry Glaze commented on how he saw the Lord working through these times to rebuild Riverview congregation:

The beauty part of both cases was that the Word of God was never falsified in school and church. Both [men] were well-liked prior to their convictions and fulfilled the duties of God's workers with the Word. With the Word remaining strong through all of this, the rebuilding time was short and strengthened the congregation.¹⁸

V. God's Grace Sees His People Through Difficult Times

Our gracious Lord in heaven was indeed watching over his children at Riverview and guiding them through these difficult times. His faithfulness to his promise to watch over his people never faltered. Though the faith of the members of Riverview had been put to the test, the love of God persevered. He and His Word remained constant through both trying situations. The one rock that God's people could lean on and turn to when their whole world seemed to be turned upside down was the unfailing Word.

The effects of these situations can still be seen in the members of Riverview today. Many times a statement such as the previous one refers to the negative effects that continue until the present time. That is not the case in this situation. Most of the negative effects from both the Ken Fogelsonger situation and the Jim Cloute situation have been left in the past. In addition to his unfailing Word, God also blessed Riverview with a faithful pastor to help the members rebound and to help them refocus their attention on what is truly important, the strengthening of faith and the reaching out to the lost. In

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Notes received from Jerry Glaze.

August of 1988, Dennis Belter was installed as the new pastor at Riverview. With the help of the Holy Spirit, he has helped this group of God's children to heal their wounds and keep their eyes heavenward. Pastor Belter remembers the state of the congregation when he arrived in 1988, "They were a hurting group who needed the Gospel of peace to heal them. The Spirit did that, but it took time."¹⁹ Bill Shaw commented on the rebuilding of Riverview, "It has taken much prayer, patience and time. God very much tested the faith of the leaders of the congregation. They are much stronger in faith as a result of the circumstance. Pastor Belter with God's help has had to be very patient in re-building confidence and trust for the church. He has had to work quite hard to rebuild volunteerism in the church."²⁰ It has taken patience and time, but the renewal of God's people has come only through the grace of God.

By that grace, through the beautiful message of the Gospel, God has restored the zeal and enthusiasm at Riverview. That restoration could first be seen in the growing worship and Bible class attendance. Members were willing to make visits to other members to help them recover from their hurting. Out of this, a new determination was seen for outreach and seeking those members who had been delinquent in their church attendance. The members of Riverview would not let these incidents get them down. They were determined to fight through the difficulties and with God's help have begun to move forward.

The effort that the members of Riverview have made to move forward can be seen in the many advances that have occurred at Riverview in the last ten years. To begin with, the people of Riverview have again become more mission-minded. Local evangelism has taken a priority in the ministry at Riverview. One of the first things that the church did when Pastor Belter arrived was to adopt a mission statement. The mission of Riverview Lutheran Church is stated in this way:

We will bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people both within the church and outside of it.

We will proclaim in word and deed what God has done and continues doing for our salvation.

¹⁹Typed notes received from Pastor Belter.

²⁰Notes received from Bill Shaw.

We will invite others to believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and live as His disciples.

Putting this mission statement on paper has helped to remind the boards and committees at Riverview to keep their attention focused on the message of the Gospel. This mission statement helps to guide the decisions that are made at Riverview. It is a reminder both to the Board and Committee members and to the others in the congregation that God desires all men to be saved and that everything they do, personally or as a church body, is done for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

At almost the same time, the congregation changed the church's constitution. The new Constitution now empowers six different Boards instead of only an eight man council. This new step has empowered the leaders of the congregation to do their respective tasks and to accomplish the objectives that they set. Through the experiences of the past, the leaders of the church have gained tremendous maturity. Now that they have been empowered to do their job correctly, the benefits for Riverview have been endless. The different boards and committees can focus their attention on their assigned tasks. An elder committee has been trained and is dealing with the straying members of the congregation. An outreach team was started to follow up immediately with visits to those people who visit the Sunday services.

In 1992, Riverview was forced to take a step forward in advancing its ministry. When Riverview requested a vicar in the spring of 1991, they were told by the District Presidium of the Synod that because of the shortage of men, the vicar assigned to Riverview that year would be the last vicar assigned to them. Riverview was faced with the same situation they encountered in 1983. How could they best minister to the needs of all their members? After much prayerful consideration, the members of Riverview decided to call a second pastor to fill the void that would be made when the vicar, who was Robert Wasserman, would leave to go back to school. In the spring of 1992, they asked the Assignment Committee of the Wisconsin Synod to assign them a graduate from the Seminary. In May of 1992, Ross Else was assigned to serve as the Associate Pastor at Riverview.

Almost as soon as Pastor Else was ordained and installed in August of 1992, the congregation began to reap the benefits. Pastor Else had already been through his training and was more than ready to begin working on his own. Pastor Belter did not have to take the first few months to train or oversee

Pastor Else's ministry. The two men could begin immediately working together to minister to Riverview. Pastor Belter notes, "An immediate result was more Bible Classes could be held. There is more organization and continuity in youth work. We now have several adult instruction classes going. Marriage retreats are now possible for a weekend. Evangelism training and emphasis has increased. More counseling can be done. Straying members are being dealt with. Our ministry is pro-active and less re-active."²¹

Another event which helped to bring the members of Riverview closer together and generate enthusiasm happened in 1994. As Riverview neared its 50th Anniversary, the members began looking at ways in which they could show their appreciation to the Lord for the grace that he had shown them throughout the many years of the congregation's existence. The congregation decided that the best way they could show their appreciation to the Lord was by remodeling and updating its worship facility. The bids for this project were taken in the spring of 1994. The congregation hired P.G. Miron Construction to do the project at a cost of \$164,000. The 50th Anniversary booklet put out by Riverview at its 50th Anniversary service describes the work that was done on the worship area:

The project included a new sanctuary stage with the wall behind the Altar being drywalled and painted. All the walls were thin-coated with plaster and painted, new energy efficient windows were installed in the west wall of the church, new ceiling tile and lighting was installed. The church was further enhanced by new carpet, the woodwork was revarnished dark, a new sound system was added, and all the church furniture was replaced. In addition the members repainted the church hallway and restrooms, and installed carpet in the entrance hallway...Two of the highlights are the wonderful stained glass window at the front of our building and the wooden cross above the altar.²²

This event boosted the enthusiasm of the entire congregation. It involved many congregation members, both men and women, and seemed to reunite everyone as one in Christ. The newly remodeled sanctuary was dedicated to the Lord on September 25, 1994 in joy and thankfulness to the Lord for watching over his people for 50 years.

²¹Notes from Pastor Belter.

²²"50th Anniversary", a brochure put out by Riverview at its 50th Anniversary celebration.

As Riverview celebrated its 50th Anniversary on May 25, 1995, it truly had much to celebrate. Through the early years, through the new building projects, through nine pastors, through difficult and hard times, the Lord had kept his people safe. Never had his word faltered. Never did God turn his back on his people. God promised his disciples in the book of Matthew, *"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20) God has kept his promise. The history of Riverview Lutheran Church is evidence of this. The optimism and positive attitude of the congregation continues to increase every day. Riverview Lutheran Church is blessed to still have a number of charter members alive to bear witness to the Lord's grace. These wonderful people sacrificed much time and effort throughout the last 50 years to insure that their children and their friends had a place to worship the Lord. God gave these men and women the strength and the courage to continue through hardships and persevere through the difficult times. Our God is gracious to his people.

What does the future hold for Riverview Lutheran Church? Where is Riverview headed in the next few years? What challenges lie ahead for this congregation? Of course, only the Lord knows exactly where the church will go and what joys, successes or trials it will face. The leaders of Riverview, though, are looking to the future and planning for what they feel they will encounter in the upcoming years. Since the 50th Anniversary, Riverview received a new spiritual leader when Pastor Else took a call to serve an exploratory mission church in Farmington, New Mexico. When calling for a man to replace Pastor Else, the congregation changed the duties that were assigned to each pastor. The congregation decided to ask Pastor Belter to be the Senior Pastor and to call man to fill the role of Junior Pastor. After extending a number of calls which were returned, Pastor Lon Kuether accepted the call which Riverview extended to him to serve at Riverview.

At this present time, in spring of 1998, Riverview has a Space Needs Committee, a committee consisting of men and women, which is making an analysis of the space needs for the church and the school. A congregational survey shows a desire by many for two pastor's offices in the building, a need for more meeting rooms, library-computer room for the school, and a multi-purpose room to serve the church and school. More Bible classes are being planned, including lay led classes. Currently 13% of the members of Riverview attend Bible class. With the addition of more classes and teachers, the leaders are hoping to raise that percentage to 15%. The leaders of the congregation are organizing a

geographical cottage unit system of all members. They are hoping that the members will be able to gather in 5-7 family units to help the communication of the congregation. These cottage units hopefully will help the members stay better informed of things at church and give added encouragement to weak and straying brothers and sisters. There is talk of possible programs to increase membership by expanding the pre-school for 3-4 year olds, offering English as a second language for local Asians, and seeking better promotion of the school and the beautiful three acre campus.

The Lord has indeed blessed Riverview Lutheran Church and School and has blessed the members who attend there. It is amazing to see the hand of the Lord at work throughout the 53 years of the church. Our God who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth has provided for his people a beautiful church, diligent called workers, and faithful members to spread that saving message of salvation to all people. As Riverview Lutheran focuses its attention on the next 50 years, Lord-willing, it goes forward knowing that the Lord is with his people and is guiding the activities that occur there. Our Lord promised through St. Paul, "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)*" Whatever challenges, trials, joys, successes, failures or problems arise in the upcoming years, the members of Riverview can be assured that their Lord is on their side and will make everything happen for his purpose. As we look back over the first 50 years and see how God has led us to where we are today, we can confidently go forward knowing that the Lord will always remain faithful to his Word and to his people and keep us safe until that time when we join him in the glories of heaven. To God alone be all glory and praise, now and for eternity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"25th Anniversary". A brochure written to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Riverview.

"50th Anniversary". A brochure written to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Riverview.

Belter, Pastor Dennis. Written notes received on April 21, 1998.

Glaze, Jerry. Written notes received on April 3, 1998.

Hartwig, Professor Theodore. Written notes received on March 26, 1998.

Lehninger, Pastor Ernst. Phone interview by Charles Vannieuwenhoven. March 19, 1998.

Luchterhand, Pastor Lyle. Written notes received on March 30, 1998.

Riverview Lutheran Church Building Committee Minutes from 1953-1956.

Riverview Lutheran Church Council Minutes from 1985 and 1988.

Shaw, William. Written notes received on April 6, 1998.

Schmidt, Ruth. Written notes received on April 7, 1998.

Wendler, Professor David. Written notes received on April 8, 1998.