

**Twenty-Five Years**

**Of Grace**

**1975 – 2000**

**Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church**

*Downers Grove, Illinois*

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**A note from the project coordinator**

Welcome to "25 Years of Grace" – a video history of Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church, Downers Grove, Illinois. My name is Kurt Schaser and for 21 years Good Shepherd was my church home. I have many fond memories of Good Shepherd. So when it came time for me to chose a Senior Church History Project, a requirement for any Senior to graduate and receive a call, I decided this was the perfect opportunity to take a closer look at Good Shepherd. I wanted to focus on how richly God has blessed this congregation over the past 25 years through its members, called workers, and most importantly through his Word and Sacraments. I could have written a paper on the subject, but that has already been done before. Therefore I decided to take a different angle on the subject matter and let the people of the congregation speak. I wanted to hear their insights and perspectives. I wanted to hear about the strengths and weaknesses, the ups and downs, the challenges and joys of being a part of Good Shepherd. Four interviews were conducted for this video history on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2001. They were held in the chancel area of Good Shepherd's sanctuary. Del and Joyce Schoenbeck and Frank Sharkey offered me the founding member and long term member perspective I was looking for. Pastor Rutschow provided the knowledgeable long term pastoral perspective. Finally, Pastor Witte offered the recent pastoral perspective concerning the last 9 years he has faithfully served Good Shepherd. The remaining part of this paper is to clarify some facts, list source information, and state what I have learned from this project. The four interviews span two and a half hours of tape. Despite the length I think you will find the interviews interesting, informative, and inspiring. God certainly has kept his promise that his Word will not return to him empty, but will achieve the purpose for which he sent it. Good Shepherd is living proof of that fact and it shows. I hope you enjoy this paper and video history. God Bless!

Kurt Schaser

### *The Early Days*

I heard the expression once that “as goes the Sem, so goes the Synod.” That became very clear to 17 people who were members of Bethel Lutheran Church (LCMS), Westmont, Illinois in the early months of 1975. After Pastor E.F. Kavasch, a conservative and confessional Missouri Synod pastor, retired, Bethel began to experience firsthand the doctrinal controversies plaguing the LCMS seminary in St. Louis. It seems that for years before this Bethel, under the direction of Pastor Kavasch, was well aware of the problems going on not only in the seminaries, but also throughout the entire Missouri Synod. They were so concerned with the direction of the synod that they didn’t support its mission efforts or operating costs, and for the most part Bethel carried on its existence as an independent Lutheran church. In 1975, however, it became clear that the new pastor who replaced Pastor Kavasch had liberal tendencies in regard to doctrine and was actively trying to lead the congregation back to supporting the LCMS. The same question that the Wisconsin Synod asked itself before breaking fellowship with the LCMS was the same one these 17 people asked as well. “How long can we stay with a church body that does not believe the same things we do?” Finally, after several meetings with prominent people in the LCMS, it became obvious to this group of 17 “that their congregation and its synod were no longer completely loyal to the Holy Scriptures and the historic confessions of faith.”<sup>1</sup>

I was born in 1975, so I am a little young to fully appreciate what it must have been like for the Wisconsin Synod and also conservative lay people in Missouri to break fellowship with the LCMS. Yet as I get older and have had the opportunity to study some church history I have come to realize that the doctrinal problems of the Missouri Synod and the problems they had at their St. Louis Seminary (Seminex) have had a

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<sup>1</sup> “Twenty Years of Grace 1975 – 1995 Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church” p. 1. (20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Booklet written by Pastor Witte).

profound impact on my life. I was baptized in a Missouri Synod church (Zion – Hinsdale, IL), but shortly after my birth my parents made the decision to break fellowship with Zion and the LCMS for the same reasons Del and Joyce Schoenbeck, Frank Sharkey, and the other members of that group of 17. It wasn't until I worked on this project that I realized one of the main reasons Good Shepherd was started was directly influenced by a liberal pastor coming out of the whole Seminex controversy.

It's also interesting to note that Downers Grove was not the target location for a WELS mission in the area. Rather, Naperville and Bolingbrook were target spots. In fact, Bob Rardin, who at that time was a member of Resurrection, Aurora, had been in contact with the proper synod officials concerning that mission in Naperville or Bolingbrook. That explains why President O.J. Naumann and the WELS were not interested in this group of 17 at first. However, the persistence of this group of 17 paid off and 455 souls later, including 11 sons and daughters who have gone on to serve as called workers (7 pastors, 4 teachers), I think the WELS is very happy it decided to start that mission church in Downers Grove. It should also be noted that many of the current members live in Bolingbrook and Naperville. The Downers Grove location has not scared them off.

Some of the early members of Good Shepherd were transfers from other WELS churches in the area. Several of those WELS churches were very helpful to that original group of 17 coming from Bethel. Pastor Mahnke (Hope, West Chicago) and Pastor Deters (Resurrection, Aurora) met with this group to encourage them and it moved several of the people present at that meeting to say this was "the most inspiring event of our life in the past year."<sup>2</sup> In fact many of the original group attended church at the WELS church in Palos Heights until they got the go ahead to start in Downers Grove. Palos was a small church, but the congregation was very happy to welcome the new

temporary guests even though “people were hanging from the rafters.”<sup>3</sup> Ironically enough the pastor serving in Palos Heights at that time was David Dolan, who just happens to be my wife’s uncle. Another successful WELS connection completed.

### **Let’s Be Honest**

As you watch the video I think it becomes obvious that these people are being honest and speaking from the heart. That even included looking at not only what are we doing well, but also what we can work on or change. I thought one interesting example of this was Del, Joyce, and Frank’s perspective on Good Shepherd’s role in the community vs. Pastor Rutschow and Pastor Witte’s perspective on the same topic. Del, Joyce and Frank think Good Shepherd is known in the community, while both pastors think Good Shepherd is a well kept secret.

Another aspect of these interviews that I found refreshing was the honesty in regards to the challenges faced over the past 25 years. How can we mold this group of former LCMS people with their own traditions and ideas of how things work with a few WELS transfers with their own traditions and ideas and make them one church, Good Shepherd? How can we get this hard working, very driven group who is used to doing things their own way, including starting a church, to understand how to deal with the WELS mission board? How do we get people to volunteer around church and fill leadership roles within the congregation in the year 2001 when we never used to have that problem in the past?

Yet even though there have been many challenges in the past and more to come, this is a group of people that is not afraid to face challenges and trust that God is going to get them through. In fact, they are quick to point out that God is the one in

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<sup>2</sup> “Twenty Years of Grace 1975 – 1995” (History Booklet written by Pastor Witte).

<sup>3</sup> Quote from Del Schoenbeck in his interview

control and the one who has blessed them so richly. By God's grace Good Shepherd has not faced some of the same problems other churches have faced when it comes to turnover rates and financial problems. Will that continue with the third building project of Good Shepherd's history on the horizon? Only time will tell.

### Attitude

It hasn't been all happy times at Good Shepherd. They have had their share of tragedy, differences of opinions, and people who have walked out the doors rejecting the message of free forgiveness through Christ. It wasn't easy on the congregation, especially the children of the grade school, when Joanna Behrens, their 26 year-old teacher, died suddenly of a rare virus. It wasn't easy to deal with the serious health problems of Pastor Rutschow and his daughter Annette that coincided with the death of Joanna in 1999.

The thing that makes all of those things more bearable and easier to deal with is attitude. The best part about that attitude is the source it flows out of. Good Shepherd's attitude flows from the center of everything they do, God's Word. It's that powerful Word that motivated the 17 founding members to be so driven in starting their own church that would be faithful to the Holy Scriptures. It is that same powerful Word that has caused this church to grow from 17 people to 455. It is that powerful Word that makes people willing and happy to describe Good Shepherd in this way. "It's good to be here." "God had his hand on our shoulders." "We have fun here." "These people understand what the goal of the church is about – saving souls for time and eternity." Praise be to our "Good Shepherd" who did lay down his life for his sheep!

***"I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep,"***

***(John 10:14-15)***

## SOURCES

### 1. Interviews

- Del and Joyce Schoenbeck (Founding members)
- Frank Sharkey (Founding member)
- Pastor David Rutschow (First full time pastor – 1977 to the present)
- Pastor Daniel Witte (First Associate Pastor – 1992-2001)

### 2. Interview Discussion questions

(Four sheets containing the questions given to those interviewed are attached to the end of this paper. Each question sheet equals one full interview. The sheets are attached in the order that the interviews are found on the video.)

### 3. "Twenty Years of Grace 1975 – 1995"

(History booklet written by Pastor Witte)

### 4. Good Shepherd Membership Statistics

(Prepared by Pastor Witte)

- Can you give me some background on what factors led you to think about leaving your church home in 1975?
- Why did your group of 17 decide to look to the WELS for help?
- How were your early correspondences with the WELS – Encouraging? Not Encouraging?
- Can you describe your feelings after the events of August 19, 1975 and the meeting with Pastor Deters (Resurrection, Aurora) and Pastor Mahnke (Hope, West Chicago)?
- I understand that Nov. 16<sup>th</sup> – 1975 was the first official service of the new WELS church. Can you describe the events of that whole week leading up to the first service?
  - Was there any worry that things would not work out?
  - What kind of things did you get from Milwaukee on Saturday the 15<sup>th</sup>?
  - How was worship in a Holiday Inn (atmosphere, attitude of congregation)?
- Who took care of the pastoral responsibilities before Pastor Rutschow came?
- 17 people broke away from Bethany yet I read that the first 7 Sundays of 1975 saw an average attendance of 93 for a church with no name. Who were the other people attending – visitors, WELS members from the area, others ?
- In March, 1976 the name Good Shepherd was chosen. Do you recall if that was an easy choice or were there some other possibilities? If so do you recall any?
- May through June, 1976, saw Good Shepherd gain mission status, formally organize, buy land, and also vote positively to incorporate. The whole process from leaving Bethany in 1975 to these monumental events of 1976 only spanned about a year.
  - Do you recall any concerns you had that first year?
  - Were you both confident this was going to work?
  - Were all the members in agreement on the quickness of the events that took place?
  - Do you recall any resistance?
- How has Good Shepherd established itself in the community?
  - Do you consider it to be a community church?
- Has the mindset of Good Shepherd changed since it's beginning as a mission church to where it is now as an established church?
- You've seen Good Shepherd from its beginnings in 1975 to where it is today 25 years later. Can you give me some of your fondest memories and thoughts on the past 25 years?



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- You've seen Good Shepherd from its beginnings in 1975 to where it is today 25 years later. Can you give me some of your fondest memories and thoughts on the past 25 years?

- When did you first receive the call to serve Good Shepherd?
- What were your initial thoughts and feelings while deliberating your two calls ( Peoria and Downers Grove)?
- What were your initial impressions (strengths/challenges) of Good Shepherd when you first arrived as far as the:
  - attitude of the members?
  - Location?
  - worship facilities?
- The church and school building were built simultaneously – What was the reasoning behind that move – Outreach? Nurture? Just the way WELS did things at the time?
- Was the building of the church and school at the same time supported strongly by the voters or were there some negative feelings toward the project?
- It seems the called workers have always had a good relationship with one another and also with the members of the congregation. Is this true? If so can you give any insight that might contribute to that fact?
- Have there been any differences or similarities in the work you did in Peoria and here in Downers Grove? Did your work in Peoria prepare you for some of the challenges you have faced in Downers Grove?
- How has being DP of the Southeastern Wisconsin District effected or impacted your ministry at Good Shepherd (Positively or Negatively)?
- Numerous sons and daughters of this congregation have gone into the teaching or preaching ministry. How have you personally and the rest of the congregation promoted that activity?
- How has Good Shepherd established itself in the community?
  - Would you consider it to be a community church?
  - Has that mindset changed over the years?
- Has the mindset of the congregation changed since its beginning as a mission to now as an established church?
- Have there been any crisis points over the years (money problems, certain people leaving the church early on, etc...)?
- Can you give some of your fond memories, joys, sadness over the past 24 years?

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- What were your initial impressions (strengths/challenges) of Good Shepherd when you first arrived 17 years into its existence as far as the:
  - attitude of the members?
  - Location?
  - worship facilities?
  - programs, activities, organizations?
  
- It seems the called workers have always had a good relationship with one another and also with the members of the congregation. Is this true? If so can you give any insight that might contribute to that fact?
  
- How has being the associate to the DP of the Southeastern Wisconsin District effected or impacted your ministry at Good Shepherd (Positively or Negatively)?
  
- Numerous sons and daughters of this congregation have gone into the teaching or preaching ministry. How have you personally and the rest of the congregation promoted that activity?
  
- How has Good Shepherd established itself in the community?
  - Would you consider it to be a community church?
  - Has that mindset changed over the years?
  
- Has the mindset of the congregation changed since you have been here (example: outreach emphasis vs. nurture, etc.)?
  
- Can you comment on the members rate of growth (numerically speaking) at Good Shepherd (slow, steady, etc.)?
  
- Have there been any crisis points over the years (money problems, certain people leaving, etc.) since you have been here?
  
- Can you give some of your fond memories, joys, sadness over the past 9 years?

## Good Shepherd Membership Statistics

<i>Date</i>	<i>Baptized</i>	<i>Communicants</i>	<i>Average Sunday Attendance</i>	<i>Sunday School Enrollment</i>	<i>School Enrollment</i>
1979	211	162	136	38	18
1980	242	178	150	45	24
1981	277	202	170	59	31
1982	298	214	170	59	28
1983	321	255	192	80	36
1984	351	241	208	81	34
1985	370	254	221	85	34
1986	377	264	219	79	34
1987	395	268	215	81	36
1988	397	264	219	87	33
1989	405	269	217	96	42
1990	407	280	221	87	42
1991	400	277	216	87	38
1992	407	297	210	78	43
1993	449	324	227	80	49
1994	446	325	237	81	55
1995	447	336	239	75	57
1996	435	328	233	70	52
1997	446	338	239	74	42
1998	471	352	249	75	56
1999	443	330	242	70	59
2000	455	333	240	75	67

(we have 180 family units; current membership is 478 baptized, 344 communicants)

### ASSUMPTIONS

1. Not we, but God causes our congregation to grow or not to grow. He may cause us to grow more than we expect, or not to grow at all. Proverbs 16:9 says, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps."
2. It can be helpful to see how we have grown and to project how we will grow. Proverbs 14:15 says, "A prudent man gives thought to his steps."
3. The last three columns are probably more important in determining how we need to expand our building size than the sheer number of members in our congregation, especially considering the number of people who are members in name only.

### CONCLUSIONS

1. Since 1979 we have grown in all areas detailed above. Growth has come in spurts.
2. Significant decline seems unlikely.

*prepared by Pastor Witte (3/24/01)*