

GRACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, FALLS CHURCH, VIRGINIA
A PIONEER IN THE EAST

by

DUANE SCHMEICHEL

SENIOR CHURCH HISTORY

PROF. FREDRICH

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Mequon, Wisconsin

Our Lord Jesus Christ gave the great commission to his disciples before he ascended to the right hand of his heavenly Father. He told them, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." That great commission is for all Christians of all times, including us today.

The WELS has been expanding since 1850 from a few congregations around Milwaukee, to thousands of congregations all over the United States and the world in 1991. That work of spreading the good news to all nations is being done. But it did not happen overnight.

Traditionally, the WELS has established congregations in somewhat rural areas of midwestern America. That was where most of the German Lutherans that make up our heritage live. But about fifty years ago things began to change. No longer did generations of the same family live in the same town or within twenty miles of each other. People began to spread further and further apart. The population began to become more and more urbanized. As transportation became easier, families moved further and further away. They went where the good jobs were, the cities. But by going there they left many things behind, their homes, their families, their heritage, and their church. This gave greater cause and urgency for the WELS to begin expanding to those areas which before had not been entered. It gave us cause to carry out the great commission.

One of the greatest population centers at that time was and still is the entire Eastern Seaboard. The northern part in the area of New England was at that time served by the Northern Wisconsin District Mission Board. The Michigan District Mission Board was responsible for the Middle Atlantic States. In their fall meeting of 1962 the General Board for Home Missions had discussed placing a man in the Washington, D.C. area to serve the military personnel in the area around the capitol. That request had come from the Spiritual Welfare Commission. At that time there were some 200 military personnel in the area to be served.¹ The request had already been made in August by several families in the area to start a mission there. The mission board wanted to use the man requested by the Spiritual welfare Commission to aid in contacting other WELS people in the area. The matter was tabled to be brought up again in their spring meeting.

There were several families in the area who had been in contact with the mission board. Those families had made the request to the mission board back in August of 1962 to see about the possibility of starting a mission in the area of our nation's capitol. In September of that year two representatives of the Michigan Mission Board, Pastors H.L. Engle and Daniel Gieschen traveled out to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Geweke in Arlington, VA. Two other families were also there to discuss the possibilities of starting a mission in the area.² The wheels had begun to roll for the gospel to spread.

By early spring the first services were held. Pastor Leonard J. Koeninger, associate pastor at Emmanuel First Lutheran Church in Lansing, Mi was given a sixth month leave of absence by his

congregation to go to Virginia and do exploratory work. On March 31, 1963, the first service was held in Churchill Road School in McLean, VA. There was a total of twenty-eight in attendance for that first service.³ The Lord blessed the efforts of Pastor Koening in those six months. Attendance fluctuated from a low of fourteen to a high of fifty. After that sixth month period several different men served the tiny nucleus of people, Prof. Harris Kaesmeyer of Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Pastor Arthur Wacker of Ann Arbor, MI, and a vicar, Gary Schoeder. There were also several times when taped services were used.

In their spring meeting of 1963 the General Board for Home Mission approved funding to call a full time worker to the Northern Virginia area. \$9000 was allotted to call a man to serve the area.⁴ The calling process began. Pastor Harry Shiley of Milwaukee was called first, but the Lord led him to return the call. Pastor Kurt Koeplin of Tecumseh, MI was called next, but again he returned the call. On the third try Walter Beckmann of Battle Creek, MI was called. The Lord graciously led him to accept this call, and another field had a full-time worker. On September 22, 1963, Pastor Walter Beckmann was installed as the first WELS missionary on the East Coast. Pastor Norman Berg, president of the Michigan District, installed him. The Beckmann's started out in a rental home in Arlington.

Within a few months the small nucleus had grown to 24 communicants and 42 souls.⁵ They needed a name for their new church, and after much deliberation the name "Grace " was chosen. They also began the search for land. In the December 9, 1963

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voter's meeting the men of Grace Lutheran Church approved to attempt to purchase a site in Falls Church from a file of about fifty sites. The land was owned by Bernard Cox, a businessman who had a workshop there. Because the workshop was in a residential area, he was receiving considerable complaints from the neighbors because of the mess and the noise. It was a site with some problems, but those problems led to the owner being more willing to sell. The Synod did approve the request for purchase and the land was obtained for \$28,500 on February 13, 1964.

With the purchase of land and a sense of permanency, a new parsonage was needed. The site purchased was not feasible for both a church a parsonage, so a house was purchased about a mile away from the future church site in September of 1964. The location of services also changed once land was purchased. Services were moved from Churchill Road School in McLean to Walnut Hill School in Falls Church. Services were held there until the time when the worship facility was completed.

With the land and parsonage purchased the time came for the construction of the worship facility. The Lord did move the Board for Home Missions to approve funding for the worship facility. The board approved a loan of \$68,000, of which \$57,500 came from CEF and 10,500 came from CEL. Elmer Cappelmann was hired as architect. He had already designed several colonial style churches in that area. The W.R. Manchester Construction Co. got the bid for the building contract. They had a low bid of \$70,500. It looked as though everything was smooth sailing.

But things were about to change. The Lord gave the members of Grace several trials to endure during the building process.

One of the major problems was drainage. A new sewer system needed to go in, but the rest of the area was not on it yet. The residents of the area tried to delay the construction process. Finally Fairfax County installed a storm sewer system that connected the one that Grace was required to install.

Another trial the members faced was the death of their architect, Mr. Cappelmann. He was a one man operation, so there was no one to take over the project. Mr. Cappelmann's widow served as an aid in this area. She directed the members to another architect, William Fahey, who finished out the construction.⁶ After many delays and mishaps, the worship facility was ready for dedication. On November 13, 1966, the new church was dedicated to the Lord in two special services. Over 300 gathered to dedicate this new mission facility to the Lord. Pastor Ray Wiechmann, Executive Secretary of the Board for Home Missions preached in the morning service to 203 worshippers. Pastor Leonard Koeninger, who had conducted the very first worship service of the group, preached in the second service to 126 people.⁷

With a permanent church building, the Lord richly blessed the efforts of the members of Grace. Membership continued to grow (see Appendix A). But along with the work being done at Grace, other seed were being planted also.

Other requests for service were coming in from different areas along the East Coast. Pastor Beckmann served these areas along with the help of summer vicars. In 1965 there were four areas of expansion; Norfolk, VA, Philadelphia, PA, New Brunswick,

NJ, and Long Island, NY. The two vicars were John E. Henning, and Keith C. Kruck.

At Grace the Lord continued to shower his blessings. The church grew both physically and spiritually. Through God's grace they grew to be able to return all subsidy to the synod and became a self-supporting congregation by 1969, only six years after holding the first services there. God's word continued to take root and the congregation grew to the point where it became apparent that another service would be needed because of space problems. However, a number of members were making a rather long commute from the Maryland side of the District of Columbia. The members of Grace looked into the possibility of starting another mission in Maryland. In January of 1970 the first service was held in Largo, MD, with 41 in attendance. John Mittelstaedt, a graduate from the seminary was assigned in May, and a new mission arm was stretched out from Grace. About twenty-five communicant members transferred to the new mission, but by the grace of God, He replaced those souls by the end of the year, with a few to spare. The growth continued and on September 26, 1971, Grace Lutheran Church went to two Sunday services.

Along with the worship life was the education life, especially of the children. Sunday School was begun almost from the time of the first services in 1963. Vacation Bible School was started in 1967, the first year that the church was available for use. In those years the Vacation Bible School proved to be a tremendous outreach arm, with attendances of as high as 102. (See appendix A) Education was a vital part to the growth of Grace and in 1973, a Lutheran Elementary School was begun. Susan Westendorf

was called to teach. The school began with grades kindergarten through third. There were ten children the first year. The school continued to grow to a high of 44 in 1981. (See appendix A) As the school continued to grow, more teachers were needed. In 1975, Mariyn Beckmann, Pastor Beckmann's wife was called to teach kindergarten and assist with other duties. In 1977 Mrs Joan Richards was called on a part-time basis. In 1980 Mrs. Beckmann retired from full time service and a graduate from DMLC, Heidi Baer was added to teach the lower grades. At the end of the 1990 school year Heidi Baer, now Mrs. Ronald Zartman resigned to take care of her children, and another graduate, John Keibel was assigned as principal. The school continues to grow and be used as an outreach arm in the community.

At first the school was held in the basement of the church until in 1975 a three room education wing was dedicated at the beginning of the school year on August 31. The project was delayed due to county moratoriums on new construction. The building was constructed at a cost of \$160,000. ¹⁰ The money was raised through gifts and notes sold to members and friends of the congregation. By 1985 both the note program for the school and the loans from Synod were paid off, and the congregation was debt free.

Throughout this time the congregation continued to be blessed with growth. By the end of 1980 the congregation was to the point of getting ready for expansion again, this time to the west. Many members were coming in from the area of Manassas. This area was also seeing a tremendous growth spurt, and was an ideal

location for a new mission. The voters of Grace decided to call an assistant pastor who would specifically work on outreach in the area of Manassas and eventually conduct services out there. Pastor Paul Ziemer accepted the call out to Falls Church. He was installed on June 7, 1981. He began services in Manassas on June 21 of that same year. 41 people attended that service. At first the salary was paid entirely by grace. Gradually they began reducing their subsidy until the members of the new congregation, Bethlehem in Manassas, was able to pay the entire salary. In this way a new mission was started without any salary support from the synod. About 50 communicant members were lost to Bethlehem congregation.

But once again the Lord led more sheep into the fold, and by 1988 another mission was starting, this time to the northwest in Sterling, another area which was rapidly growing. Once again, Grace started saving up money to help start this mission arm. Pastor Thomas Zarling was called to this new mission. They are still in the process of growing. Once again, Grace lost members through this expansion, but once again the Lord is adding to the flock. The numbers at Grace are close to what they were before the expansion, but the thing to remember is that every time the branch is pruned it grows back stronger and produces more fruit. This is certainly evident when one realizes that 30 years ago there were only a few WELS families in the metro Washington D.C. area, and no WELS churches. Today we have four thriving churches with over 800 souls and almost 600 communicants. It is truly amazing how the Lord has blessed our work in the nation's capitol. Much more work can and will be done; the harvest is not

yet complete. But we can and should continue to thank the Lord for the abundant blessings he has given us in spreading his word throughout the nations.

ENDNOTES

1. General Board for Home Missions, Meeting Minutes Nov. 6-9, 1962, pg. 7.
2. Grow in His Grace, Grace Lutheran Church 25th Anniversary Book, pg. 1.
3. *ibid.*, pg. 2.
4. G.B.H.M., Minutes, May 13, 14, 1963, pg. 7.
5. Grace Lutheran Church, 1988 Annual Report, pg. 27.
6. Grace Anniversary, pg. 5.
7. *ibid.*
8. 1965 BoRaM, pg. 48.
9. Grace Anniversary, pg. 6.
10. *ibid.*, pg. 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. General Board For Home Missions, Minutes of November 6-9, 1962 Meeting.
2. Grow in His Grace, Grace Lutheran Church, 25th Anniversary Book.
3. Grace Lutheran Church, 1988 Annual Report.
4. W.E.L.S. Book of Reports and Memorials, 1965.

Appendix A - Statistics

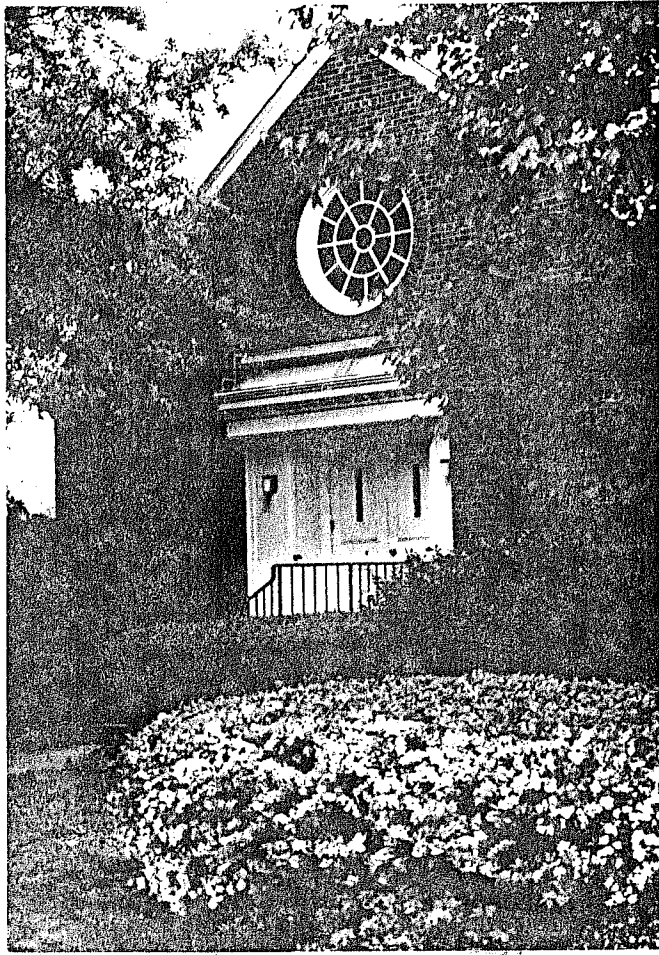
	Sunday Average	# of spec. Services	Lent Avg.	Maundy Thurs.	Good Fri.	Thanks-giving	Mission fest	Reforma-tion	Special Advent	Xmas Eve	Late Xmas Eve	Xmas Day	N.Y. Eve	Total Attendance
1963	29	2								55			33	1,280
1964	41	3			46					75			36	2,200
1965	56	3			47					70			37	3,072
1966	70	3			61	60				SNOW		57	37	3,940
1967	98	11	41		82	50				120		54	30	5,618
1968	119	11	50		83	110				159		72	47	6,939
1969	137	11	60		108	127				195		86	89	8,093
1970	139	11	57		112	118				226		91	28	8,145
1971	156	11	82		103	116				248		113	80	9,570
1972	159	11	69		130	111				270		126	92	9,570
1973	179	11	85		93	161				255		123	95	10,620
1974	175	11	65		129	160				255		130	98	10,327
1975	187	12	80	119	concert	166	97			275		148	104	11,292
1976	196	16	77	85	80	128	71		51	248		112	82	11,613
1977	190	14	60	96	92	145	93		52	300		194	90	11,302
1978	193	14	54	71	108	150	96		54	206		126	110	11,484
1979	211	14	61	95	127	188		121	62	260		155	79	12,425
1980	212	15	59	102	105	176	75	119	56	224		157	86	12,475
1981	206	15	68	90	108	137	122		75	219		124	75	12,205
1982	182	15	80	96	126	181		96	56	207		120	96	10,922
1983	194	14	74	98	150	161		94	37	241		178	68	11,381
1984	209	14	68	101	125	155		72	36	239		147	91	12,451
1985	212	15	67	105	110	180		119	48	231	58	168	80	12,524
1986	212	15	61	91	156	150		84	53	175	35	130	85	12,349
1987	213	16	59	72	151	62/90		85	54	194	54	125	80	12,368

	Souls	Communi-cants	Communion Attendance	Christian Day School	Sunday School	V.B.S.	Baptisms	Confirm-ations	Synod Offering	Total Offering	Average per Communicant
1963	42	24	122		15		2			\$ 3,579	\$148
1964	66	38	260		22		10		\$ 500	6,722	148
1965	87	41	293		36		5	2	840	9,005	220
1966	117	62	404		41		13	5	970	14,430	232
1967	146	80	510		47	53	6	7	1,370	17,051	213
1968	197	112	734		55	50	9	10	2,250	24,260	217
1969	215	127	802		63	56	11	13	6,250	28,657	226
1970	244	132	865		70	67	11	5	6,250	34,952	265
1971	270	157	1,022		75	102	14	8	7,875	38,637	246
1972	280	169	1,128		72	80	14	12	8,300	49,808	295
1973	298	175	1,183	10	72	46	11	7	8,250	54,613	312
1974	285	180	1,246	12	81	60	2	10	9,000	65,018	361
1975	287	190	1,487	18	83	38	7	5	9,631	81,841	431
1976	310	203	1,357	21	76	49	16	14	11,479	95,442	470
1977	320	206	1,423	25	79	62	7	10	13,028	110,509	536
1978	339	225	1,464	31	72	32	14	12	13,700	111,043	494
1979	349	233	1,557	33	75	12	14	15	15,137	127,640	548
1980	350	237	1,512	37	74	29	5	9	18,496	145,944	616
1981	320	217	1,513	44	70	24	10	8	18,813	162,190	747
1982	296	206	1,432	30	62	26	5	7	20,920	165,695	804
1983	328	230	1,580	32	65	24	8	11	29,973*	168,384	732
1984	338	240	1,720	25	58	35	4	15	27,064*	184,103	767
1985	340	253	1,771	31	61	25	2	7	29,903*	186,921	739
1986	320	250	1,737	31	52	18	9	12	27,239	219,199	877
1987	344	273	1,819	19	51	34	10	10	29,700**	234,801	860

*includes Reaching Out

**Does not include special offering of \$21,570

Appendix B - Church &
School



THE CHURCH

