

Tested, Yet Blessed

A History of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church,

Grafton, Wisconsin

Richard I. Krahn II

Senior Church History

Prof. J. Brenner

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For over thirty years, God has been with his people at Our Savior, in Grafton, Wisconsin. Throughout all the years of their existence, Our Savior has been severely tested by the Lord. She has been dealt many blows that could have been fatal, but God has continued to bless her with perseverance. She has also been blessed by the Lord in many other ways. Though the years have often been stormy, the congregation continued to thrive, and faithfully serve God's children, as they faithfully serve their Lord.

The roots of Our Savior Lutheran Church can be traced back to a letter, sent on October 19, 1964, by Pastor Lyle Hallauer, the chairman of the Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board. Several new residents of Grafton were interested in starting a Wisconsin Synod church in the area, so they asked Pastor Hallauer to look into the possibility. He sent a letter to residents in the Grafton/Port Washington area who were prospective members of the potential congregation in Grafton. He asked those interested to be present at a meeting on October 25 at 7:30pm.¹ As would be true of many things in the future of this yet-unformed congregation, even this small matter was not without trouble. The letter asked for the meeting to be held at an address that did not exist -- it would have been in the middle of the Power Products Factory.² But despite this error, there were seven people that found their way to the Herman Kuether residence for this meeting. They were Mr. and Mrs. John Metzger, Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Schmidt, Mr. Palmer Schmidt and Mr. and Mrs. Kuether. In spite of the poor attendance, it was decided to go ahead with exploratory services in the Grafton area. Services were planned for November 8, 1964, at 9:00am, in the Kuethers' basement at 926 7th Avenue in Grafton.³

¹"Special Pictorial Report of the Early Years of Our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church," 1972.

²Interview with Herman Kuether, conducted May 6, 1996.

³"Pictorial Report," 1972.

With approximately fifteen people in attendance,⁴ the service was conducted by Mr. Larry Zessin, who was at that time a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, and at the time of this writing is the pastor of Grace Ev. Luth. Church, of Oshkosh, WI. A copy of the bulletin of this first service shows that this first service opened with the fitting words of then Hymn 231, "We now implore God the Holy Ghost for the true faith, which we need the most," expressing the prayer of the young congregation that God the Holy Ghost would be with them in their endeavors. Mr. Zessin preached on Mark 7:31-37, the account of Jesus healing the deaf and dumb man, which made the people exclaim, "He has done all things well!" Surely God had done all things well for this budding congregation, and he would continue to do so into the future. The service closed with the natural response of the Christian to the gospel, the prayer "Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise!" sung in the words of Hymn 360.⁵

Services, conducted by Mr. Zessin, continued to be held in the Kuethers' basement through the end of 1964 and the beginning of 1965. Interest in the Christian gathering increased to the point that a meeting was held to decide on whether to organize as a congregation. This meeting was held on January 10, 1965. Pastor Hallauer advised those present on what steps needed to be taken to begin a congregation. After having some questions answered, the seventeen men in attendance voted unanimously to take the first step, to organize a congregation. Temporary officers were elected: Mr. Clarence Henning, President; Mr. Palmer Schmidt, Recording Secretary; and Mr. Herman Kuether, Treasurer. These three men, along with Mr. Zessin, were to draw up a constitution, which would be presented the following week. Those present were also asked to consider possible names for the new congregation.⁶

These men gathered again the following week, on January 17. The constitution presented by the three officers and Mr. Zessin was presented and adopted, as well as the by-laws, which were first amended, then adopted. This constitution was adopted by the congregation in March.⁷

⁴"Pictorial Report," 1972.

⁵Service bulletin, dated November 8, 1964.

⁶Minutes from First Organizational Meeting, January 10, 1965.

⁷"Pictorial Report," 1972.

There were five names suggested for the congregation: Hope, Our Savior, St. Matthews, Redeemer, and Bethesda. Our Savior and Redeemer were carried to a second ballot, and by a vote of nine to three, Our Savior was chosen as the name of this new congregation. A motion was made and seconded that the temporary officers sign the incorporation papers,⁸ and on February 14, 1965, the congregation was incorporated as "Our Savior Lutheran Church Congregation."⁹ A congregation was born.

Charter membership in Our Savior Lutheran Church was closed on September 1, 1965. There were twenty-four charter members: Mr. and Mrs. Leo Biever Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Werner Fischer, Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Fritz, Mr. and Mrs. Armand Goeden, Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Henning, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Kuether, Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Lederer, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lederer, Mr. Carlton Macks, Mrs. Adelia Nemitz, Mr. Dennis Nemitz, Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Rapp, Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Schmidt, and Mr. Palmer Schmidt.¹⁰ From these charter members, a Church Council was elected on October 18, 1965. They were Mr. Armand Goeden, President; Mr. Bernard Rapp, Secretary; Mr. Herman Kuether, Treasurer; Mr. Ralph Lederer, Chairman of the Board of Education; Mr. Robert Lederer and Mr. Clarence Henning.¹¹

Mr. Larry Zessin served the congregation as its senior vicar until June of 1965, shortly after his graduation from the Seminary. At that time, Mr. W. Keith Roehl came to serve the congregation as its vicar, and did so for the next fourteen months, until August of 1966. During his service, the Lord blessed the congregation to the point that they outgrew their first building. They moved out of the Kuethers' basement and on July 18, 1965, Our Savior held the first of many services at the American Legion Hall in Grafton.¹² They would worship there for the next two years.

⁸Minutes from Second Organizational Meeting, January 17, 1965.

⁹25th Anniversary booklet, printed in 1990.

¹⁰25th Anniversary booklet, 1990.

¹¹Minutes from Congregational meeting, October 18, 1965, and Church Council meeting, November 5, 1965.

¹²Kuether interview.

In the meantime, they strove to erect their own building. As was also true of the Wisconsin Synod as a whole, education of children was an early focus of Our Savior. It was already a topic of discussion at the first organizational meeting.¹³ In the original plans of the congregation was the idea of two buildings on two sites, with the school going up first.¹⁴ At its May 9 meeting, several sites were inspected. When the meeting was reconvened, two sites were chosen: first the Klotz property on Highway 57 at Arrowhead Road, and secondly the Tetzlaff property at Lakefield Road and Highway C.¹⁵ However, after some haggling with the Mission Board, it was decided at that time to go ahead with only one of the buildings, a four classroom school, with the two rooms of the basement serving as a temporary chapel. At the May 25, 1965 congregational meeting, Pastor Hallauer informed the congregation that they were granted permission to proceed with the purchase of land and their building plans. The Mission Board granted Our Savior \$6000 for the purchase of land and another \$50,000 for their first building.¹⁶ But this was far from the end of the debate. Several times the Mission Board considered the building plans to be too ambitious, or too expensive, and scaled them back. Finally in the special congregational meeting on January 30, 1966, preliminary plans were accepted by the congregation and submitted to the Synod for approval.¹⁷ In March the Mission Board approved the plans and gave authority to the Building Committee to have an architect begin construction drawings and to accept bids on the construction.¹⁸ But the struggle continued for several more months. It included still more changes to the building plans and a decision of the congregation to be its own general contractor, all to reduce costs, This led to a delay in the opening of the school. It was hoped to open the school in the fall of 1966, but with no building in place, this was not possible. Three Church Council meetings in June and July discussed, and then resolved to send the children to St. John's East Mequon for one year, with the congregation assuming the tuition.¹⁹ Finally,

¹³"Pictorial Report," 1972.

¹⁴Kuether interview.

¹⁵Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 9, 1965.

¹⁶Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 23, 1965.

¹⁷Minutes from Congregational meeting, January 30, 1966.

¹⁸"Pictorial Report," 1972.

¹⁹Minutes from Church Council meetings, June 5, June 10, July 18, 1966.

after more than two years of planning, everything was ready. On Easter Sunday, March 26, 1967, ground was broken for a four classroom school, with the basement to serve as a temporary chapel.²⁰

But the building was far from the only concern of the congregation at this time. Knowing that Mr. Roehl would soon be leaving, after his graduation from the Seminary, they began a search for a full-time pastor. At the April 8, 1966 congregational meeting, they decided to submit an application requesting to be assigned a candidate from the Seminary.²¹ But the following month, on May 8, Chairman Armand Goeden informed the congregational meeting that their request was not approved by the District Mission Board because of a shortage of pastors in the Synod.²² At the council's next meeting, they resolved to request the Mission Board to have Professor Martin Albrecht of the Seminary serve as their vacancy pastor.²³ The Mission Board approved, and Prof. Albrecht served the congregation from August through November, 1966. At that time, Pastor John Raabe, the missionary of the Southeast Wisconsin District, became the full-time vacancy pastor. In their March 12, 1967 meeting the congregation decided to again make an application to call a candidate from the graduating class of the Seminary.²⁴ This time, the Holy Spirit directed a call to Herbert Winterstein, who was ordained and installed by Pastor Raabe on June 25, 1967.²⁵ At this same time, since the school building was nearly complete, the congregation decided to call a male candidate to be their principal and teacher.²⁶ The Holy Spirit directed this call to Mr. James Bilitz, who was installed by Pastor Winterstein on July 2, 1967, just one week after his own installation.²⁷

²⁰25th Anniversary booklet, 1990.

²¹Minutes from Congregational meeting, April 8, 1966.

²²Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 8, 1966.

²³Minutes from Church Council meeting, June 5, 1966.

²⁴Minutes from Congregational meeting, March 12, 1967.

²⁵Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 28, 1967.

²⁶Minutes from Congregational meeting, January 8, 1967 (corrected at March 12, 1967 meeting).

²⁷"Pictorial Report," 1972.

Now all was nearly ready for the opening of the school. Since the building was not quite completed, school met in the home of Mr. Dean Miller.²⁸ Mr. Bilitz was the only teacher, and he taught 15 students, from kindergarten to eighth grade.²⁹ This arrangement did not last long however. By later that fall, the school building was finally ready. Nearly three years after the first service, and almost two and one-half years after the Mission Board granted permission to build, the doors were finally opened. On October 8, 1967, the dedication services were held. The morning service began with a ceremony ^{in which} where the congregation entered the new building.

The congregation will assemble before the door of the church.

At the door the minister shall say a prayer.

The key will be received by Ralph Lederer, the chairman of the building committee from one of the architects of Blong, Kempf, and Erlich.

Then will follow the opening of the door, after which the minister will read from a psalm.

The minister and the congregation shall then enter the church. The minister and the guest speaker and the liturgist will enter the sanctuary. The members of the church council shall give the Bible and other liturgical books, as well as the sacred vessels, into the hands of the minister, who shall put them in their proper places.³⁰

The words of the opening hymn expressed the desire of all 186 who gathered there: "Here in Thy name, eternal God, we dedicate this house to Thee. Oh, choose it for Thy fixed abode and keep it from all error free." Pastor Larry Zessin, at this time the pastor of Goodview Trinity Lutheran Church of Winona, MN, was the guest liturgist, and Prof. Martin Albrecht delivered a sermon on Ephesians 5:25-27, with the theme "Our New Church Building -- A Reflection of Christ's Work."³¹ In this morning service, Pastor Winterstein performed the rite of dedication. In the afternoon service, 257 gathered to ask the Lord, "Enter this temple, now thine own, and let Thy glory fill the place."³² Pastor Keith Roehl, now of Grove City, OH, was the guest liturgist, and Pastor John Raabe preached on Psalm 63:1-5 (although the bulletin said Isaiah 63:1-4), telling the

²⁸Minutes from Congregational meeting, October 16, 1967.

²⁹25th Anniversary booklet, 1990.

³⁰Bulletin from Dedication Service of October 8, 1967.

³¹25th Anniversary booklet, 1990.

³²Bulletin from Dedication Service of October 8, 1967, afternoon service opening hymn, verse 1.

congregation of the five sanctuaries of our Lord: the heart, the school, the church, the home and heaven.

The congregation had more building projects in its future. ^{Almost} Nearly as soon as the church/school building was completed, work was begun on a parsonage. With much of the work done by members of the congregation, this building was completed in 1968. But this was still not the end of the building projects. In 1970 a teacherage was completed, again with a large amount of congregational labor, although not to the same degree as the parsonage. After only five years, Our Savior had a church/school building, a parsonage and a teacherage. Surely God had blessed this congregation!

During these several years (first five??), the Lord blessed Our Savior Church with steady growth. At the end of 1967, the congregation reported 65 communicant members and 110 souls.³³ The Lord blessed them with 47 new communicant members and 85 new souls in 1968;³⁴ 48 new communicants and 96 new souls in 1969;³⁵ and 47 new communicants and 72 new souls in 1970. This brought the total membership to 158 communicants and 300 souls³⁶ (a total of 45 souls were lost due to transfer, release, or cases of discipline). More importantly, this growth was not only due to transfers from other Wisconsin Synod congregations. Of the more than 250 new souls, nearly 90 of them were brought into the congregation by profession of faith, confirmation, or baptism.

During these early years, the Lord granted similar growth to Our Savior Lutheran School. After opening in 1967 with 15 students, all taught by Principal James Bilitz, enrollment was up to 36 by 1968³⁷, and by 1970 that number was up to over 50, necessitating two more teachers --

³³1967 Yearbook.

³⁴1968 Yearbook.

³⁵1969 Yearbook.

³⁶1970 Yearbook.

³⁷1968 Yearbook.

Mrs. Ronald Litke and Mrs. Keith Schroeder³⁸ (In addition, Mrs. Bilitz and Mrs. Richard Hennig taught for a time in 1968 and 1969³⁹).

This growth with which the Lord blessed Our Savior allowed them to take a major step. In January of 1971, the congregation voted to adopt a budget which included a plan to go self-supporting that year. This dream was realized on July 1, 1971. It became a source of great joy for the congregation that after six years of Synod support, Our Savior was able to go self-supporting, so that the money once given to them could go to another home mission, to continue to spread the gospel. While done with the ^{best} greatest of intentions, it seems that this may have been too ambitious. There is also some opinion that many in the congregation did not know what they were getting into. Our Savior had to go back on Synod support in order to make ends meet. But this bad news was not permanent. Finally, after a decision by the congregation on January 28, 1979⁴⁰, the congregation wrote a letter to the Southeastern Wisconsin District Mission Board, dated February 14, 1979, declaring itself to be self-supporting, and thanking the Mission Board for their help, encouragement and guidance during the years that they were a mission congregation.⁴¹ Finally, by the grace of God, Our Savior Lutheran Church was a self-supporting congregation.

By the early years of the 1970's, it became apparent that one building was not enough to house Our Savior Lutheran Church and Our Savior Lutheran School. At the March, 1973 Church Council meeting, it was decided to set up a planning committee, to look into expansion of the school due to increased enrollment. Projected figures were: 1973-74 -- 66 students, 1974-75 -- 81-82 students, 1975-76 -- 86-87 students.⁴² Membership was up to 175 communicants, and the time was approaching to make more room for the children in the school. The Lord quickly

³⁸1970 Yearbook.

³⁹1968 and 1969 Yearbooks.

⁴⁰Minutes from Congregational meeting, January 28, 1979.

⁴¹Letter to SE WI Dist. Mission Bd., dated February 14, 1979.

⁴²Minutes from Church Council meeting, March 5, 1973.

directed the thoughts of the congregation to the south, to the northwest side of Milwaukee, and Redemption Lutheran Church.

A discussion was then held on Redemption Lutheran Church. The present building is to be torn down upon the completion of their new church. The present church is of a pre-fab construction and has a possibility of being moved. Pastor Winterstein will contact Redemption expressing our interest in the building pending checking out further details.⁴³

By early 1974, the congregation had decided that moving this chapel from Milwaukee was their best option for a new church. By April, the plans were near completion, and some of the parts of the construction were out for bids.⁴⁴ On Memorial Day weekend, May 25-27, the building was disassembled and transported to Grafton.⁴⁵ Ground was broken for the new chapel following the Sunday service on July 7, 1974.⁴⁶ For the next fifteen months, work progressed, done both by congregational volunteers and by hired hands. Although they received the chapel free from Redemption, nearly \$30,000 was spend on the entire project.⁴⁷ Finally on August 31, 1975, at 2:00PM,⁴⁸ the new church was dedicated.⁴⁹

In the middle of this work regarding the new church building, the congregation passed another milestone -- their first full-time pastor received and accepted a call. In January of 1974, Pastor Winterstein informed the congregation that he had accepted a call into our synod's world mission field, to Tsuchiura City, Japan.⁵⁰ After debating calling only a vicar for one year and one call which was returned, it was decided to turn once again to the synod's assignment committee

⁴³Minutes from Church Council meeting, April 2, 1973.

⁴⁴Minutes from Congregational meeting, April 21, 1974.

⁴⁵Minutes from Church Council meeting, May 9, 1974.

⁴⁶Minutes from Congregational meeting, June 30, 1974.

⁴⁷Church History paper by Lon Kuether, "A Lutheran Tabernacle," 1990.

⁴⁸Minutes from Congregational meeting, July 20, 1975.

⁴⁹For a more complete description of this building, its history, and its move to Grafton, see "A Lutheran Tabernacle," Lon Kuether's Church History paper, 1990.

⁵⁰Minutes from Congregational meeting, July 21, 1974.

for a graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Through the committee, the Lord of the Church directed a call to Paul Sullivan, who was installed on June 23, 1974.

In ^cEarly 1977, the congregation passed another milestone, this one at the school. Its first principal, and for a time its only teacher, Mr. James Bilitz, received and accepted a call to be the upper grades teacher and principal of St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church in Oakfield, Wisconsin.⁵¹ In February of that year, the congregation extended a call to Mr. Reynold Kremer, of St. Paul's, Moline, Illinois, to be their principal, a call which Mr. Kremer accepted.

After serving faithfully for nearly four years, in April of 1978, Pastor Sullivan received and accepted a call to be the Pastor of Divine Charity Church, of Bethel Park, Pennsylvania⁵² After considering calling another candidate from the ^sSeminary, the congregation decided to call a man from the field. Professor John Jeske served as the vacancy pastor while this search continued.⁵³ No less than four calls were returned during the months of 1978. Finally at the end of that year, Pastor Ethan Kahrs, from Christ Our Redeemer Church in Bend, Oregon, accepted the call, and in January 1979 moved to Grafton.⁵⁴

For several years, Pastor Kahrs faithfully served the people of Our Savior's, as did Principal Kremer and the teachers of Our Savior School, while physically and outwardly not much changed in the congregation. This all started to change however in April, 1985. In that month, Principal Kremer tendered his resignation to be effective June 30. One of the teachers, Miss Mary Wilde, did the same.⁵⁵ Before they called to replace the principal, the decision was made to sell the teacherage, in order to reduce the congregation's debt.⁵⁶ On June 2, Mr. James Petermann, of St. Paul, Green Bay, received and accepted the call to be the new principal,⁵⁷ and on August 25

⁵¹Minutes from Church Council meeting, January 30, 1977.

⁵²Minutes from Congregational meeting, October 15, 1978 (the date of Pastor Sullivan's transfer).

⁵³Minutes from Congregational meeting, April 28, 1978.

⁵⁴Minuted from Church Council meeting, January 7, 1979.

⁵⁵Minutes from Church Council meeting, April 18, 1985.

⁵⁶Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 12, 1985.

⁵⁷Minutes from Congregational meeting, June 2, 1985.

he was installed.⁵⁸ This change, however, was only the first of several major changes in the congregation.

On June 8, 1986, after serving for only one year, Mr. Petermann resigned as principal.⁵⁹ This, as well as other concerns caused the congregation to decide not to offer seventh or eighth grades for the 1986-1987 school year. Directly or indirectly, it also led to the resignation of several members of the Board of Education. For this and the following years Mrs. Arlene Pastorek, the pre-kindergarten teacher, served as acting principal.⁶⁰ At nearly this same time, there were many people leaving Our Savior, which was a cause of great concern. "Ideas, comments, or viewpoints on why people are leaving the church were solicited by some members. As a result, the motion was made and approved that a questionnaire be sent out as a way to find a solution to our problem."⁶¹ These reasons, as well as other personal and professional ones, led to a most unfortunate incident. At the September 9 Church Council meeting, Pastor Kahrs submitted his resignation.⁶² Again, the congregation sought to call a pastor. After three calls were returned, the Lord led Pastor William Heiges, of Our Savior, Ashland, Ohio, to accept the call in early 1987.⁶³ The congregation continued its recovery, when on January 24, 1988 they called Mr. Philip Boileau to be their Principal and upper grades teacher.⁶⁴ Again, although the Lord had tested them, he had also blessed them, and made the congregation stronger through this painful experience. He also blessed them with outward growth. "Growth within the church and school is the highest it has been since 1980."⁶⁵

This growth continued to the point that it was soon decided that a new building was needed. The Long Range Planning Committee, in October of 1989, foresaw the need to add on

⁵⁸Minutes from Congregational meeting, August 11, 1985.

⁵⁹Letter from James Petermann to the members of Our Savior Ev. Luth. Church, dated June 8, 1986.

⁶⁰Minutes from Congregational meeting, July 23, 1986.

⁶¹Minutes from Congregational meeting, July 20, 1986.

⁶²Minutes from Church Council meeting, September 9, 1986.

⁶³Minutes from Church Council meeting, February 8, 1987.

⁶⁴Minutes from Congregational meeting, January 24, 1988.

⁶⁵Minutes from Congregational meeting, April 16, 1989.

to the school by 1991.⁶⁶ Originally there was a desire to add a gymnasium and classrooms to the school, but it soon became apparent that a new church was a more pressing need.⁶⁷ In October 1991, the Building Planning Committee presented the drawings of a church that would seat 280, with offices and two classrooms. A fund drive was immediately begun to finance this project.⁶⁸ Finally, after months of wrestling with future needs versus current debts, the congregation decided to go ahead with the building of a new church, the basement of which would provide two additional classrooms.⁶⁹ Once the decision was made to go ahead with the building, the building itself went rather quickly. On April 9, 1995, the new building was dedicated, and on May 7 an Open House Dedication was held. This building has already been a blessing to the congregation in just the few months it has been in use.

Certainly, the history of Our Savior Lutheran Congregation is one that is filled with bumps in the road. But as any member would attest, it has also been a blessing, and has been blessed by the Lord. It is the prayer of the members, this author, and surely of all Christians everywhere, that the Lord continue to bless this congregation and all of its members!

⁶⁶Minutes from Congregational meeting, October 19, 1989.

⁶⁷Minutes from Congregational meeting, January 18, 1990.

⁶⁸Minutes from Congregational meeting, October 20, 1991.

⁶⁹Minutes from Congregational meeting, May 11, reconvened May 22, 1994.