

A History of Lighthouse Youth Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Steve Kruschel

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Professor John Brenner

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“A lighthouse is a tower located at some place important or dangerous to navigation; it has a very bright light at the top, by which ships are guided and warned at night.”¹ For centuries lighthouses have dotted the globe in order to guide ships and their passengers safely through the darkness to their destinations. Because of this, sailors have often looked with predilection on lighthouses.

This is similar to the way we as Christians look upon God’s Son and God’s Word. Scripture says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”² God’s Word also says of God’s Son, Jesus “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”³ As the light of a lighthouse shines through the darkness to guide lost ships to safety, so Jesus and his Word shine the light of salvation on this sin-darkened world and so guide it to safety and eternal life.

With this association in mind Redemption Evangelical Lutheran Church gave the name “Lighthouse Youth Center” to its building dedicated as a safe haven for youth in the area. The title of the establishment is indicative of its mission. The mission statement declares that “Lighthouse Youth Center exists to be a beacon for Christ to the youth of the community.” Currently Lighthouse Youth Center shines the light of Christ and his message of salvation to teenagers in the city of Milwaukee five days a week with a daily Bible lesson, homework aid and God fearing directors and staff.

How did Lighthouse become a beacon of light for the teenagers in the community surrounding Redemption Evangelical Lutheran Church? When did Redemption begin this mission aimed at youth ministry? What challenges did God help the members of Redemption and

¹ David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster’s New World Dictionary*. (New York: The World Publishing Company 1962), 848.

² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1996), Psalm 119:105.

³ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1996), John 1:4,5.

the staff of Lighthouse Youth Center to overcome? What challenges remain? This thesis will attempt to answer these questions and others by documenting the history of Lighthouse Youth Center through the present time.

In 2002 Redemption Evangelical Lutheran Church was not impressive statistically. What was once a booming congregation of 800 souls had fallen to ^{Fewer} less than 200. A once thriving school had just closed its doors because enrollment had reached an all time low. Those members who remained admitted to be out of step with the African American community around them. It all added up to a general attitude of defeat among the congregation. Worldly speaking, Redemption had become a shell of the congregation it once was.

The congregation had choices to make concerning the empty school building. Ideas were brought forth at committee meetings resulting in renting out the facility for a daycare program. After nearly a year of renting out the facility, Redemption looked into creating their own daycare program for the community. However, the high standards for daycare became prohibitive for the congregation to seek such a use of their facility. Circumstances began to look even more daunting for the people of Redemption when their pastor took a call, leaving the congregation with a vacancy.

God filled Redemption's need for a pastor. In 2003 Pastor Christian Winkel received his graduate call from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to be pastor at Redemption. By sending Christian Winkel to Redemption God had provided the congregation with a willing servant who had experience in preaching and serving in the city of Milwaukee. The experience Pastor Winkel received during his vicar year at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, became an instant asset as he began serving at Redemption.

Upon his arrival, Pastor Winkel saw the frustration of the congregation concerning their empty facility. After looking at past ideas and failures Pastor Winkel took a new approach with the vacant school building. Instead of trying to fill the empty school with a program that Redemption wanted to accomplish he looked at utilizing the building to fulfill a need in the community. However, as the congregation had witnessed previously, there was no immediate need for a Christian Day School or daycare center. Pastor Winkel led Redemption back to the drawing board.

With the guidance of Pastor Winkel, Redemption proceeded to evaluate the community in an intensive way. The evaluation included all aspects of life: number of households, single parent households, number of schools, number of churches, average income, a juvenile crime report, and overall demographics. The members of Redemption also went into the community inquiring about those living around the church. The ensuing statistics pointed to a lack of centrality in the community.

If lack of recognition was a saddening statistic for the members of Redemption to hear, the statistics of the juvenile crime report in the immediate area were downright frightening. The juvenile crime report for 2003 in the area consists of 44 burglaries, 56 sexual assaults, 53 drug possessions, 123 disorderly conducts and a number of other offenses. The members of Redemption concluded that "The fact that there are youth committing these crimes in this area suggests that there are a number of children that are not being supervised or offered constructive things to do."⁴

After seeing the statistics of the community the members of Redemption resolved that the vacant school building be designed to facilitate a center dedicated to the youth of the community. In order to better organize and follow through on the plan of building a youth center Redemption

⁴ *Lighthouse Strategic Plan*, (Lighthouse Youth Center Records 2005), 4.

put together a youth center planning committee. This committee was responsible for putting together the goals of the youth center, heading up the construction of the youth center and promoting the center in the community.

Finances were short from the beginning. To accommodate a small budget the members of Redemption became instrumental in providing the manpower for the construction and renovation of the old school into a youth center. The estimated cost that the youth center saved in this donation of time is in the thousands. It is no hyperbole to state that the youth center would not have been a possibility had there not been a generous outpouring of help on behalf of the members of Redemption.

Changes that were made to the original school building were drastic. What once was a four room school became a three room youth center containing a working canteen area. Walls were taken down to provide an open area for youth to come and play games, work on homework and build relationships with each other and the staff of Lighthouse. One original classroom was cut in half to create an office for the Director. Only one classroom remained from the original school blueprint. This classroom was converted into a media room containing computers, stadium seating and a projection system to aid in teaching God's Word to the youth.

As construction was nearing an end, Redemption's youth center planning committee, now called "Lighthouse Youth Center Planning Committee," realized that the task of heading up the completion and funding of the youth center would be better in the hands of more experienced men. To this end an official board of control was formed.⁵ The board was to consist of nine members. Seven of these members were to represent various Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregations. One member was to be an adult residing within a one mile radius of the

⁵ Roughly two weeks after the board of control was formed the overseeing group changed their official title to the "board of directors."

facility and the seventh member was to be a high school student between the ages of 13 and 18 who would regularly participate in Lighthouse Youth Center activities. Pastor Winkel's role became one of "ex-officio member of Lighthouse Youth Center board of directors."

With this change of roles also came a change in the relationship between Lighthouse and Redemption. By creating a separate board of directors for Lighthouse Youth Center, Redemption has made Lighthouse a separate entity. In this way Lighthouse was to run in a similar fashion to a Christian Day School, having its own board of control, its own goals, its own staff, and its own non-profit status.

One of the greatest initial struggles for Lighthouse was funding. Because Lighthouse is a non-profit organization they are dependant on the generosity of churches and secular associations. Much of the board's time was dedicated to making churches and companies of the area aware of the existence of Lighthouse. Through these charitable funds Lighthouse was able to establish a budget for the projected first year of operation.

By the end of 2005 the Lighthouse board of directors had accomplished many of the goals set before them. The next step toward opening and operating Lighthouse was to call a fulltime Pastor to fill the role of Executive Director. The duties of the Executive Director included developing experiences that provided focus and encouragement in the light of the gospel, building ties with the youth and their families in the community and work closely with Pastor Winkel and Redemption. However, above all the "Director's role is to live out the truth that this ministry is grounded in Christ and that the Word works one, by one, by one."⁶

On November 19, 2005 a call was extended to Pastor Jim Buske. Pastor Buske accepted the call, becoming the first Director of Lighthouse. As Director, Pastor Buske initially finalized the construction of the youth center, contacted those people, organizations and churches who

⁶ *Report to the Board of Directors (Lighthouse Youth Center Records 2005), 1.*

were willing to provide Lighthouse with funding, and most importantly, he went out into the community seeking to build relationships with youth.

The initial vision of Redemption and the work of more than two years culminated in the official opening of Lighthouse on Friday, April 21, 2006. That evening six youth from the area arrived. In order to carry out the plan of starting out small and slowly growing Lighthouse was originally open every Friday evening for four hours. However, due to the rise in youth attendance on Friday evenings Lighthouse started opening its doors on Thursdays and Fridays only two months after initially opening in April.

With the rise in youth attending Lighthouse a need for additional staff became evident. In order to provide more help for the Executive Director a Senior Vicar from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Dustin Sievert, was added to the Lighthouse staff in August of 2006. With a fulltime Director and a part time Senior Vicar, Lighthouse now had two men who were able to make connections with the youth on an everyday basis.

Apart from the work of the Director and Senior Vicar, Lighthouse also made use of volunteer help. From the night Lighthouse opened its doors a majority of those working Thursday and Friday evenings had been volunteers from Redemption. On any given night there were four to seven volunteers at Lighthouse playing with teens, helping them with their homework and offering themselves as Christian role models.

A later development in the area of volunteers has been students from Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee. Just as the number of teens grew by word of mouth through friends so also the number of volunteers from WLC has grown through friendships. Certain courses at WLC even offer credit to those students who serve as volunteers at Lighthouse, offering yet another connection between the work of Lighthouse and the work other WELS establishments.

With such a large and dedicated base group working at Lighthouse the youth center is able to have and maintain a structured setting for the youth that come. Every time a youth from the community comes to Lighthouse within the time period it is open the youth will be asked to write down his or her name, address and home phone number. The purpose of such a rigorous system is two fold. First, in case of emergency a contact number is needed to contact the legal guardian of the youth. Second, it provides Lighthouse with updated information on each youth allowing the Director, Senior Vicar or staff member the ability to contact the family of the youth in order to make further connections.

After signing in, the youth has the freedom to do what he or she wills in accordance with the established rules of Lighthouse. Internet ready computers, homework tables, video games, pool and other options are all within the grasp of the youth. After a set free period the youth are all required to work on homework for one hour. This time provides the youth with the opportunity to finish school work with the help of the volunteers in accordance with one of the goals of Lighthouse.

Following the homework period is a small time dedicated to relaxation. This allows the youth to rest their minds before the Bible lesson. When the Bible lesson begins all the youth are to be in the media room. The entire time the youth are at Lighthouse centers on studying the truth of God's Word. This is the ultimate goal of Lighthouse: to provide a safe environment in which the youth are able to hear God's Word.

The Bible lessons given to the youth are often part of a series. Bible lessons on the Ten Commandments and the Apostle's Creed have been given. In addition, the youth have gone through the New Testament and major sections of the Old Testament. These series are on a two-

year rotation in order to offer both variety and repetition over the course of two years for the youth.

Every day at Lighthouse there are rules that are in effect. These rules are in keeping with the goals and regulations established by both the board of directors and the youth themselves. In fact, the rules at Lighthouse have all been established in one way or another by the youth that attend under the direction of Pastor Buske. In this way the youth have a greater sense of ownership in the establishment and are able to correct each other in a loving manner.

Since Lighthouse opened to the community in 2006 there have been several minor changes. To accommodate a greater amount of youth Lighthouse has multiplied the days it is open from twice a week to five times a week. The Lighthouse staff has also multiplied from one Executive Director and one Senior Vicar to two Directors, a Senior Vicar, a Middler Vicar and one part time staff position.

The reason for the current surplus of staff is found in the future goals of Lighthouse. One goal to be attained is the establishment of another youth center by the year 2010. In order to create another youth center Pastor Buske has hired another Executive Director, Mark Gunderson, for Lighthouse in order to give him the time to create the funding and train the appropriate people to fulfill this goal.

Lighthouse has also made use of the staff minister intern program of MLC. Between September and December of 2008, Lighthouse and Redemption together received Ryan Kummerow as a staff minister intern. By working with Pastor Winkel on behalf of Redemption Ryan has received experience in various ways, such as helping the church through visiting shut-ins and leading Bible Class. By working with Pastor Buske at Lighthouse Ryan Kummerow has gained experience in working with the youth in an urban setting. Ryan Kummerow is just the

first of possibly many future internships accomplished under the direction of Pastor Buske on behalf of Lighthouse Youth Center.

Another goal toward which Lighthouse is building concerns youth who have “graduated” from the youth center. Because only youth between the ages of 10 and 18 are allowed to attend Lighthouse many youth who once attended Lighthouse are now too old to continue coming. Lighthouse continues to encourage and train former youth and current youth in connection with Redemption. One program that will be implemented involves a confirmation class that bridges the gap between attending Lighthouse and membership at Redemption.

The connection with Redemption and focus on Christian education makes Lighthouse more than just an after school “drop in” facility. Baptisms of many of the youth that attend Lighthouse, the dedication to studying God’s Word, and the bridging of connections between youth and staff all show that Lighthouse is truly a beacon of the light of God’s Word to the community.

Although the faces at Lighthouse have changed, the purpose and goal has remained constant. Lighthouse Youth Center exists to be a beacon for Christ to the youth of the community. Through the grace of the Lord the youth of the community surrounding Redemption Evangelical Lutheran Church are hearing God’s Word on a daily basis. These youth are making friends with believers in a safe and secure environment. Through the working of the Holy Spirit Lighthouse Youth Center has become a guiding light for these young men and women.

In order to appreciate the work done at Lighthouse Youth Center one perhaps must hear it from the mouths of the youth themselves. Everyday after the homework period has ended a member of the staff gives the students a question to answer. On one particular day the question asked was “With whom would you want to be trapped on a deserted island?” After many of the

youth gave answers of various sports stars and famous people a girl raised her hand. She asked if she was allowed to choose a thing rather than a person. The staff member said that she could. This girl then proceeded to explain her answer. She said, "I would take my Bible because in it I am told about Jesus and everything he did for me. He is all I need."

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."⁷ Through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word this ministry of Lighthouse Youth Center is a beacon of light grounded in Christ and that very Word that works "one, by one, by one."

⁷ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 1996), John 8:12.

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