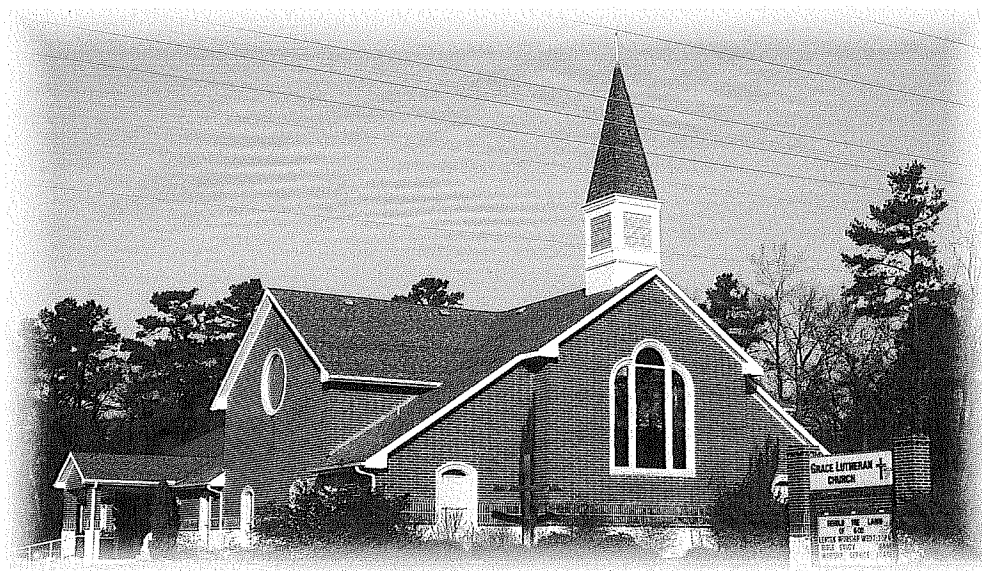


The Story of God's Grace in the Beginning of Grace Lutheran Church of Scroggins, Texas



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If you sneeze while traveling through rural Scroggins, Texas there's a good chance you'll miss it. In fact, Scroggins is so small that on many maps it doesn't even merit a tiny black dot. Even *Mapquest* acted puzzled the first time I put "Scroggins, Texas" into its query box. How then could there possibly be a Wisconsin Synod Lutheran church in, of all places, Scroggins, Texas? In a word—grace. From its very beginning, the story of Grace Lutheran Church in Scroggins, Texas is a story of the grace of our dear Lord.

I. The preliminary stage (pre 1991)

Despite the fact that Scroggins consists basically of a post office and a gas station/diner, the "greater Scroggins" area does have something special going for it—beautiful lakes. Lake Cypress Springs and Lake Bob Sandlin in particular. And the interesting thing about Texas lakes is that all of them but one, so I'm told, are man-made lakes. So one day in 1974, when Ted and Lois Burgdorf (charter members of Calvary Lutheran Church in Dallas) made the two hour trip out to East Texas from Dallas to camp with their six children as they often did in those days, Ted recalls, "Suddenly there's a lake here!"

Lake Cypress Springs quickly became a favorite getaway for the Burgdorfs. So much did they love the area that they sold the motor home they used to take out to East Texas and bought their first lake home the following year—1975. It was a little chalet in a development called Eldorado Bay. Ted didn't know it yet, but at the time, the development was in serious economic trouble. For two more years the Burgdorfs kept coming out to their home in Eldorado until, in 1977, Ted got word that Eldorado was bankrupt.

Realizing the investment potential of Eldorado Bay, without hesitating, Ted went to his banker with the intention of taking over the note. Inexplicably though, on the Monday that Ted was going to close the deal, he encountered a serious setback. Someone had beaten him to the punch.

The bank that held the note told him that someone else had moved in on the deal and they were ready to work with that other fellow instead.

Despite racing back with a cashier's check in hand to purchase Eldorado, Ted was denied. Perhaps the Lord didn't want the Burgdorfs to purchase the development. Or perhaps the Lord had even bigger plans in mind and was saying, "Just wait."

1979 was the year of the oil crunch. Between Christmas and New Year's Eve that year Ted got a call from the bank asking him if he'd still be willing to purchase Eldorado! Ted's response? "Only half expecting him to agree I told him, 'It's a new economy now. I'll give you half.'" A few days later the new owner of Eldorado Bay was none other than Ted Burgdorf.

After buying Eldorado development, the Burgdorfs had plenty of reasons to come out to East Texas more frequently. Ted though figured he really needed one more reason to make it more of a permanent move. That reason came in 1982 with the purchase of an automobile dealership in nearby Pittsburg, Texas which came to be known as Burgdorf Auto.

By 1982 a number of WELS families had found their way out to East Texas. Roy Green (who at the time was not yet a confirmed WELS member) and his family moved to Pittsburg when Ted asked Roy to run the dealership. Some folks, like Dave and Nita Bertram, had begun coming out to Eldorado Bay from the Metroplex with their families for vacations. Richard and Lena Burgdorf had also began coming out to the lake with their family for fun filled getaways from the big city. Dennis and Deb Ulman along with their son, Craig, had moved to Longview in 1981, then on to Winnsboro in 1986 where they helped take Rhonda Mahan and her children to church in Tyler. Rod and Georgia Lange, members from Calvary in Dallas, had migrated out permanently from the big city to the Winnsboro area already in the 1970s.

At this time nearly all the WELS folks living or vacationing in a 100 mile radius from Tyler made the trek every Sunday morning to Lonestar Lutheran Church (WELS) in Tyler. According to Deb Ulman:

When we moved to Longview in 1981 we were searching for churches. The closest WELS church was in Tyler. With Pastor Neumann we were holding services in a 7th Day Adventist building, then a union hall—all sorts of different places. Then with just a handful of us, including Rod and Georgia and Ted and Lois, it just kind of grew and we bought some land. We even finally moved into our own church. But for some reason the church in Tyler just never took hold. We had trouble getting the locals. There was a huge Missouri Synod church in town with a fancy building. We had ten families tops. It was real real small. Just when we really started to get things going under our new pastor, Pastor Kupke, he died. I guess the Lord just had other plans for us there.

Those plans it seems, were to take place not in an urban area like Tyler, but in the lake country.

Despite the fact, or perhaps because of the fact that many of the WELS members who were living or vacationing in the lake country had been making the sixty plus mile trip to Tyler every Sunday, Ted Burgdorf and Roy Green began cooking up plans for a Lutheran church a little bit closer to home.

When asked how long they had been thinking about having a church in the lake country, Lois Burgdorf replied, "Forever! The more we came out the more we realized there was a need for this area too. Perhaps also there was a little ulterior motive so we didn't have to drive so far."

Myrl Wagenknecht, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Fort Worth and circuit pastor at the time of the Dallas-Ft. Worth circuit, remembers that in 1990 Ted had first inquired about starting a mission station in Pittsburg, Texas. Ted was on the South Central District's Mission Board at the time. And even though, according to Ted, nothing ever materialized on that suggestion, a seed had been planted.

Initially though not everyone was as excited as Ted and Roy about the idea of starting a mission in the lake country. It was out of genuine concern for Lonestar Lutheran in Tyler that people were at first a bit subdued in their enthusiasm to start what is now Grace congregation.

Debbie Ulman recalls a conversation that she had with Pastor Quandt of Tyler who told her, "Someday you're going to have a church in Scroggins." Deb remembers thinking, "Yeah, right. Scroggins is just a tiny dot on the map and we're having trouble getting it going here in Tyler." Then when Deb heard from Ted and Roy that they were going to check out property in the Franklin/Wood/Camp county area for a church, her initial reaction was disappointment. "I kind of liked the drive into the big city and I thought we'd miss out on seeing all our friends. But once Grace got started that shorter drive sure was nice."

Pastor Wagenknecht, also a member of the South Central District Mission Board, was likewise a bit apprehensive at first about starting a congregation in the Scroggins area. His chief concern was regarding Lonestar congregation in Tyler. Already back in 1973 Pastors Walter Diehl and Myrl Wagenknecht had made begun to make exploratory visits to the Longview/Tyler area. Considering all the work that had gone into establishing Lonestar congregation in Tyler and because of Tyler's location and population, Myrl just felt that Tyler was a place the WELS needed to have a church:

From the beginning, Ted had to work very hard on me to get started here [in Scroggins]. I was very committed to seeing Tyler go with its population. I felt we just had to maintain that congregation there at Tyler. It made sense to have roots in Tyler and I didn't think it would hurt those families to keep driving to Tyler because the first roots to break through a wall are tiny and small, but when they break through then they can really grow.

Yet despite the fact that initially Pastor Wagenknecht was hesitant to get on board for a church in the lake country he agreed to tour the Tri-county area (Franklin, Wood and Camp counties) with his fellow mission board member, Ted Burgdorf, on February 21, 1991. As they traveled along Hwy. 115 and then later came out of the Kings Country development on the north shore of Lake Cypress Springs, Ted happened to spot a restaurant for sale. Pastor Wagenknecht recalls Ted saying, "Hey, that would be a nice place for a church!" But would the Lord agree with Ted or would He say, "Just wait?"

As it turns out there wasn't a whole lot of waiting that was going to be done from this point on. Plans for a church and a pastor were about to get going in a hurry. After consulting his red daily planner for 1991 (It's amazing isn't it that someone would be so organized as to keep one of those things for 15 years!?), Pastor Wagenknecht informed me that on March 2 of that same year, 1991, Ted made a phone call to the realtor of that restaurant that was for sale. And lo and behold, the realtor and the restaurant owner just happened to be the same person. The real estate office was in fact inside the restaurant. The fellow's name was Dave Binns—a Lutheran by conviction.

II. The Pancake House Stage (1991-1999)

Dave Binns' wife, Fran, had always dreamed of running a restaurant. God, however, it seems had different plans. In Dave's words, "God set us up to be a failure at the restaurant business. If you want to make God laugh...make a plan!" Fran reasons, "We had too good a menu at first—too many marvelous Cajun recipes with too many expensive things!" Dave's plans had never really included running a restaurant. He had wanted to rent out the building across from Kings Country as a storage facility, not to run as a restaurant. And if Dave had gotten his way? "We'd be a lot richer, but we'd probably still be unchurched. I sure am happy we had to close that restaurant!"

Dave and Fran Binns had been members of the Lutheran Church of America (LCA, which is now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the ELCA) in Allen, Texas. In 1988 they moved out to Lake Cypress Springs where they bought a home in the Kings Country development. There was no Lutheran church in the immediate area. However, not to be deterred, Dave and Fran took part in an effort, along with the pastor of the ELCA church in Greenville, to establish an ELCA congregation in nearby Mt. Vernon. Their group worshiped for a time in the Methodist church in Mt. Vernon, but no congregation resulted from their efforts. Later Dave had a

heart attack and he began to think to himself, “You’re unchurched Dave. This isn’t good.” For a number of years in fact Dave and Fran had been without a church home.

Until Ted Burgdorf called. Ted: “You got that restaurant for sale? We’re looking for a building to start a Lutheran church.” Dave: “Well good. I’m looking to get rid of this place and I’m not churched...but I’m a Lutheran. Maybe we can start a church together.” It didn’t take long before Ted met Dave and Fran face to face. He talked with them a bit about the differences between Lutheran denominations and gave them a WELS “This We Believe” tract.

How long did it take Dave and Fran to realize that they had found a new church home in the WELS—one rooted in Scripture? “It took a nanosecond” remembers Fran. “Ted brought us some material about the WELS and when I read it I thought, ‘This is my belief!’ At the time we just didn’t realize what the ELCA was. So the next time I met Ted in the parking lot I told him, ‘This is what I truly believe!’ Ted was the only one I had met, but we knew we wanted to be a part of starting this church.”

The start of Grace congregation really got going on March 16, 1991 when the first formal informational meeting of “Lake Country Lutherans and others”¹ was held at the former pancake house. Pastor Myrl Wagenknecht conducted the meeting. Incredibly, thirty-three people were in attendance—including two LCMS (Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) pastors, one from Mt. Pleasant and the other from Sulphur Springs. Ted Burgdorf recalls, “Those guys were spying on us. They didn’t introduce themselves, but I knew them. And the one from Sulphur Springs told me, ‘It won’t work.’ They didn’t get in the picture that was taken, but they were there.”

At this meeting it was decided that the nucleus of families was interested in applying for exploratory mission status from the WELS General Board for Home Missions (GBHM).

¹ From the Historical Highlights of Grace Church section in the 1999 worship folder for the dedication of the new sanctuary.

Exploratory status would have provided the group with money and manpower to get a church up and running until such time when it would become a self-supporting congregation.

In a summary letter that Ted Burgdorf wrote to all interested people he enthusiastically notes:

Saturday evening of the 16th of March was a thrilling day for Lake Country Lutherans! Though the weather was cool, rainy, and blustery, 33 people turned up in a show of support for the informational meeting which precedes the establishment of a WELS mission congregation in the area. . . During the week of April 15th, Pastor James Tauscher, president of our district mission board and Tracy Linn, lay member of our D.M.B., will be in Milwaukee to formally request synod exploratory status with fulltime manpower. They will carry with them unsigned pledges of over \$2000.00 per month in financial support given by those of you in attendance at the informational meeting. We ask your prayers that the general board will grant this request, though we must realize that the synodical budget is strained, man power is short and that the board cannot possibly grant all the requests that it will receive.²

On behalf of the group, Pastor Wagenknecht filled out a BIRF (Basic Information and Request Form), something he was quite familiar with from his many days on the mission board. The BIRF requested exploratory status from the WELS and a resident pastor to work in Franklin, Wood, Camp and Titus counties using a nucleus of about a dozen families. The estimated amount of time it would take to become self-supporting was listed as three years. Those families present at the meeting who helped form that nucleus included Doug and Sherry Burgdorf's family, Roy Green's, Rod and Georgia Lange's, Rhonda Mahan's, Dennis and Deb Ulman's, Dave and Nita Bertram's, Richard and Lena Burgdorf's, Ted and Lois Burgdorf's, Art and Dorothy Lassila, and Dave and Fran Binns.

On the BIRF Pastor Wagenknecht described the group as committed to outreach: "We are looking to provide a future home for Lutherans moving to the Lake Country without a Lutheran Church and to reach the unchurched community in the new developments." Under "leadership

² Letters and correspondence given to me by Ted and Lois Burgdorf.

potential” he wrote: “strong, able, excited and ready to get to work, good spirit for evangelism work.”³

An interesting side note to this meeting is that the group stressed evangelism and ran through a brief five point presentation on how to witness. On a letter he submitted as an addendum to the BIRF, Pastor Wagenknecht humorously notes, “Fran liked the FRAN approach to evangelism.” FRAN evangelism (Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances, Neighbors) was basically what people call “friendship evangelism” today, but in the presence of the bubbly Fran Binns it took on a whole new meaning. All things taken into consideration on the request form, Pastor Wagenknecht felt that “the package was so delicious that the BHM (Board for Home Missions) just couldn’t say no.”

It’s been said that the Board for Home Missions has never denied a mission, only deferred. Accordingly, on April 15, 1991 word came back from Milwaukee that the WELS had deferred the request of the Lake Country Lutherans for exploratory status “due to a lack of funds in the synod’s mission treasury.”⁴ So how would the group react? A crushing blow to group moral? A major obstacle to overcome?

Another organizational meeting had already been scheduled for April 20, 1991 at 6:15 pm at the former pancake house. The group’s reaction to the news of being deferred exploratory status was somewhat mixed. “We don’t need them. We’re determined,” was how Fran Binns put it to me. Richard Burgdorf agreed, “We thought, ‘Big deal. We can do it ourselves.’” Richard’s brother, Ted, says, “We were all a bit disappointed. But I tried to cheer everybody up by saying, ‘You don’t know how lucky you are that you don’t have to deal with the mission board!’” (And this coming from a man who willingly and faithfully served on the South Central District Mission Board for 18 years!)

³ Information from a copy of the BIRF given to me by Pastor Wagenknecht as well as from a letter he submitted as an addendum to the BIRF.

⁴ From the Historical Highlights of Grace Church section in the 1999 worship folder for the dedication of the new sanctuary.

Deb Ulman's reaction was, "It didn't dampen our spirits. We thought, 'We can do this!' We came out of that meeting even more encouraged." It wasn't as if the group didn't want help from the WELS. It was just that together they believed that by the grace of God they could accomplish whatever plans God had in store for them as a group of committed Christians—even if that meant turning to plan B.

Just what was plan B? Leading that second organizational meeting on April 20, 1991 Pastor Wagenknecht said, "Let FRAN do it." Myrl told me, "At that time, we got serious. We decided to go through a series of basic doctrine classes and starting May 2 every Thursday evening we went through two classes a night." Incidentally, it was during these doctrine classes that Dave and Fran Binns became WELS members as well as Roy Green who had been a strong supporter of the WELS for a number of years but hadn't yet taken the time to go through an intensive doctrine class.

At this meeting a few other intriguing developments took place. By the end of the meeting there was such a positive attitude among the group that they decided to take an anonymous, informal poll on pieces of paper as to how much money each family could contribute weekly towards supporting a church. In doing this they discovered that together they could come up with enough money to support a retired pastor who would serve on a part time basis. Encouraged by the understanding that they could support a pastor on their own, the group decided to go ahead with plans to form an official self-supporting WELS congregation.

Another important development at this meeting is that the group chose a name for their new church. According to Deb Ulman, "They passed around a hat. Everyone picked a name, put it on a piece of paper and threw it in the hat. 'Grace' just happened to win out." On top of that, the former pancake house seemed a natural choice in which to begin their church. And so, in a summary letter composed by Ted Burgdorf to all interested people, he writes:

Dear Fellow Christians,

On April 15th the priority committee of the GBHM (General Board for Home Missions), with tough decisions presented to them, decided to defer exploratory status and manpower for East Texas lake country.

On April 20th, a nucleus of 28 lake country Lutherans met with one united purpose in mind, that purpose being to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unchurched in the Tri-County area of Camp, Franklin and Wood counties of East Texas. Current population of the target area is 44,000 and contains no Lutheran church of any description in its Tri-County boundaries.

The group accepted the GBHM deferral as a mixed blessing, as Pastor Wagenknecht led them in the following decisions:

1. To organize an independent, self supporting congregation to be named Grace Lutheran Church of Lake Country, and apply for a state charter.
2. To hold a series of five Bible information and doctrine classes to be conducted by Pastors Wagenknecht of Ft. Worth and Lau of Tyler. These classes are designed to prepare non-Lutherans for membership and to refresh current members in the basic principles of Lutheran doctrine. These classes will start on Thursday, May 2nd at 7:30 pm and will continue on each of the 5 Thursdays in May. All are welcome!
3. To apply for membership in WELS and ask So. Central District President Rev. Vilas Glaeske to furnish them with a call list from which they will issue a call for a Pastor.
4. To hold the first service on June 9th and request President Glaeske to deliver the first sermon.
5. To establish a planning committee to act until the formal congregation of officers, trustees & committees.
6. To purchase the present 2000 sq. ft. meeting facility at 4431 Highway 115, Scroggins, Texas, 75480. This property is ideally located directly across from the Kings Country entrance to Lake Cypress Springs.
7. An annual budget of \$35,000.00 to \$45,000.00 per year was discussed and an offering of \$1900.00 was received from those present. Rod Lange volunteered to be temporary treasurer and will open an account in the name of Grace Lutheran Church.

To summarize, in one evening, the Lord led this group to make decisions which ordinarily do not occur until 6 months to 2 years into the life of a new mission. May the Holy Spirit add new souls to His kingdom while we support this new mission with our prayers, presence and contributions.

Even though the first official service of Grace Lutheran Church was set for Sunday, June 9th, the group gathered for worship on each of the Sundays leading up to that day. An average of thirty

people watched video taped sermons that Pastor Wagenknecht had made for them. The local paper published a picture of the group under the heading, "Lutherans To Form Lake Country Church" along with information on how to find out more about the church. Ads were placed in the local papers for the first official service of Grace Lutheran Church saying in bold print, "YOU ARE INVITED."

During the month of May and extending all throughout the year extensive cleaning and renovations were made on the restaurant in order to turn it into a church. Deb Ulman recalls, "Basically when we moved into the pancake house it was a restaurant: sinks, exhaust fans, ovens, salad tables. We had big garage sales—it was fun. Sherry [Burgdorf] and I got involved in that. Everybody pitched in and helped." Dave and Fran Binns both credit Rod Lange as being instrumental in what they called "de-greasing" the restaurant: "Rod just couldn't stand that smell. He was absolutely steadfast in his resolve to de-grease that place. He was really the key in renovating the pancake house and the kitchen. He really fixed it up. He was so willing to work and he had an ability to motivate the people to help him."

But the credit for all that cleaning and renovating doesn't being or end with any one person. "We didn't have a slacker in the bunch," Fran says. Dave and Fran especially give credit also to Georgia Lange, Sherry Burgdorf and Deb Ulman for everything they helped with during those first few months. In addition, during this time a dozen willing volunteers pitched in to install chancel walls. An altar, lectern, pulpit and baptismal font were obtained from King of Kings Lutheran Church in Alexandria, Louisiana. Pastor and Mrs. John Gaertner donated an electronic organ. Hymnals were also donated. Volunteers landscaped the grounds. The restaurant was becoming a church.

Already by May 14, the state of Texas officially approved the articles of incorporation for the group and granted a certificate of incorporation. Much of the work in this regard was willingly done

by Ted Burgdorf's attorney, Marc Wooten. He obtained non-profit status for the church and did it all for free. The church was now official.

So with all things ready for the big day, the first official service of Grace Lutheran Church took place on Sunday, June 9, 1991 at 10 am. South Central District President, Pastor Vilas Glaeske, at the time pastor of Christ the Lord congregation in Houston, preached. His sermon text was Joshua 24:15 and he used the theme "We Are Committed To Serve The LORD." Miss Leah Burgdorf served as organist. Sixty-eight people were in attendance, many of whom were WELS members from congregations in the DFW area. In everyone's memory it was an exciting, joyous day—a day to thank our gracious God. Grace Lutheran Church had an excited nucleus of families, a building they were all happy with, and now an official opening service. Only one thing was still missing—a pastor.

On May 16, 1991 Rev. David Zietlow of Anchorage, Alaska received the first call to serve Grace congregation. A few days after Grace's first official service however, Pastor Zietlow returned the call. One other man declined the call to serve as the first resident pastor of Grace until August 11, 1991 when Pastor Norman Berg notified the congregation that he had accepted it. During those months without a pastor, worship continued unabated every Sunday led by various pastors and vicars who, in many cases, came from as far away as Houston to lead worship on a Sunday. On occasion worshipers watched a video taped sermon prepared by Pastor Wagenknecht. Georgia Lange and Sherry Burgdorf also conducted Sunday School classes during this time as well.

Pastor Berg's installation service was set for Sunday, September 29th at 5:30 pm. Rev. John Vieths of Calvary in Dallas would be the preacher. District President Glaeske would perform the rite of installation. Again ads appeared in the local newspapers inviting the community to the special service, these ones sporting pictures of the snowy haired Rev. Norman W. Berg. 148 people

attended the installation service! A previous newspaper ad had said that the interior of the newly renovated Grace Lutheran Church could “accommodate 100 worshippers.”⁵

Together with his wife Eleanor, Pastor Berg had served parishes in Arizona and Michigan from 1944-1968. Pastor Berg had been the district president for the eastern third of the United States as well as vice president of the WELS. In addition, from 1968-1988 he served as the administrator of the General Board for Home Mission of the WELS. Now Grace congregation had called Pastor Berg to be a semi-retired pastor.

But from the get-go, even though Pastor Berg was officially a semi-retired pastor, the congregation remained committed to advancing the gospel and growing. In a letter Dave Binns sent to the members of Grace concerning Pastor Berg’s installation he writes:

We have been blessed by Pastor Berg’s acceptance of our call and we have been blessed in many other ways as we have endeavored to start our mission church. Everyone has pulled together and we have accomplished much in a short time, but the Lord’s work is never finished so we encourage everyone to work harder and remember that this new phase of growth will require all of the talents and money that we can give as well as our evangelistic efforts to bring others to hear the Word. We should all thank those that have supported us with their prayers. We could not have done without the prayerful support of the WELS, the District Mission Board and our many fellow Christians throughout the District.

Pastor Berg faithfully served Grace Lutheran Church as its pastor for three years until his final retirement in September of 1994. In July of 1994 Grace congregation hosted the celebration of Pastor Berg’s 50th anniversary in the public ministry. He was much loved by the people he was privileged to serve.

Dave and Fran Binns remember, “He was absolutely perfect for the beginning of our church. Everybody followed his lead. He would put his mark on everybody. He had such a gift for speaking and such a sense of humor. He played golf at the country club and so many people would tell us, ‘You have such a wonderful pastor!’ And he used to put the most beautiful things on the old

⁵ Ad in the Mt. Vernon Optic-Herald dated June 7, 1991 which was printed for the first service of Grace Lutheran church.

restaurant signboard we had out front of the church—things like ‘We’ve got room for one more sinner.’”

In addition to similar comments like, “Everybody loved Norm Berg,” with a smile on her face Deb Ulman also remembers those signs. In fact, she recalls that many folks in the community remembered them too. “The big thing in the community was those signs. Everybody would comment on them. In fact I’d run into people in the grocery store who said they drove out of their way to go down Hwy. 115 just to see what was on our sign that week.”

So just what could be so catchy about the slogans on an old restaurant marquee that would cause people in the community to take a sight seeing detour? Deb Ulman kept a photo album of pictures she had taken of the first three years of the congregation. In a number of pictures I could make out the slogan on the church signboard. It almost goes without saying that Pastor Berg had an apparent fondness for exclamation points. Here are my top ten:

10. RE-CREATION CENTER!
9. GOD SAYS—READ MY LIPS!
8. “HEELS” AND SOULS REPAIRED HERE!
7. GRACE LUTHERAN OBSERVES LENT!
6. BEST FISHING REPORT AROUND!
5. ONLY TURKEYS DON’T GIVE THANKS!
4. GOD’S VALENTINE: I LOVE YOU!
3. GOD’S VALENTINE: I LOVE Y’ALL! (One can see the difference a year in Texas had on Pastor Berg by comparing numbers 4 and 3.)
2. JESUS IS COMING. HOW ABOUT YOU?
1. LUTHERANS ARE NOT “SOUR” KRAUTS!

During Pastor Berg’s three years in Scroggins, a number of significant developments took place. On April 26, 1992 the voter’s assembly officially adopted the church constitution. On June 28, 1992 the first church council was elected. Dave Binns was the president. Rod Lange was the treasurer. Art Lassila was the secretary. Other officers included Doug Burgdorf as financial secretary and Jerry Ferguson as head usher. In 1993, Grace congregation purchased and used the new hymnal, Christian Worship, for the first time. In September of 1993, at the same time Pastor

Berg announced his forthcoming retirement the next year, the congregation established a building fund for a future new church building. The congregation purchased the parsonage which they had previously been renting at 206 King Nicholas Rd. By the end of 1993 membership stood at 46 baptized souls and 33 communicant members. On July 15, 1994 the congregation held a service of thanksgiving marking Pastor Berg's fiftieth anniversary in the public ministry. Pastor Wagenknecht recalls Norm Berg telling him that his years in Scroggins were "the happiest years of my entire ministry." God had been graciously blessing Grace Lutheran Church.

One further example of God's grace to the congregation during this time was that Dave and Fran Binns donated to Grace what remained of the payments that the congregation was to make to them for their former restaurant. Their reasoning? "We were so terribly excited for the congregation, so enthusiastic, so thrilled. Our hearts were just bubbling over and because of the ownership of the property this was a way we knew we could help."

In April of 1994, because they knew that Pastor Berg was retiring in September, Grace congregation extended a divine call to Pastor Carl Voss of Green Bay, WI to serve as their next pastor on a semi-retired basis. Word came back from Pastor Voss the next month that he had accepted the call. Pastor Berg's farewell service was held on September 11, 1994. Pastor Voss was installed on October 2 with familiar faces Pastor Vilas Glaeske preaching and Pastor Myrl Wagenknecht conducting the rite of installation.

Grace congregation loved Pastor Carl Voss together with his wife Margaret just as much as they loved Norm and Eleanor Berg. Lena Burgdorf says, "The wives of both those pastors just fit in so well among us." And Pastor Voss was also just as hard a worker as Pastor Berg. A number of people commented about their semi-retired pastors, "They gave 110% for the amount of time and work they put in to getting us off the ground."

III. The permanent sanctuary stage (1996-Present)

The largest part of “getting us off the ground” that Pastor Voss played was the counsel and direction he gave in the process of gearing up for building a permanent new sanctuary. Roy Green says, “He was a strong leader who would not let us get off course. He’d say, “This is what we’re talking about here!”” On September 22, 1996 the congregation took a big step in that direction when they established a \$100,000 building fund drive for a new church, being “convinced that a new facility would make a strong statement to the community that Grace Congregation is establishing itself as a congregation eager to serve all people with the Gospel.”⁶

So just when did the congregation determine that a new church would, God-willing, be in their future? Did they always plan on building a larger worship facility or were they at least for a time content with what they had in the former pancake house?

Everyone agrees that Grace congregation was overjoyed and thankful just to have the building that they had in which to worship at the time. People were content and glad to be where they were in the former restaurant. The idea to perhaps someday build a larger worship facility happened, as Richard Burgdorf says, “Step by step when our congregation kept growing and it started to get a little cramped.” Pastor Voss remembers:

It wasn’t my goal at first to get a new church built. I would say my primary goal in the beginning was to see what kind of prospects were in the area and to build up the congregation, to get them involved and encourage them to bring people to church with them. But Ted was convinced that permanently worshipping in a pancake house would be detrimental to our long-term future, leaving the impression that we were just a fly by night outfit. So he helped get the machinery moving...and everything just clicked. The whole congregation got enthused about it. Knowing the people who were behind it, I had no negative thoughts. I knew it would go.

At least in part the rapid speed at which things got going happened because on December 31, 1996 Grace congregation received a statement of intent for 1997 on the part of Roy Green together with Ted and Lois Burgdorf to supply the congregation with a loan of \$100,000 to cover the exact amount of the hoped for building fund goal. The letter began by saying, “Recognizing that

⁶ From Historical Highlights of Grace Church in the bulletin for the dedication of the new church in 1999.

the Good Lord has richly blessed us not only with His grace, but also with material goods, we will co-sign a note in the principal amount of up to \$100,000, the proceeds of said note to be payable to Grace Lutheran Church Building Fund upon the start of new construction.”

In the same letter it was also stated that, “It is our prayer that if the Good Lord grants growth according to His pleasure, that the congregation would participate in the note repayment as able...for reduction of said note payment.” After trying to determine from the financial records of Grace just how much of that note has been repaid over time, I discovered what I had been suspecting. That note never has been repaid. It was in reality not a loan, but rather a gift.

The statement of intent reads at the top, “From the Desk of Ted Burgdorf,” but when I asked him about what was, in effect, that \$100,000 gift, Ted was very quick to shift the bulk of the credit to Roy Green: “Basically the dealership just paid for it. So much was Roy’s doing. You can’t short-change what Roy wanted to do. He’s just very generous and for all the right reasons.” When I asked Roy about this gift, he commented:

Every time we needed something the Lord came through for us. I bought a café only because my friend advised me to. And that café brought \$100,000 in profit. It made the money that started the church. That money was really always going to be a donation—that was my idea anyway. If just one person gets the opportunity to be saved by it it’s all worth it. I never gave it a second thought. It all comes from the Lord after all.

But as much credit as Ted and Roy deserve for their financial backing, often quietly behind the scenes, people are even more quick to credit them for their leadership and encouragement—even though Roy will always quickly respond, “Ted always sees farther down the road than I do.” And yet as Pastor Voss recalls, “Roy Green went all out in showing in interest in having a church built. He did an awful lot behind the scenes. Before we even got started he used to point out to me all kinds of different church buildings that he thought would be good for us.” One comment sums up what numerous people have said, “Ted and Roy were our motivators. They had the big visions.”

Besides Ted and Roy, the vision for a big church, however, belongs in large part to Richard Burgdorf who was, in essence, the architect who designed the grand new church building. Richard, who had previously built Atonement Lutheran Church in Plano with his own construction crew, drew up the plans himself with some help from Rod Lange. These plans remained nearly unchanged even by the time the church was completed.

Everybody had their input into the design of the new church to some degree. Initially it was suggested at the planning committee meetings that Grace could possibly make use of the church plan from Grace in Lowell, Arkansas perhaps with a few modifications. However, after investigating their building project the building committee of Grace in Scroggins agreed that they could build the best possible church by doing it themselves.

The question of whether or not to hire an architect was answered by Richard Burgdorf, “No, I can do that.” Richard says, “I knew what hiring an architect would cost so I took it upon myself to come up with a design and investigate. I had learned from Plano, where we had to add on in short order because of quick growth, to make it big enough to meet our future needs. So I started drawing and looking at plans until I came up with what we have now.” Alas though, Lena Burgdorf’s dream plan of having a fireplace in the pastor’s study never materialized. Laughing about that, Lena remarked to her husband in her own defense, “Mary Traugott was for it though!” High ceilings perhaps, but no fireplaces.

Even though Richard drew up the plans for the church, “doing it themselves” never meant doing it alone. No one can underestimate the huge role that Builders for Christ played in building the new sanctuary. When asked how Grace knew when it was time to start building, Ted Burgdorf replied, “When we found out the Builders [for Christ] could come!”

It’s quite a story. Officially, March 11, 1998 is the day that Grace congregation asked Builders for Christ (a branch of WELS Kingdom Workers made up largely of volunteers—mostly

retired couples who travel in their RV's and help build churches and schools) for help. Builders for Christ was finishing a project in San Antonio and they then agreed to help with the framing of Grace's new building on their way back north.

This agreement came about as a result of a phone conversation that Ted Burgdorf had with David Timm, head of Kingdom Workers, early that year in 1998. According to Ted:

He called me. The builders were adding on to the educational building in San Antonio. And San Antonio has a rule that you can't park an RV within 20 miles of the city. So David Timm, knowing I had the dealership, called to ask me if I had a van that they could use to get back and forth from work. Half joking I said, "Yes, but only if they stop here on their way back and build us our church!" I mean, the land [for the church] wasn't even cleared yet. So when we found out that the builders were going to stop here on their way back home for Easter we had to really work to get that slab poured.

The Builders for Christ were coming. But at first some folks were just a little bit skeptical about what kind of work they could do. Being a builder by profession, Richard assessed the situation this way:

I already had framers lined up. I wasn't against having them [the Builders for Christ] do it. But I knew they only had a certain amount of time and they couldn't climb certain pitches and go over certain heights. And in fact they broke all those rules and they were happy to do it. They did leave us in a lurch for a year. But they came back the following year [in 1999] and finished the job. And they did really really nice work. Where we would nail things together, they used screws and glue. Dar Hoefs pretty much headed things up and his wife did a lot of work too. Some wives were so active. They would go shopping for materials and things. Dar Hoefs and Marty Leyrer were the two main innovators. It was like they were in the army, "Do this right now, then take a break and get back to work!"

Ted Burgdorf remembers, "There were 11 couples who worked for 11 days straight—everyday save Sunday. And I mean they punched the clock! Full work days! They started early, finished late and didn't take many breaks. And their compensation was simply snacks that our ladies of Grace made for them and Vineyard's lunches."

Were people surprised at the quality of the finished product? "Oh yes," says Ted. "In fact Rod Lange and Richard were really skeptical at first, but we were all just so impressed and very thankful. Dar Hoefs, the project manager, and Rod Lange were both big guys and as Dar left, Rod

gave him a great big bear hug...and Rod's not that kind of guy! We never could have built such a wonderful church if Builders for Christ had not voluntarily put in the kind of work that they did."

Pastor Voss likewise is very thankful for everything that the Builders for Christ workers accomplished:

It hadn't been my idea to have them come because I thought they usually came just for mission congregations and not self-supporting congregations. But when I found out that they were coming I said, "Fine!" I sang my Te Deums! And it was a wonderful fellowship experience. They were gifted, concerned men. They worked together. They kept in mind the thoughts and feelings of the congregation in no way wanting to assert themselves in such a way that would hurt the feelings of the congregation.

Chief among the Builders for Christ crew was Dar Hoefs and his wife Judy. Second manager on the project was Marty Leyrer and his wife Rose. Other couples who so generously gave of their time in 1998, 1999 or both to help build Grace church include William and Shirley Brown with their son Aaron, Don and Imie Fictum, Harold Jackle, Dale and Margery Jacobson, Paul and Pearl Kock, Stanley and Lola Kruse, Bernie and Betty Markham, Art and Eunice Meyer, Harold and Valeria Schultz, John and Lynn Wempner, Roy and Betty Zastrow, Leroy and Kate Gaertner, Miles and Shirley Gladitsch, Norm and Ella Frey, Howard Zimdahl, Tom and Dorie Heyn, and John and Barbara Bubolz.⁷

In addition to the Builders for Christ members who volunteered so many hours, countless members of Grace Lutheran Church also volunteered many hours to the project. Deb Ulman remarks about her husband, "Dennis had the best time of his life. He took two weeks of vacation, worked on the church and had a really great time getting to know the builders." The same I'm quite sure could be said for Pastor Voss. People still have fond memories of seeing him coming to help work while riding in on his bicycle with a tall Green Bay Packers flag on it.

⁷ This list of Builders for Christ workers and their home addresses was given to me by Ted and Lois Burgdorf. It comes with a disclaimer that it's possible someone's name was left off this list who helped build Grace in Scroggins. Any such folks can have the confidence that their unheralded contributions are still greatly appreciated by Grace congregation and known by their Lord!

“Pastor Voss was amazing,” Deb says. “When the builders were working, he was working, everyday. And then he insisted on going way up on that scaffolding, on a ladder, to put the cross on the steeple. That just amazed me that someone his age could do that, but he said he was going to do it!”

Constructing the church steeple was a difficult project that Richard Burgdorf headed up. He designed it so that the Builders for Christ could do it, but they never got to it. As a result, Richard, Lloyd Martinson, Ed Schulze, Pastor Voss and a host of other volunteers all helped to construct it. About Pastor Voss, Richard remembers, “He just pitched right in and was such a great deal of help. He would actually get mad at me if I’d be working at church on a Saturday, even for an hour or two, and I didn’t call him to help. Pastor Voss put in a lot of hours with me building the steeple and he did things nobody else would do.” Pastor Voss thoroughly seemed to enjoy the work. Lena Burgdorf once asked him how old he felt up there by the steeple to which Pastor Voss answered, “Sixteen!” About putting the cross on the peak of the steeple Pastor Voss remembers: “Oh, that was fun! My wife was concerned a couple times about me up there but of course Richard saw to it that it wouldn’t be dangerous for me and we helped one another. That was one time I could sing “Lift High the Cross” and make it a visible demonstration!”

All throughout 1998-1999 work was carried out on the church. The organ was the last thing to be installed, on August 2, 1999. Work was complete. The only things still to be added were the beautiful stain glass windows present today which Lena Burgdorf initially sketched out and which were modified slightly by Pastor Vilas Glaeske in 2000.

During this time also the question came up as to what the congregation was going to do with their old church, the former restaurant. Since the new church was going to be more than adequate for worship, most people seemed in favor of selling it. And for a time the pancake house was actually up for sale. There were no takers on it right away, however, and one man had other plans

for it. Those plans were centered around using the old church for the Christian education of the congregation's children. He also wanted to at least retain the possibility of using it one day as a Christian Day School. Roy Green says, "After this sanctuary got built, we were going to sell the old church to clear the note—I think there was an offer on it of \$50,000—and before that meeting I said to Ted, "Why don't we just pay that note. And he said 'fine with me.' I just knew we needed it, for kids and all. I knew for \$50,000—we couldn't replace it for that." Although plans for a Lutheran Elementary School or perhaps a pre-school haven't yet materialized⁸, the old church still serves every Sunday as the Youth Center for Sunday School classes.

A groundbreaking service was held on February 2, 1998. The cornerstone laying took place on September 9th. In the cornerstone, in a copper box, the congregation placed a few items that were to declare the congregation's commitment to its mission: a Bible, a catechism, a hymnbook, a copy of the church constitution, Sunday School materials, a few pictures and some autographs of the Sunday School kids. The dedication service for the new church was finally held on August 8, 1999. By this time Pastor Voss had announced his desire to retire by September 15 to enter full retirement. The dedication service of the new church was nearly his farewell. Pastor Voss preached on Psalm 127 using the theme, "A New House of Worship: God's Gift to Us in Christ!" Calvary Lutheran Church from Dallas supplied a brass ensemble. It was a time to celebrate God's grace to Grace Lutheran Church of Scroggins, Texas. The service folder for that dedication concludes:

THANKS TO THE MANY who in many ways contributed of their time, their talents and their treasures to make this a beautiful, edifying occasion. Your labors and gifts of love are deeply appreciated. May God in his grace remember you for your service.

Additional thanks are extended to those directly involved in the construction of the building, namely, the Planning/Building Committee, designers, members of the congregation, Builders for Christ, contractors and suppliers. The spirit of harmony and helpfulness throughout the construction period was a joy to witness and experience.

⁸ Pastor Voss remarked to me, "At that time we had a vision to have an educational unit between the pancake house and the church."

Above all, thanks to our gracious God for his blessings upon the project. May he continue to favor the congregation with every good as it serves him in its mission of spreading the Gospel.

IV. Concluding Comments

Pastor Voss headed for retirement back in Wisconsin just one month after dedicating the new church, but the ministry of Grace continued as it always does when one called worker leaves. Pastor Vilas Glaeske, the same man who had been involved in all the previous call meetings for Grace as the district president, was the next man to accept the call to Grace.

A person might wonder just how a district president receives another call to a different congregation within his own district. As Pastor Glaeske describes it, "At the call meeting...pretty quick the motion was made and seconded to put my name on the list and then I said, "Ok now, it's time for me to leave. I can no longer be a part of this meeting. And so the next person I talked to said, 'Congratulations, you got the call!' ...And I just couldn't find any peace in my heart until I said yes." This time around, however, Grace had not called a semi-retired pastor, but a full time pastor who was also the South Central District President of the WELS.

Thus, along with Pastor Glaeske and his wife Ruth, Grace congregation was also served for a time by Associate Pastor Heath Butler and his wife Sarah. The Butlers came in 2000 and left in 2003 when Heath took a call to be pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Manassas, Virginia. Pastor Glaeske's associate pastor then became Vicar Nathan Kassulke in '03-'04. Vicar Benjamin Kuerth with his wife Sarah served at Grace in '04-'05, and, as I write this, Vicar Bradley Taylor with his wife Molly in '05-'06. God continues to be gracious to Grace Lutheran Church and to those privileged to serve there.

So what is it that makes Grace such a special congregation? Who deserves the credit for what the people of Grace congregation have accomplished? Dave and Fran Binns, who moved away from the lake country in 1996 before the new church was built say, "We never would have

imagined it would have grown to what it is today or that we could have built such a beautiful church! Certainly God deserves all the credit! Secondly, Grace survived because all of the people love the Lord. We were united in our effort and there was never a harsh word spoken to another.”

Ted and Lois Burgdorf likewise feel humbled by God’s grace. “The Holy Spirit has used us and blessed us and what a joy it’s been. And look at all the friends we’ve made and the joy they’ve brought! All praise and thanks to the Lord! The Lord’s grace is just overwhelming.”

God’s grace motivated God’s people to give generously, frequently and proportionately of their time, talents and treasure. While it cannot be understated how significant it was that there were individuals, blessed by the Lord, within that early nucleus who were able to give generously of their earthly wealth, that fact alone cannot account for the growth and success of Grace Lutheran Church. Nor does anyone like Ted Burgdorf or Roy Green have any desire to claim the credit for themselves. “To God alone the glory!” they both said to me. Pastor Voss remarks about the whole congregation, “The Holy Spirit was working through those people—giving them the vision, the wherewithal, the enthusiasm, the stick-to-itiveness. Nobody wanted to be put on a pedestal. It was a wonderful place to end my ministry.”

Richard Burgdorf, Ted’s brother, helps put a good perspective on the whole development of Grace congregation:

Financially everyone gave as they were prospered by the Lord and I think that even though Ted and Roy were the pushers, they didn’t stand above anyone. It was a really good group that wanted a church right where they lived and really it was always the Lord’s work. It’s like how every church gets started. There’s a need. There’s a nucleus that pushes. And if you have good preaching and teaching God will make it grow. I sincerely feel also that a congregation needs a good facility as soon as possible. I don’t believe in going head over heels, but if you can see your way down the road, then stretch your limits and get the nicest thing you can afford. That’s what we tried to do.

Lois Burgdorf insists that she read an old LCMS book from the early 1900s on missions that says something like, “It’s impossible to start a Lutheran mission in East Texas due to the Reformed influence.” (Even a brief drive around countryside will quickly reveal just how many Baptist and

Church of Christ congregations dot the landscape). Yet it seems that Grace Lutheran Church proves that the author of that book was wrong. Why? “The Holy Spirit didn’t write that book!” answers Lois, “All things are possible with God.” Such is God’s grace to us in Christ and such is God’s grace in the beginning of Grace Lutheran Church of Scroggins, Texas.

Bibliography

1. Church council minutes of Grace Lutheran Church from 1991-2005.
2. Various bulletins and service folders of Grace Lutheran Church, especially the dedication folder for the new church on August 8, 1999.
3. Numerous newspaper ads found in the church records or given to me by Myrl Wagenknecht, Deb Ulman, or Ted and Lois Burgdorf.
4. A copy of The Basic Information and Request Form given to me by Myrl Wagenknecht as well as written comments from the informational meetings.
5. A photo album with captions under the pictures and year by year summaries of church happenings from 1991-1994 loaned to me by Deb Ulman who was the church historian at the time.
6. Lots of informal conversations with people over the course of my Vicar year.
7. Formal interview with Pastor Myrl Wagenknecht on the morning of August 1, 2005.
8. Formal interview with Dave and Fran Binns during the morning/afternoon of August 1, 2005.
9. Formal interview with Ted and Lois Burgdorf the morning of August 2, 2005.
9. Formal interview with Deb Ulman during the evening of August 2, 2005.
10. Formal interview with Richard and Lena Burgdorf during the morning/afternoon of August 3, 2005.
11. Formal interview with Roy Green during the afternoon of August 7, 2005.
12. Formal interview with Pastor Carl Voss during the afternoon of December 10, 2005.
13. Building committee reports together with architectural drawings given to me by Richard Burgdorf.
14. Letters and other correspondence given to me by Ted and Lois Burgdorf.