

GETSEMANI to GETHSEMANE:
GROWTH is CHANGE

by
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for
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In November of 1982 the Wisconsin Synod's General Board for Home Missions seized an opportunity. A small group of Mexican-Americans in Corpus Christi, Texas asked the Wisconsin Synod to start a mission in their midst. Thus began the story of La Iglesia Luterana Getsemani, the ministry of Carl W. Leyrer and a series of changes that mark this young congregation's history. Humanly speaking, the congregation's history is remarkable in that many of the changes it experienced came as a result of "setbacks" which might have destroyed a human venture. But just as Lazarus' death gave Jesus an opportunity to show his power, this congregation's story provides a rich illustration of the love and providence that the Lord lavishes on his people.

From its very inception, Getsemani was a departure from the "normal" way of doing things. The Mexican-Americans who asked for a Wisconsin Synod pastor had broken away from Nuestra Salvador, a Missouri Synod congregation in Corpus Christi. Although eager to begin work in that area, the Wisconsin Synod had few men fluent in Spanish, a language necessary both for work with the original group and for outreach to the south Texas community. In November of 1972 the Board for Home Missions asked Carl W. Leyrer, a senior

at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, to fly to Corpus Christi and conduct Spanish services once a month. Leyrer had learned Spanish during his vicar year in Puerto Rico. Call day held little of the suspense for Leyrer that it does for most Seminary seniors. Getsemani became his assignment in May, 1973.

Rev. Vilas Glaeske of Christ the Lord Lutheran Church in Houston installed Leyrer as the first pastor of the congregation on August 4, 1973. Pastor Glaeske preached the sermon in English and Sr. Elias Martinez, president of the congregation, interpreted. The actual rite of ordination and installation, however, was performed in Spanish with Pastor Glaeske reading the appropriate words from a Spanish version of the Lutheran Agenda. The service took place in a rented Seventh Day Adventist church which served the congregation until March of 1974.

Pastor Leyrer had little time to become accustomed to his role and responsibility as shepherd of his flock when the Lord led the congregation through some changes. The first was a change in their place of worship. A few weeks after the Seventh Day Adventist congregation notified them that they could no longer use their facilities one of the members of Getsemani found a small church building in Corpus Christi for sale. The building, located at 4618 Hakel Street, had belonged to a Pentecostal congregation and Getsemani lost little time in acquiring it. They had received notice from the Seventh Day Adventists in March, 1974. They held

their first worship service in their own building on April 5 of the same year. The Lord had turned an apparent setback into a new home for his people.

But even as the congregation rejoiced over its new acquisition, storm clouds were brewing. The Lord saw to it, however, that these clouds precipitated a purifying shower rather than a devastating flood. The group which originally broke away from Nuestra Salvador to begin Getsemani had not left for doctrinal reasons, but over disagreements concerning a building project. Sad to say, they brought a propensity for discord into their new congregation. They took nearly every opportunity they could to disagree with the new pastor's ideas and undermine his authority. Apparently they saw their control over the affairs of the congregation threatened by this young man. Perhaps they felt they had been treated unfairly in their old congregation and were determined not to let it happen again.

Whatever the case, Pastor Leyrer saw that some of the decisions the congregation did not always have the best interests of the Kingdom of God at heart and sometimes suggested other courses of action. He also saw personal conflicts among the founding members of the congregation that needed pastoral counseling. When he tried to get to the bottom of these problems, some of the members tried to discredit him at voters' meetings. The situation came to a head when the president of the congregation accused Pastor Leyrer of lying before the assembled voters. Pastor Leyrer insisted that

this issue be resolved before the congregation carried out any more business. To that end, the meeting was adjourned and a special meeting was scheduled to settle the conflict.

Before the special meeting the voters held some meetings of their own without the Pastor's knowledge. At the special meeting they informed Pastor Leyrer that he was released from service to the congregation. They brought against him the trumped up charges of persistent adherence to false doctrine, scandalous life, and wilful neglect of duty. Pastor Leyrer refused to resign but told the assembly that he would appeal his case to the circuit pastor and that until then he would remain pastor of La Iglesia Luterana Getsemani. When circuit pastor William Gabb heard the charges he vindicated Pastor Leyrer and informed those who had brought the charges that they needed to repent. Rather than submit to this ruling, the entire seminal group of 25 returned to the congregation they had originally left. Getsemani now consisted of 14 communicant members and 26 souls. The group that left also took with them many of the church furnishings which they had provided, including the organ.

Although much smaller than it had been, the congregation enjoyed a peace and harmony that it had never known before. The Lord had provided them with a new, more stable foundation for this group of believers to build on. This small remanant exercised its faith in the Lord by continuing the remodeling project it had already starte^d, even though_^

it required a total of \$9200 in loans from the Synod to complete the work.

The congregation also displayed its faith by quickly making this unfortunate chapter a part of its past and getting on with the work of spreading the gospel. Although the congregation began as a mission aimed primarily at the Mexican-American, they recognized that they existed in a community of varied racial backgrounds. In an effort to reach all the people of Corpus Christi with the gospel a voters' meeting decided on August 22, 1975 to offer Sunday services in both English and Spanish. The congregation realized that some change would be necessary if they were to carry out the work the Lord called them to do. But the minutes of that same meeting seem to reflect ^{that the congregation} was not ready for what it perceived as too much change too fast. The congregation ^a passed a motion stating that "every person that is not directly tied with the Mexican-American" would not be allowed to vote or hold office in the congregation. "Such people," the motion continues, "will be able to share the word of God with us. They will also be able to share in the sacraments (those who are in confessional agreement with us)...They can remain with us until they want or can start their own congregation." The motion was to be reviewed after one year, but was in fact negated by a unanimous motion less than six months after it had been passed.

The Lord blessed Getsemani's efforts with steady growth. In October of 1976 the Synod suggested that they begin to

look for a parcel of land. The land would be the site of their parsonage and, later, a new church building. In December of 1976 the congregation decided to request a loan from the Church Extension Fund for such a purchase. At this time the congregation's membership numbered about 48 souls.

Getsemani went through the usual steps required of a congregation looking for a piece of land. Five sites were selected, the list was then narrowed to three and submitted to the district mission board for approval. As a result of this sifting process, the congregation purchased two acres of land on Holly Road in Corpus Christi, the present site of their church and parsonage. Construction on the parsonage began shortly after the land deal was closed. Pastor Leyrer and family moved into their new home in December 1978.

During this period the congregation experienced substantial numerical growth. The pastor and people were active in sharing the gospel of Christ throughout the community and the Lord blessed their labors. By the end of 1978 their soul membership was 78, nearly three times what it had been after the schism just three years earlier. By 1981 they counted 136 souls as members of the congregation. Also during this time, the congregation experienced a gradual shift in the ethnic makeup of its membership. What had begun as a Mexican-American mission now reached out to all groups in the Corpus Christi area. Members of the black and white communities began to find their way into Getsemani's fellowship. Spanish services were dropped because every-

body in the congregation understood English--most better than Spanish--and because interest in and attendance at them had waned. To reflect these changes in the congregation the name of the church was officially changed to Gethsemane Lutheran Church by a unanimous vote on May 24, 1981.

In March of 1982 Gethsemane began to investigate the possibility of erecting a new church on their Holly Road property. They formed a building committee and approached the district mission board for a CEF loan. That summer the building committee engaged an architect who would also serve as contractor. Unlike most of the changes that make the history of Gethsemane Lutheran Church, the move into their new building took place slowly. In fact, the building project was a constant source of frustration to the congregation and a real thorn in Pastor Leyrer's flesh. ~~More~~ More than four years passed between the formation of the building committee and the dedication of Gethsemane's new worship facility. But in the end the Lord blessed the congregations work with a beautiful building which they dedicated to his glory.

The initial planning process took much longer than anticipated as a result of some personal problems that occupied the contractor's time and initial disapproval of the plans by the Board for Home Missions. Groundbreaking took place on Reformation Day 1984. Pastor James Radloff spoke. Shortly after this late start city zoning codes forced

further revisions in the plans. The walls went up during the summer of 1985. The building committee and the pastor had chosen the contractor for two reasons: his wife was a member of Gethsemane and because the buildings he had erected were some of the most beautiful in the Corpus Christi area. Apparently, along with his expertise came something of an artist's temperament. Throughout the rest of 1985 and into 1986 work on the church proceeded only intermittently. Finally in March 1986 the contractor simply quit. The congregation pulled together to finish the job. Pastor Leyrer filled in as contractor while Mr. Jack Langbecker, a member of the congregation, organized volunteer work crews. Work progressed through the spring and summer of 1986 until the building stood ready for dedication on November 30, 1986. Pastor Carl S. Leyrer, Pastor Leyrer's father, preached for the dedication service.

At this writing, about 230 blood bought souls make up Gethsemane Lutheran Church. Since their new facility seats about 190, the congregation may soon take advantage of the building's expandability. Since many young families belong to Gethsemane, there has been some talk of beginning a Christian elementary school, although no solid plans have been made. At the moment, the congregation's future is on "hold" since Pastor Leyrer has accepted a call to serve our Synod's mission in Colombia. Pastor Brian Dose (WLS class of 1985) of Paul the Apostle Lutheran Church in Detroit, Michigan has accepted Gethsemane's call to serve as their

pastor. He will be installed in July of 1988. No doubt the Lord will continue to bless Gethsemane through this change of pastorate as richly as he has through all other changes.

A visit to one of Gethsemane's worship services immediately informs the onlooker that this congregation differs somewhat from many Wisconsin Synod churches. The ethnic mix is quite obvious: Hispanics make up 53% of the congregation, whites 37% and blacks 10%. The ratio roughly equivocates Corpus Christi's population. But, at least according to Pastor Leyrer, a statistic not as apparent to the casual observer makes Gethsemane even more remarkable. About 93% of the members are new to the Lutheran faith. Pastor Leyrer sees that statistic as a real blessing, for it has forced the congregation to ground its practices firmly on the Scriptures rather than to ask what other Lutheran bodies have done under similar circumstances. This unshakeable foundation has kept Gethsemane alive and thriving throughout its many changes.

Information for this history came from:

Minutes of Gethsemane Lutheran Church's congregational meetings

Gethsemane Lutheran Church newsletters

Two short histories written for the dedication of Gethsemane's remodelled Hakel St. building and the dedication of their new Holly Road facility.

An interview with Pastor Carl W. Leyrer

Handwritten text, possibly a stamp or signature, is present but illegible.

The author thanks Pastor Leyrer for providing this information.

The author also thanks Richard Pamperin for translating the early minutes of La Iglesia Getsemani Luterana.