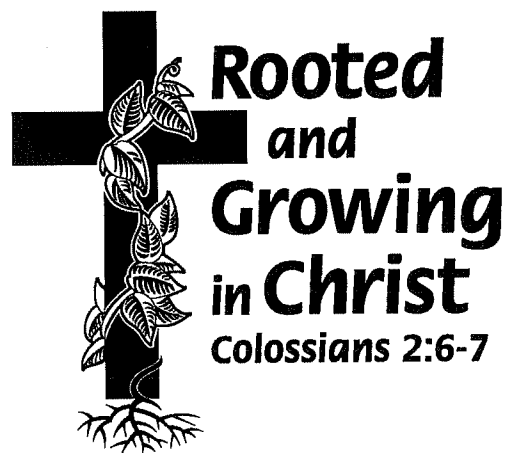


**Rooted and Growing in Christ:
A Congregational History of Our Savior
Evangelical Lutheran Church and School,
Grafton, Wisconsin**



**David C. Mielke
Church History Thesis
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Mequon, WI
Professor John Brenner
April 2003**

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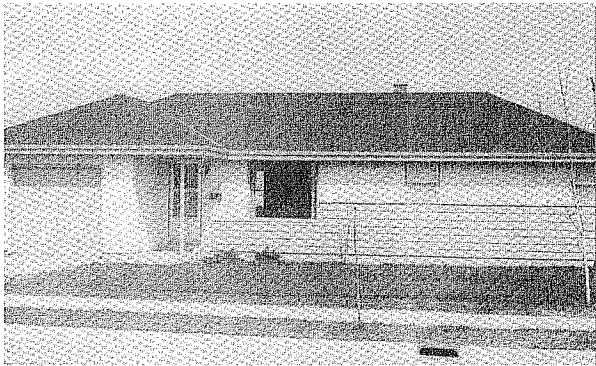
Early Beginnings—the 1960's

The year was 1964. The Warren Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, while the U. S. Surgeon General concluded that cigarette smoking caused cancer. Lyndon B. Johnson became President of the United States while Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution authorized military action in Southeast Asia, while the Civil Rights Act legally guaranteed equality. The Braves were still in Milwaukee, and the Lombardi dynasty was just beginning. “Mary Poppins” and “My Fair Lady” were popular movies, while “Hello, Dolly!” by Louie Armstrong and “Where Did Our Love Go” by the Supremes topped the music charts. The Beatles were heard on the radio singing “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” while the Ed Sullivan Show gave America its first look at the Fab Four. People were watching “Bonanza,” “The Andy Griffith Show,” and “The Fugitive” on television, and for the first time in 1964, people were watching these shows in color.

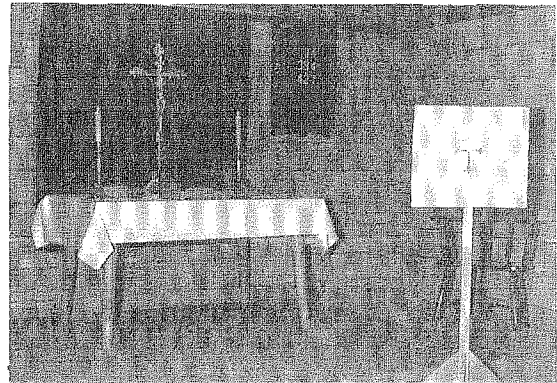
The year was 1964. There were no Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) congregations in the Grafton, Cedarburg, Saukville, and Port Washington area of Ozaukee County, Wisconsin. The nearest congregations were located to the south in Thiensville/Mequon and to the west in Newburg. As Grafton and the surrounding areas began to attract new residents, some of those residents were WELS members who desired to have a congregation closer to home. They expressed their interest to Pastor L. Hallauer, the chairman of the Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board. In response, Pastor Hallauer sent a letter to WELS

members living in Grafton and the surrounding communities inviting them to an exploratory meeting at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Herman Kuether at 7:30 pm on October 25, 1964.

Present at the meeting were Mr. and Mrs. Herman Kuether, Mr. and Mrs. John Metzger, Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Schmidt, and Mr. Palmer Schmidt. While the attendance at this initial meeting may seem slight, it is quite good considering the letter soliciting interest of area WELS members listed an incorrect address for the meeting. The invitation letter listed the Kuether's address as 926 9th Avenue instead of 926 7th Avenue in Grafton.¹



The Kuether residence, 926, 7th Avenue,
Grafton



First altar and lectern used in the
Kuether basement

At the initial meeting, a decision was made to begin exploratory services on November 8, 1965 at the Kuether residence. Mr. Larry Zessin, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), Mequon, WI, conducted the first service on the 24th Sunday after Trinity, with about 15 persons in attendance. The opening hymn reflected the prayer of those present: "We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost." Mr. Zessin's sermon was based on Mark 7:31-37, the account of

¹ Original document, provided by Dennis and Karen Nemitz; Armand and Ruth Goeden

Jesus' healing the man who could not speak nor hear. The closing hymn certainly expressed the emotion of all Christians hearing the Gospel, but especially this small group of Christians as they embarked on this new endeavor: "Oh, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing."²

God blessed the initial work in Grafton; interest in the new WELS group in the area increased. On January 15, 1965, a meeting was held with two items on the agenda: 1) to determine whether or not to start a WELS congregation in Grafton and 2) to determine whether or not to start a WELS elementary school at the same time. It was decided to pursue both activities in Grafton. On February 14, 1965, the congregation was incorporated as "Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church Congregation."³ The Constitution and By-Laws of Our Savior were adopted in March 1965.⁴ Later that year, on September 1, 1965, charter membership of the congregation was closed. The charter members of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church were:⁵

Mr. and Mrs. Leo Biever, Jr.	Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lederer
Mr. and Mrs. Werner Fischer*	Mr. Carlton Macks
Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Fritz	Mrs. Adelia Nemitz
Mr. and Mrs. Armand Goeden*	Mr. Dennis Nemitz*
Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Henning	Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Rapp
Mr. and Mrs. Herman Kuether*	Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Schmidt
Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Lederer	Mr. Palmer Schmidt*

* indicates current member of Our Savior

God blessed this small group of Lutheran Christians so that soon they outgrew the Kuether's basement. For a very short time, about a month, the group worshiped at Miller

² Service folder, dated November 8, 1964.

³ Original document, located in church office

⁴ Original document, located in church office

⁵ "Special Pictoral [sic] Report of the Early History of Our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church in Commemoration of the First Anniversary of Attaining Self-Support on July 1, 1971," 1972, p. 3.

Funeral Home.⁶ Then, beginning on July 18, 1965, the congregation utilized the Grafton American Legion Post for its worship services. The American Legion Post was home to Our Savior for the next two years. During this time, the first church council, board of education, and building committee were formed. Mr. Clarence Henning served as the first chairman of the congregation; following the formal organization of the church council, Mr. Armand Goeden served in that capacity for five years.⁷



The Grafton American Legion Post in the mid-1960's

Mr. Larry Zessin, a senior at WLS, served the congregation from its inception until June, 1965. At that time, Mr. W. Keith Roehl, another seminary senior, began to serve Our Savior and did so until August, 1966. At the April 18, 1966, congregational meeting, the congregation had submitted a request to be assigned a graduate from WLS. But because there was a shortage of pastors in the WELS, the District Mission Board did not approve the request. Subsequently,

⁶ Personal Interview with Dennis and Karen Nemitz, Armand and Ruth Goeden, and Palmer Schmidt.

⁷ "Special Pictoral [sic] Report," 1972, p. 4.

Professor Martin Albrecht of WLS was called to be vacancy pastor. Professor Albrecht accepted the call and served the congregation from August through November 1966. At that time, Pastor John Raabe, General Missionary of the Southeastern Wisconsin District of the WELS, became the full-time vacancy pastor at Our Savior. At the March 12, 1967, congregational meeting, it was again decided to request an assignment from WLS. This time, the request was granted and WLS graduate Herbert Winterstein was ordained and installed by Pastor Raabe on June 25, 1967.⁸

From its very beginning, the Christian education of the congregation's children was a priority. Thus, it is not surprising that the congregation decided to plan for the construction of a facility that could serve as a school as well as a church. In May, 1966, a survey was conducted of the congregation to determine the feasibility of opening a Lutheran elementary school (LES) in September of that same year. It soon became apparent that there was not adequate time to open the school for the 1966-1967 school year. In August 1966, a decision was made to postpone the opening of a school. Arrangements were made with Calvary, Thiensville, and St. John, East Mequon, to have children from the congregation attend either of these schools on a tuition basis. The congregation then approved full payment of the tuition of \$12.50 per month, contingent on the WELS paying the pastor's salary in full. Thus, nine children of the congregation attended either Calvary or St. John during the 1966-1967 school year.⁹

A preliminary plan for the Our Savior school facility had been approved by the congregation in February, 1966. The District Mission Board approved the plan and gave its permission to secure an architect to begin construction drawings for a two-room school building with a full basement which would serve as a temporary chapel for worship. The first bids were

⁸ Krahn, R. *Tested, Yet Blessed—A History of Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church, Grafton, WI*, WLS Church History Thesis, 1996, p. 5.

⁹ Our Savior 1966 Yearbook, p. 11.

rejected as too expensive by the District Mission Board, and the Our Savior building committee worked to reduce the costs. The costs were ultimately reduced through a number of strategies: 1) various changes were made in the building plans; 2) the building committee, led by Mr. Ralph Lederer, would be the general contractor; and 3) members completed much of the finishing work themselves, including the altar furniture and baptismal font built by Mr. Palmer Schmidt. (The original altar furniture and font continues to serve the congregation well.) A 6.12 acre parcel of land, at Highway 57 (now County Trunk V) and Arrowhead Road, had been purchased from Mr. and Mrs. Ernst Klotz (parents of charter and current member Ruth Goeden) for a mere \$1000 per acre. In the end, the architect's fees and building costs amounted to just over \$66,000, reduced from the initial projection of \$93,000.¹⁰

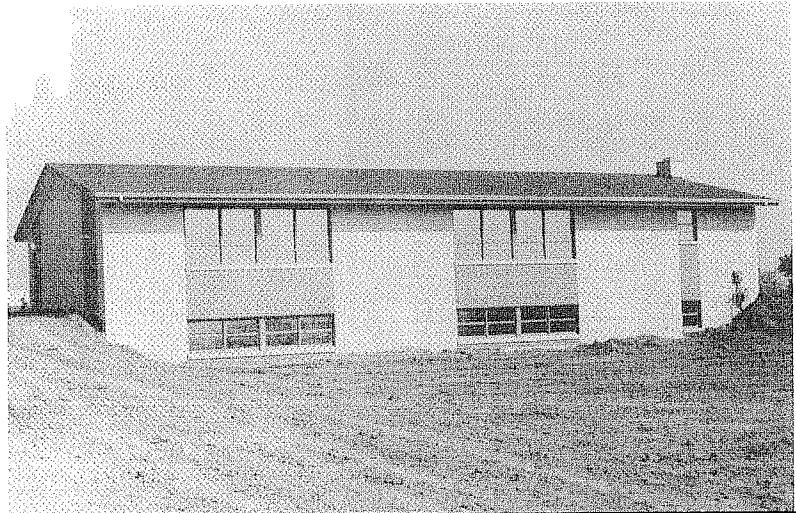
Ground was broken on Easter Sunday, March 26, 1967, and the school/chapel was dedicated on October 8, 1967. The morning service, attended by 186 members and friends of Our Savior, began with an appropriate choir anthem, "Songs of Immortal Praise Belong." Pastor Larry Zessin, then of Winona, MN, served as the presiding minister for the service; Professor Albrecht of WLS preached the sermon based on Ephesians 5:25-27. The afternoon service, led by Pastor W. Keith Roehl, then of Grove City, OH, was attended by 257 persons. The message from God's Word was presented by Pastor John Raabe, General Missionary of the Southeastern Wisconsin District and former vacancy pastor. Pastor Raabe's sermon text was Psalm 63:1-5, although the service folder read Isaiah 63:1-4.¹¹

¹⁰ "Special Pictoral [sic] Report," 1972, p. 4; Personal Interview with Armand and Ruth Goeden.

¹¹ Service folder, dated October 8, 1967; "Special Pictoral [sic] Report, 1972, p. 5.



Groundbreaking for the school/chapel facility, Easter, 1967



The completed school/chapel, 1967

But buildings are for people, and the WELS ministry in Grafton was also blessed in this regard. In addition to giving the congregation many dedicated people who loved their Lord and His Word, God also blessed the proclamation of that Word in Grafton by using it to bring new members into the congregation. By 1969, the congregation had 272 baptized members and 145 communicant members.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1967, Our Savior Ev. Lutheran School opened its doors to students for the first time. Mr. James Bilitz served as principal and teacher of grades 1-8 (later

grades 5-8); Mr. Bilitz faithfully served the congregation for a decade until he accepted a call from St. Luke, Oakfield, WI, in 1977. During the first three years of its operation, the enrollment in the school increased from 12 to 50.¹²

On the Grow—the decade of the 1970's

The people of Our Savior continued to give richly of their time, talents, and treasures so that by 1970, the congregation had erected both a parsonage and teacherage. The congregation marked a major milestone early in this decade. On July 1, 1971, the congregation became a self-supporting congregation. However, this joyous occasion was dampened by the fact that the congregation encountered financial problems which necessitated that it revert back to receiving WELS mission subsidy by early 1974.¹³

But this setback was short-lived. In February, 1979, the congregation again declared itself to be self-supporting and expressed its gratitude for the many years of assistance from the WELS Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board.¹⁴

Despite some obstacles, God richly blessed this young congregation. By 1973, the congregation had outgrown its facilities again. The existing school/chapel was not adequate to meet the needs of both the school and church. Since the basement of the school (at the time being used as the chapel) was designated for school expansion, a new worship facility was needed. About the same time, the congregation had received word that a sister WELS congregation, Redemption Ev. Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, was preparing to build a new church and demolish their old structure upon completion of the new building.

¹² "Special Pictoral [sic] Report," 1972, p. 6.

¹³ 1974 Congregational Report, Home Missions Division, WELS, dated July 1, 1974; document indicates that this was a report for the first six months of receiving synod mission subsidy.

¹⁴ Letter to SE WI District Mission Board, dated February 14, 1979, located in church office.

The old Redemption chapel has quite an interesting history in its own right. Built originally during World War I and used at Fort McCoy (then Camp McCoy) in Sparta, WI, the building has served several WELS congregations. It first served as the chapel for St. Matthew, Oconomowoc, WI from 1922-1951. In 1951, it was moved to 5641 68th Street in Milwaukee to serve Redemption until 1974. On Memorial Day weekend in 1974, Mr. John Metzger of Our Savior rented a 40 foot flat-bed semi-trailer. About 18 men from Our Savior helped to disassemble the building, load the parts on the trailer, and transport them to Grafton. The following weekend, the remainder of the disassembled building was brought to the property on Arrowhead Road in Grafton. For the next fifteen months, work progressed by both professional contractors and members of Our Savior. Since the chapel was given to Our Savior gratis, the cost of the project came in under \$30, 000.¹⁵

On August 31, 1975, the new church building was dedicated. Worship began with a hymn of gratitude, "Now Thank We All Our God." Pastor Reinhart Pope preached on Psalm 122:1, "Our Joy in the House of the Lord." A reception following the service was sponsored by the congregation's Ruth Guild.¹⁶

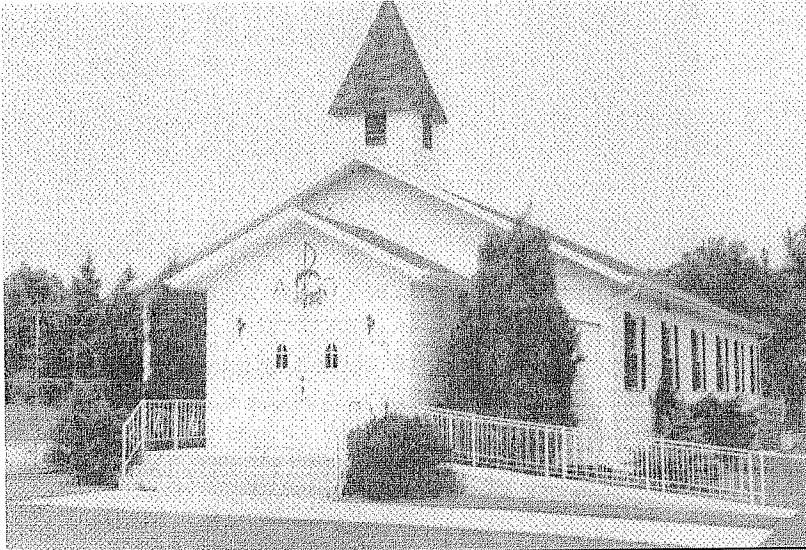
But the congregation not only experienced blessings in facilities, but most importantly, in souls. By the end of the 1970's, the congregation had over 300 baptized members and over 200 communicant members. School enrollment was in the 80's.¹⁷

As the work on the new church building was being completed, in January 1974, Pastor Winterstein accepted a call as a world missionary to Tsuchiura City, Japan. The congregation again decided to seek a graduate assignment from the seminary. Through the assignment

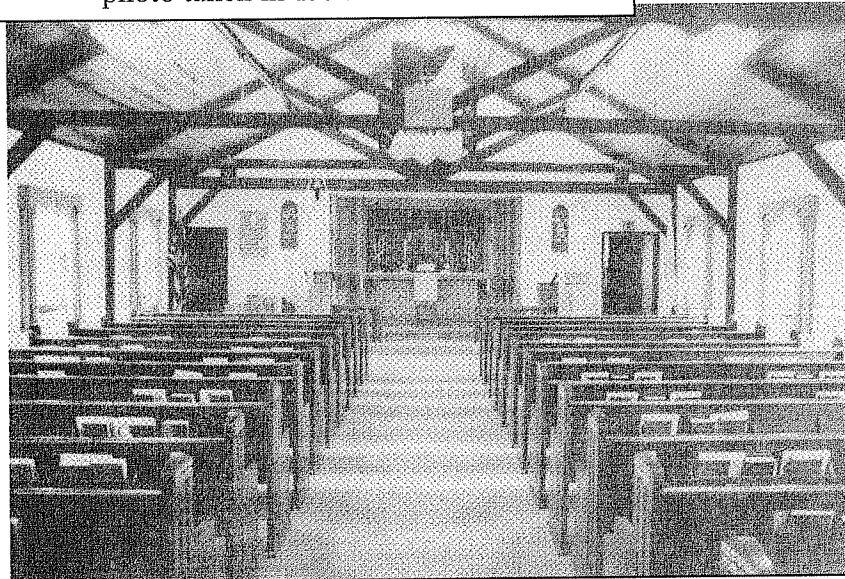
¹⁵ Kuether, L. "A Lutheran Tabernacle," WLS Church History Thesis, 1990, reprinted as part of the Our Savior 25th Anniversary Booklet, 1990.

¹⁶ Service folder, dated August 31, 1975.

¹⁷ WELS Parochial Report for Year 1978, dated January 31, 1979; report for 1979 missing from church office archives.



The chapel completed and dedicated in 1975;
photo taken in 1990



Interior of chapel used for worship from 1975-1995

committee, the Lord called Mr. Paul Sullivan to be the pastor of Our Savior; he was ordained and installed on June 23, 1974. In 1978, Pastor Sullivan accepted a call from Divine Charity in Bethel Park, PA. This time, the congregation decided to issue a call to a man already serving in the field. During this vacancy, Professor John Jeske of WLS served as vacancy pastor. After several returned calls, Pastor Ethan Kahrs of Christ Our Redeemer, Bend, OR accepted the call

to serve as pastor of Our Savior. Pastor Kahrs served the congregation from January 1979 through September 1986. Meanwhile, in 1977, the school's first teacher and only principal, Mr. James Bilitz, accepted a call to Oakfield, WI. Subsequently, a call was issued to and accepted by Mr. Reynold Kremer of St. Paul, Moline, IL. Mr. Kremer served as teacher of upper grades and principal until 1985.

Growing Pains—the 1980's

The congregation faced a series of challenges during the 1980's. Early in the decade, some members felt embittered by the WELS Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board's decision to grant the exploratory group in nearby Port Washington mission status and funding for a pastor. Perhaps the tension was not so much competitive but simply reflected the fact that many members remembered the difficulties they had in obtaining funding for facilities and pastoral staffing. The Gospel of peace prevails^{ed}, however, and with some further dialog the tensions were tamed. Some 20-plus years later, the relationship between the two congregations is healthy and they walk together in the faith. Several students from St. Matthew, Port Washington attend Our Savior school and the evangelism committees cooperate in advertising and other activities.

Five years later, the congregation would again face several challenges. Principal Kremer resigned effective June, 1985. Miss Mary Wilde, a teacher at the school also resigned. Before a call was issued to replace Principal Kremer, the teacherage was sold in order to reduce the congregation's debt.¹⁸ Mr. James Petermann of St. Paul, Green Bay, WI accepted the call to be principal and teacher of the upper grades; he was installed on August 25, 1985.

¹⁸ Our Savior 25th Anniversary Booklet, 1990.

Unfortunately, after one year, Mr. Petermann resigned as did several members of the board of education. The situation that resulted was that seventh and eighth grades were not offered during the 1986-1987 school year.¹⁹ This was a time of much tension within the congregation, particularly as the congregation dealt with some interpersonal issues, financial struggles, and membership losses. The declining morale within the congregation was evident by notations in the church council meeting minutes such as “Sunday School has left much to be desired,” and “Trying a more positive approach to keeping members within the church.”²⁰ In addition to these unfortunate circumstances, Pastor Kahrs submitted his resignation, effective September 14, 1986.²¹

The year 1987 was a year of recovery. After several returned calls, Pastor William Heiges of Our Savior, Ashland, OH, accepted the call to Our Savior, Grafton in February, 1987. In early 1988, the Lord of the Church also provided the congregation with a principal, Mr. Philip Boileau. In the months between the resignation of Mr. Petermann and Mr. Boileau’s arrival, Mrs. Arlene Pastorek assumed the responsibilities of acting principal.

Despite the turnover in messengers, the Lord used the message of the Gospel to heal, strengthen, and grow this congregation. By the end of 1989, baptized membership stood at 378 and communicant membership at 243. School enrollment was 84.

On the Grow Again—the 1990’s and beyond

As Our Savior looked forward to a new decade of God’s grace, it was also time to reflect on God’s grace in the past. On October 14, 1990, the congregation celebrated its 25th

¹⁹ Krahn, R., 1996, p.11; this writer was not able to locate the meeting minutes that Mr. Krahn refers to; they are missing from their proper placement in the church office archives.

²⁰ Church Council meeting minutes, November 13, 1986.

²¹ Church Council meeting minutes, September 9, 1986.

anniversary. To mark this occasion and to celebrate God's goodness, a special service was held on Saturday, October 13, 1990, at Port Washington High School auditorium. The following day, regular worship was held, followed by a dinner at the D & G Club in Port Washington.²²

Another special observance occurred just five years later. Already in 1989, the long-range planning committee had recommended an addition to the school. But after much discussion, it was decided that the most pressing immediate need was that of a new worship facility. In May 1994, the congregation approved the building of a new church structure, the basement of which would provide two additional classrooms. The building was designed and built by the Anderson-Ashton Company of New Berlin, WI. The seating capacity of the 11,000 square foot facility is 290 with expansion to 500 possible with the finishing of the balcony. On Palm Sunday, April 9, 1995, the congregation worshiped in its new sanctuary for the first time, with 525 persons attending. About a month later, on May 7, 1995, the new church and addition were dedicated in a special 2:30 pm service. The choir opened the service praising God for his "Amazing Grace," and Pastor Heiges served as presiding minister and preacher (unfortunately, no text or theme is listed).²²

The "old" church building would survive and remain a part of Our Savior; it was remodeled to contain the church office, pastor's office, classroom, copy room, and library.

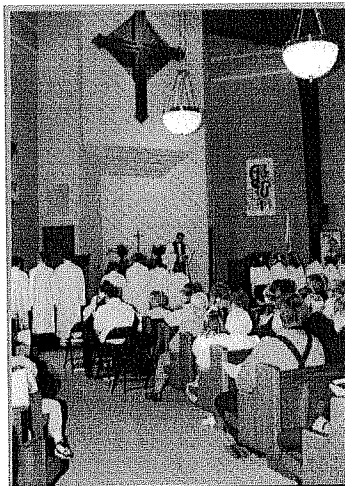
Pastor Heiges, after serving Our Savior faithfully for nine years, accepted a call in late 1996. In the interim, Pastor Paul H. Wilde served as vacancy pastor. On July 6, 1997, Pastor Mark C. Wagner, of St. John, Wauwatosa, WI, was installed as pastor of Our Savior, where he continues to shepherd God's people. In addition to Pastor Wagner, Pastor Paul Kelm serves monthly as preaching assistant and Mr. David Mielke, a senior at WLS, serves as Senior Vicar.

²² Original document, invitation to the anniversary weekend events, provided by Sandy Garlie.

²² Service folder, May 7, 1995.



The current church building, completed in 1995.



Interior of church built in 1995

During the 1990's, there was also transition within the school. After faithfully serving Our Savior for eight years, Mr. Boileau accepted a call to teach in Antioch, IL. During the 1996-1997 school year, Mr. David Schleaf, 5th and 6th grade teacher, assumed the duties of acting principal. The following school year, those duties were handled by Mr. Elroy Schroeder on a part-time/retirement call basis. On August 1, 1999, Mr. Tom Hering of Beautiful Savior, Carlsbad, CA, was installed as principal and teacher of grades 7 & 8, and continues to faithfully serve Our Savior.

The Spirit has been quite active using the means of grace faithfully administered at Our Savior. By 1999, the baptized membership was 611 and communicant membership was 473. Statistics for 2002 show that baptized membership stands at 747, communicant membership at 572, weekly attendance at 328, and weekly Bible study attendance at 96. Our Savior is one of the youngest of the 17 churches in the area it serves, yet it is the fourth largest in membership and third in average weekly worship attendance. One could certainly cite the human elements involved, such as being located in the right place at the right time, a rapidly growing area in a

relatively affluent population. One might cite the feeling that Our Savior, despite its size, has maintained a personal, friendly feel to it. One might cite the leadership or active layperson involvement. Truly, there are many reasons one could cite, but all pale in comparison to the main reason: the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed at Our Savior and that Gospel of forgiveness in Christ Jesus is efficacious; the Spirit of God works through it to create, sustain, and strengthen faith in Christ. When considering both the internal and external growth of this congregation, the words of the hymnwriter are appropriate:

Not unto us, not unto us be glory, Lord;
 Not unto us but to your name be praise;
 Not unto us but to your name all honor be giv'n
 For matchless mercy, forgiveness, and grace.
Christian Worship, Hymn 392, verse 1

The LES at Our Savior continues to serve the congregation, other WELS congregations, and non-members in the area. Current enrollment in the LES is 97 in¹ Preschool through eighth grade. The school has enjoyed the stability of a faculty and staff that has not changed in four years. Currently, the school faculty consists of Principal Hering, Mrs. Monica Dierker, Mrs. Laura Martin, Mrs. Arlene Pastorek, Mrs. Annette Diener, and Mrs. Beth Wagie. Our Savior also promotes secondary Lutheran education as part of the federation of Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School (KML) in Jackson, WI, and many students from Our Savior attend KML. In fact, 100% of the 2002 graduates from Our Savior LES attend KML.

During its nearly 40 years, Our Savior has had several men and women who have entered the teaching ministry of our synod. In addition, Pastor Lon Kuether, a son of the congregation, currently serves St. Mark, Bemidji, MN. God-willing, Steve Hahm, a son of the congregation, and David Mielke, a current member of the congregation, will graduate from WLS and receive a divine call into pastoral ministry in May, 2003. In addition, several men and women from the

congregation are currently at Martin Luther College (MLC) in New Ulm, MN, preparing for ministry in our synod. Our Savior also regularly hosts student teachers from MLC and provides opportunities for Early Field Training (EFT) for students of WLS.

In the present year, 2003, Our Savior is conducting a major capital funds appeal, "Rooted and Growing in Christ." The goal of the appeal is to raise \$600,000--\$900,000 in cash gifts and commitments over the next three years. Depending on the response of the members to this appeal, the funds raised will be used to:

- Pay off the mortgage on the church building, which will free up the payments now being made from regular offerings;
- Provide funds to support calling another pastor;
- Expand the school, particularly adding a gymnasium;
- Make a building fund commitment to KML;
- Complete the balcony project in the sanctuary; and
- Add a steeple to the church building.

Only God knows how many gifts will be given and which goals will be able to be met.

However, what is certain is the blessing of the Lord on the faithful proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments at Our Savior. In nearly 40 years of history, our Savior, Jesus Christ has touched many lives with His life-giving and life-changing Gospel through a congregation that reflects Him in its name and ministries. Rooted and growing in Him, Our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church in Grafton, WI, by God's grace and to God's glory, will continue to carry out its mission statement:

KNOW Jesus Christ as Savior
GROW in loving service to God and to each other
GO into our community and the world with the good news of Christ's forgiveness

Acknowledgements

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Thanks to Armand and Ruth Goeden, Dennis and Karen Nemitz, and Palmer Schmidt for providing me with historical insights and historical documents

The photos contained in this paper were originally published in the Our Savior 25th Anniversary booklet in 1990

I apologize in advance for any inadvertent inaccuracies or omissions contained in this paper; any such errors are not deliberate and the author would appreciate feedback or suggestions.

