

Trempealeau County Outreach

The History of God's Grace to Bethel Evangelical Lutheran
Church in Galesville and Arcadia, Wisconsin

Church History CH3031

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“Come and see! Go and tell!” On Easter morning, the angels spoke these words to the women who had come to the empty tomb.¹ The angels invited the women to come and see the evidence for themselves; Jesus had truly risen. Once the women saw the empty tomb, the angels encouraged them to go quickly and share the good news of Jesus’ resurrection with his followers. Filled with joy, the women eagerly ran off to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen.

“Come and see! Go and tell!” As Jesus stood with his disciples one final time before he ascended into heaven, he spoke this same command to them. The disciples had come to Jesus and had witnessed his entire ministry: his miracles, his teaching, his death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection from the dead. Now that Jesus was leaving his disciples, he instructed them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”² The disciples would now be Jesus’ witnesses to the entire world. The book of Acts shows how the disciples went and proclaimed the gospel throughout the world.

“Come and see! Go and tell!” Throughout history, believers have taken these words to heart and have put them into practice. Time after time, Christians have come to God’s Word, have seen God’s grace through Jesus’ work of salvation, and have gone out and spread the message of the gospel across the world.

“Come and see! Go and tell!” These words form the basis for the mission of Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Galesville and Arcadia, Wisconsin:

Come and see, go and tell. As men, women and children united by a common confession of faith based on the Holy Scriptures, we, the members of Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, exist to glorify God. We regularly gather to study the Word of God in the Bible. Encouraged by the promise of redemption and filled with God’s grace, we go forth in

¹ Matthew 28:6,7 (New International Version) – “Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.’ ”

² Mark 16:15 (New International Version).

our daily lives using the talents God has given us to spread His Word to our community and our world.³

It is fitting that Bethel has chosen these words as their mission. Bethel's very existence in both Galesville and Arcadia came as the result of believers going out and telling the good news of Jesus' love throughout Trempealeau County. For thirty-five years Bethel has grown because of God's grace, a solid foundation in scriptural truth, and because of a burning zeal to share Jesus with lost souls. This paper will examine God's grace to Bethel throughout its history, from its founding to the present.⁴

Previous WELS Presence in Trempealeau County

Today, Bethel is the only Wisconsin Synod (WELS) congregation in Trempealeau County. It was not always that way, though. For several years, two Wisconsin Synod congregations existed in Trempealeau County, one in Arcadia and one near Whitehall. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church began in Arcadia in 1886, and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Whitehall joined the Wisconsin Synod in 1885. St. John's and St. Paul's were closely associated; they shared pastors until 1904 and became a dual parish from 1941 until 1962, when St. John's dissolved.⁵

Both congregations are no longer part of the Wisconsin Synod. St. Paul's, which is still in existence today, is a member of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. The remnants of St.

³ The Mission Statement of Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, taken from "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Arcadia, Wisconsin," April 27, 2008.

⁴ The author of this paper, when researching the history of Bethel, ran into the unfortunate problem of not being able to locate some of Bethel's congregational records. At this time, the first thirteen years of congregational records are missing. Because of this situation, some areas of this paper may not be as complete as others. Thankfully, the author was able to conduct interviews with some of the previous pastors and members of Bethel, including some of the original members of Bethel.

⁵ Daniel S. Olson, "The History of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Wisconsin." (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2005), 7.

John's have joined Christ Lutheran Church, a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Prior to Bethel, Wisconsin Synod churches in Trempealeau County have had a less than desirable performance history. It seems that the congregation of St. John's, throughout its entire history, dealt with financial woes. During its early years, St. John's also struggled to hang on to its pastors. St. John's kept a loose affiliation with the Wisconsin Synod for many years as it repeatedly transitioned back and forth between Wisconsin Synod pastors and Iowa Synod pastors. Because of this constant switching, St. John's suffered from numerous doctrinal controversies.⁶

Two of these doctrinal controversies, which revolved around the issues of women's suffrage and fellowship principles, played a large role in the termination of St. John's membership in the Wisconsin Synod. Reports from numerous sources claimed that St. John's final pastor, Richard Buege, was allowing women to vote in the congregation and that he was violating scriptural fellowship principles by some of his participations with clergy of other denominations.⁷ When synod investigations found these reports to be true, synod officials wanted to dismiss Buege from the ministry. St. John's and St. Paul's, however, sided with Buege and voted to leave the Wisconsin Synod.

When St. John's was still a member of the Wisconsin Synod, it made an unsuccessful attempt to do mission work at its neighbor to the south, Galesville. In a letter to Pastor James

⁶ I have given a mere summary of problems surrounding St. John's. For a fuller explanation of these issues, confer "The History of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Wisconsin," written by Daniel S. Olsen (2005).

⁷ Daniel S. Olson, "The History of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Arcadia, Wisconsin." (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2005), 16.

Mumm, who began the early exploratory work for Bethel in Galesville in 1976, Pastor Paul C.

Eggert writes of his own exploratory work in Galesville years earlier:

Some months ago the Northwestern Lutheran had the notice: 'Exploratory services in Galesville!' The Wisconsin Synod has been in Galesville in past years...In 1914 the Seminary graduated six more candidates than the number of calls that had been sent in. At the Synod meeting in 1914 the Pastor of Arcadia, so it had been said, without the consent of the Pastor of Whitehall asked the Mission Board to place a graduate from the Seminary in Galesville, since there were graduates available. The Mission Board refused. Some of the members of the board were acquainted with conditions in and around Galesville...The Pastor of Arcadia threatened to ask for a graduate for Galesville on the floor of the Synod, if his request was refused. Lest this happen, the Board knowing better agreed to grant the request.

When the young man arrived in Galesville he learned that no preparations had been made for a place for the new Pastor to hang his hat. When the young man got to church on Sunday P.M. to be installed he was greeted by the Pastor of Whitehall, "Brother I am glad that you are here, but I am sorry for you." "Why?" the young man asked. The answer was "Galesville is no place for a Wisconsin Synod Pastor now."

In May, one of the members of the Mission Board came to Galesville and spent the night with the Pastor in his rented quarters. "This is what we expected," he said, after he visited with the Pastor...At the Synod meeting in 1915 the Pastor was informed by the Mission Board: "You accept the first call that you get, Galesville will be served as it was before you got there. Things turned out as we had expected. We knew better, and should not have given in."

I got a call soon after...and did as I was told.⁸

Efforts to build and maintain Wisconsin Synod congregations in Trempealeau County in the early 1900s did not succeed.

God's Grace in Bethel's Early Years

Pastor Mumm's exploratory efforts in Galesville provided better results than the efforts of Pastor Eggert. At that time, Pastor James Mumm was serving at St. Paul's in Onalaska. He

⁸ Cf. Appendix, Paul C. Eggert, letter to Pastor James Mumm, 1976, quoted in "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

had a number of members coming from the north, from Trempealeau County, because there were no other Wisconsin Synod congregations between Onalaska and Eau Claire, a distance of nearly eighty miles. And so, Pastor Mumm had members attending St. Paul's from Holmen, Galesville, Trempealeau, Blair, and other towns north of Onalaska.

In 1974, two of these members, Walter and Annie Geske, approached Pastor Mumm with the idea of possibly starting a daughter congregation north of Onalaska. When they gauged the interest of other members living north of Onalaska, the Geskes and Pastor Mumm discovered they had a sufficient amount of interest. There were members who wanted to start a congregation north of Onalaska.

The discussions continued the following year as Pastor Mumm brought the matter to the attention of his fellow pastors in the Mississippi Valley and Southwestern Conferences. These men also expressed interest in Pastor Mumm beginning exploratory work north of Onalaska. Pastor Mumm remarks, "We just thought, for outreach...these people could be served better by having churches out here, but we could also reach out with the good news of Jesus Christ our Savior if we just had some churches out here...The area was really ripe to get some churches going."⁹ Pastor Harold Hoepfner of Christ Lutheran Church in West Salem agreed to assist Pastor Mumm in his efforts.

Galesville and Holmen both appeared to be the two best areas for these outreach efforts, but Galesville was the primary target site because it was further north of Onalaska. In 1976, an official request was made, asking for the assistance of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board, and on May 12, the General Board of Home Missions of the WELS (presently

⁹ Pastor James Mumm, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

known as the Board for Home Missions) approved that request.¹⁰ Pastor Mumm and Pastor Hoepfner could now begin exploratory services in the Galesville/Holmen area. Meetings were held at St. Paul's to discuss this outreach effort, and more than fifty members expressed their interest and willingness to start services, both in Galesville and Holmen. On June 16, 1976, a similar meeting was held among eighteen interested members living in the Galesville area. Included among these eighteen people were Mr. and Mrs. Edward Henseling, Mr. and Mrs. Duane Bothe, Mr. and Mrs. Ken Farley, Mr. and Mrs. Art Gillmeister, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Geske, and Mrs. Karen Schams.¹¹

With a core group of Christians willing to start services in Galesville in place, the next task was to find a location to conduct services. The search for a facility concluded when the Bank of Galesville agreed to allow these members to hold their worship services in its basement. On July 11, 1976, the members in Galesville held their first service in the Bank of Galesville with an attendance of twenty-seven people.

The success of that first service carried on throughout the following months. At first, services were held on Sunday evenings. Pastor Mumm and Pastor Hoepfner took turns conducting worship services in both Galesville and Holmen, but because both men had their own parishes to serve, Sunday evenings worked best for them to lead worship. The evening services did not deter worshippers. Approximately thirty members attended the services in Galesville each Sunday evening.¹² What caused this faithful attendance Sunday after Sunday? One of Bethel's original members answers, "We all had that common interest where we

¹⁰ Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pastor James Mumm, email message to author, November 11, 2010.

we wanted to see a church established here...we had really good attendance when we first started because we had a common goal. We wanted to have a church here in Galesville, so very few Sundays were missed by those first initial people."¹³ A couple months later, the Sunday evening services changed to Sunday mornings, and attendance at Galesville began to increase.

It was not long before the District Mission Board took notice of the accomplishments taking place in Galesville. Pastor Ardin Laper, the chairman of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board, showed great interest in Galesville and even visited worship services at the Bank of Galesville. With Pastor Laper's backing, Galesville formally requested to be granted Mission Status. On November 2, 1976, less than six months after being approved by the General Board of Home Missions to begin exploratory services, Galesville received approval by the General Board of Home Missions for its request for Mission Status. Galesville could now officially begin to organize their congregation.

The next logical step for the new congregation in Galesville was to select a name. After discussing suggestions for names, the members chose the name Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church. Shortly thereafter, the members of Bethel held their first annual voters' meeting, where they approved their constitution and elected their first officers. At this organizational voters' meeting, Bethel officially started with fifty-five souls and thirty-three communicants.¹⁴ Now, only one major component was missing, a pastor to serve the new congregation.

¹³ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

¹⁴ Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

By God's Grace, Bethel Receives Its First Pastor

Bethel's road to receiving its first pastor was rather interesting. In February of 1977, Bethel presented a request to the Mission Board to call a pastor to serve both Galesville and Holmen, which at this time had not yet reached Mission Status.¹⁵ The Mission Board approved their request. It seems, however, that the Mission Board did not quite fully understand this request. As Pastor Mumm recalls, when the Mission Board "granted exploratory status, they were under the impression that we were starting in one place (Galesville), but when reality set in, well, they went along with it because we were having good attendance at both places."¹⁶ He also mentions,

The WELS Mission Board did not realize we were establishing two mission congregations in both Holmen and Galesville. They were under the impression that one location would be served and not two locations. When the fact that two locations were being served with worship services, the WELS and WWD Mission Boards somewhat reluctantly agreed to the arrangement of two locations of outreach mission services and efforts.¹⁷

By the time Bethel received its first pastor, this confusing matter had been settled. Bethel and Holmen would be considered a dual-parish. In May 1977, Bethel decided to go to the assignment committee of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary so that they could receive their pastor from the Seminary's graduating class. On May 17, 1977, Donald Swartz received the assignment to serve as pastor at both Bethel and the congregation at Holmen.¹⁸ He was well aware that he would be ministering at two mission congregations: "When I was assigned in 1977, my call read that I was assigned to Bethel in Galesville, and to serve the mission group

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pastor James Mumm, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

¹⁷ Pastor James Mumm, email message to author, November 11, 2010.

¹⁸ Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

holding services in Holmen.”¹⁹ At his ordination and installation on July 31, 1977, Donald Swartz officially became the first pastor of Bethel.

During his time of service at Bethel, Pastor Swartz led the congregation as they continued to organize and gain their footing as an established congregation. The first major task Pastor Swartz and Bethel undertook was to permanently and physically establish their congregation in Galesville by constructing a worship facility. When Bethel had first requested permission to search for land on which to build a church building, which occurred before Pastor Swartz was assigned to Bethel, the General Board of Home Missions denied its request. When Pastor Swartz and Bethel presented the same request a few months later, in November of 1977, the Mission Board granted them permission.²⁰

Bethel’s land search was not trouble-free. Pastor Swartz presents some of the difficulties which he and the land search committee faced:

Our District Mission Board was supporting and very helpful. But dealing with the Synod Mission Board was challenging. When we looked for land in Galesville, we were required to come up with at least three sites. The first site that we really wanted was sold by silent bid. We were outbid by a group wanting to build a nursing home there...The third site, which we only put in because we had to have three, was the one that the Synod Mission Board told us to buy. It did not have a road into the property yet. The gravel road that was put in was very steep and would have ruts after a large rainstorm.²¹

During 1978, Bethel placed bids on the first two sites, and, much to their disappointed, both times their offers were rejected. At the recommendation of the General Board of Home Missions, Bethel voted on December 24, 1978 to bid on the Smith subdivision, which was

¹⁹ Pastor Donald Swartz, email message to author, December 2, 2010.

²⁰ Cf. Appendix, “We Dedicate This Building to the Lord’s Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin,” June 14, 1981.

²¹ Pastor Donald Swartz, email message to author, December 2, 2010.

located off Highway 53 and McKeeth Drive.²² The following year, Bethel closed on their purchase of the Smith subdivision.

But many members still doubted the Mission Board's choice of a site. Besides not having access to the property except for a steep and unkempt gravel road, the land also did not pass a percolation test, which would prevent the congregation from installing an underground septic system.²³ Bethel could, however, install an above-ground holding tank. In the end, though, the general consensus among the members was that this property was the best choice of their original three options. It was located right off a major highway, so more people would be able to see the church when driving past Galesville. The Smith subdivision provided the best opportunities for evangelism and outreach.

Putting up a church building proved to be just as challenging as finding a site on which to build it. After purchasing the Smith subdivision in 1979, Bethel's Building Committee met with the General Board of Home Missions to discuss what type of facility to build.²⁴ The Mission Board strongly suggested putting up a Worship/Education/Fellowship (W/E/F) facility, which is what most mission congregations at that time were constructing for their first church buildings. Pastor Mumm gives the rationale behind this suggestion: "The purpose of the W/E/F was in the case that the church failed, then they could sell it for maybe a business."²⁵

Along with its suggestion that Bethel build a W/E/F unit, the General Board of Home Missions also set strict standards for the architectural plans. Pastor Mumm says that the

²² Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

²³ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

²⁴ Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

²⁵ Pastor James Mumm, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

mission boards were "dictatorial...The W/E/F buildings were inadequate, especially if you see that they (the congregations) were thriving...Sometimes they didn't evaluate the congregations. The W/E/F units were not real popular buildings, but we should be thankful we could even have a building."²⁶ Pastor Swartz shares his frustrations with the Mission Board throughout the building project:

We put up the building that they told us to put up. The Mission Board sold us the plans to the building, but we had to have an architect use them and adapt them for our site. When we submitted the plans back to the Synod Mission Board, we received several pages of questions on what basically was their building plan. It was somewhat frustrating to deal with them... I have heard that it has gotten easier to deal with over the years.²⁷

The preliminary plans and working drawings for the W/E/F unit underwent numerous rejections by the Synod Mission Board before they were finally approved on July 24, 1980.²⁸ The groundbreaking for the W/E/F unit took place on August 31, 1980.

Once construction began on the W/E/F unit, the problems were minimal. Some flooding occurred as a result, and this delayed the construction of the building. The final cost of the project also grew from an original bid of \$71,667 to \$75,317.²⁹ Because of this increase in construction costs, the members of Bethel cut costs in furnishing the building. Two members, Duane Bothe and Art Gillmeister, drove to Colorado to pick up free pews and a baptismal font from a WELS church that was closing. Bethel's altar, cross, and organ came from the WELS church in La Crescent, Minnesota. One of the members built the pulpit. Pastor Swartz remarks,

²⁶ Pastor James Mumm, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

²⁷ Pastor Donald Swartz, email message to author, December 2, 2010.

²⁸ Cf. Appendix, "We Dedicate This Building to the Lord's Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin," June 14, 1981.

²⁹ Ibid.

“We did everything that we could do to save money.”³⁰ Finally, by the grace of God, Bethel dedicated their first worship facility on June 14, 1981.

Throughout this process, Bethel’s membership grew. By the time the W/E/F unit was completed in 1981, Bethel had over eighty souls.³¹ Now, with a permanent home, Bethel was ready to continue sharing Jesus around the community.

Bethel’s sister congregation, Good Shepherd of Holmen, was also blessed with growth at this time. Being on the fringe of Onalaska, the city of Holmen was also beginning to grow quite rapidly. Because they saw a greater opportunity for Good Shepherd to reach out in the community of Holmen, the General Board of Home Missions resolved to move the parsonage, and, consequently, Pastor Swartz and his family down to Holmen.

Previously, Pastor Swartz and his family had lived in Galesville. The location of the first parsonage was a couple miles northwest of Bethel on Gale Avenue, across the street from the Surge Factory and the Northern Engraving Company. Before the W/E/F unit was constructed, Pastor Swartz held meetings and Bible Classes at the parsonage.

Later, Bethel rented a house located between Galesville and Holmen so that Pastor Swartz could be closer to both congregations. Once Bethel purchased the Smith subdivision, though, they asked the General Board of Home Missions for permission to build a parsonage on the property. Instead of granting their request, the Mission Board determined that the

³⁰ Pastor Donald Swartz, email message to author, December 2, 2010.

³¹ Cf. Appendix, “We Dedicate This Building to the Lord’s Work: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin,” June 14, 1981.

parsonage would be built in Holmen. In 1983, Pastor Swartz and his family relocated to Holmen, where they lived in a rented house.³²

This decision to move the parsonage to Holmen did not sit well with members of Bethel. Some people in Galesville were not too happy with the Synod Mission Board; they felt somewhat betrayed. Not only did Bethel have to share a pastor when they were originally the target site for a mission church north of Onalaska. Now their pastor had been taken away. One member shares his feelings: "A lot of people kind of hated seeing the parsonage moving out of our community. It set me back because, you know, you always like to have a parsonage in your home community...After stepping back and looking at it, though, Holmen had the better growth opportunity than Galesville did."³³ Those feelings of resentment toward the General Board of Home Missions and Good Shepherd did not last.

Pastor Swartz did not spend much time living in Holmen. Shortly after relocating, Pastor Swartz received and accepted a call to serve in Ixonia, Wisconsin in 1984. He left a lasting mark on Bethel. He had seen the congregation through its first years of organization, through its efforts to purchase land, and through its first building project. Above all else, he faithfully preached the Word of God to the members of Bethel.

By God's Grace, Bethel Grows

After Pastor Swartz left, Bethel again went to the assignment committee at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary with a request for one of the graduating seniors. In May of 1984, Joel Suckow received the assignment to be Bethel and Good Shepherd's second pastor. Pastor

³² Pastor Donald Swartz, email message to author, December 2, 2010.

³³ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

Suckow served Bethel and Good Shepherd from 1984 until 1989. Many fondly remember Pastor Suckow for his love of singing and his participation in the choir.³⁴ During Pastor Suckow's time at Bethel, God blessed the congregation with growth to over 100 souls.³⁵

The next pastor to serve Bethel was Pastor Andrew Bauer. Like Pastor Swartz and Pastor Suckow, Pastor Bauer was assigned to Bethel and Good Shepherd as a graduating senior from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. One couple described Pastor Bauer as being "outgoing, energetic, enthusiastic."³⁶ Another member said he was a "very outreach-oriented individual who was very involved with families."³⁷ Pastor Bauer had a love for souls and a great desire to be out among his people. One of his first goals after arriving at Bethel was to complete 'every member' visits "ASAP!"³⁸

As a pastor at Bethel, Pastor Bauer was committed to helping the congregation grow, both in numbers and, more importantly, in their spiritual lives. He kept a careful record of his monthly pastoral activities and shared this record with the church council. In his continual endeavor to nurture his congregation, Pastor Bauer sought the help of his brothers in the ministry.

One such instance took place in May of 1990. Pastor Bauer solicited the advice of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Counselor, Pastor Wayne Schultz, on a variety of topics pertaining to Bethel, the most important of which was the Sunday morning service times for Bethel and Good Shepherd. It appears there was only a total of fifteen minutes between the

³⁴ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010. Russ and Darlene Johnson, interviewed on telephone by author, November 27, 2010.

³⁵ "Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for 1989," 90.

³⁶ Russ and Darlene Johnson, interviewed on telephone by author, November 27, 2010.

³⁷ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

³⁸ Bethel Council Meeting, July 30, 1989, Bethel Congregational Records.

end of the worship service at Good Shepherd and the beginning of the worship service at Bethel. In summarizing the comments of Pastor Schultz at Bethel's church council meeting in May 1990, Pastor Bauer laid out the concerns which Pastor Schultz felt about the small amount of time between current services:

It put the pastor in physical danger as he rushed to make it for the service here (at Bethel). It cheated the pastor of talking with members in Holmen, and cheated the members there of being able to talk to the pastor. It cheated the members of the Bethel, not having the pastor at church before the service to greet the people. It cheated the Bethel congregation, by rarely being able to start on time. It was a disadvantage for the Bethel congregation as far as visitors coming to our service, and having to wait beyond the publicized starting time.³⁹

Pastor Schultz gave Pastor Bauer suggestions for alternative service times, but his concerns may have been going a little deeper than seeing a need to change service times. Bethel and Holmen were approaching a time when one pastor would not suffice to serve both congregations.

In the summer of 1990, Pastor Bauer dealt with one of the hardest situations in Bethel's history. A well-known couple in the congregation wanted to get a divorce. When they did follow through with a divorce, the congregation voted to excommunicate one of the spouses. Many of the members at Bethel had a difficult time participating in the vote for excommunication. Members had strong relationships with one of the spouses or even both of them. Because of the strong emotional attachments members had with each person of the couple, it seemed as though a major split in the congregation could have occurred. By God's grace, that did not happen.⁴⁰

³⁹ Summary of Comments by Pastor Wayne Schultz, Western Wisconsin District Counselor, May 14, 1990, Bethel Congregational Records.

⁴⁰ The author has chosen not to go into lengthy detail concerning this divorce case out of respect for the divorced couple and out of consideration for those who may have been involved in this messy situation and still feel uneasy about it.

Another accomplishment of Bethel during Pastor Bauer's ministry was the establishment of a preschool program at Bethel. Pastor Bauer brought the original idea before the council on February 18, 1991.⁴¹ He explained that the preschool would serve as a mission tool. He believed a preschool would only be able to pay the teacher's salary and offset the bills the preschool would accumulate. At this time, the council only decided to gain the input of the congregation and then study the results at a future time.

The actual decision to begin a preschool at Bethel would not take place until 1994. During that time, some members conveyed concerns about having a preschool in a W/E/F unit.⁴² Some members believed the facilities were inadequate for a preschool. But, in the fall of 1994, Little Lamb Preschool finally opened with Mrs. Lauri Lettner serving as the first teacher.⁴³

After Pastor Bauer took a call to Buffalo Grove, Illinois, in 1995, Bethel called its next pastor, Dan Schoeffel. Unlike his predecessors at Bethel, Pastor Schoeffel was not assigned to Bethel from the Seminary; he accepted the call from the field. Unfortunately, Pastor Schoeffel did not serve at Bethel for long. After a little more than a year at Bethel, Pastor Schoeffel resigned for "the good of the ministry." Different members have given various reasons why Pastor Schoeffel resigned. Pastor Nathan Strutz, Bethel's next pastor, comments about the differing views on why Pastor Schoeffel resigned: "Different people had different takes on it. I don't really know why, but he did resign. It's not a secret. What all the reasons were are difficult to

⁴¹ Bethel Church Council Meeting, February 18, 1991, Bethel Congregational Records.

⁴² Russ and Darlene Johnson, interviewed on telephone by author, November 27, 2010.

⁴³ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin, Dedication of Sanctuary Addition," September 21, 2003.

say. I even heard different things from some people at Good Shepherd and some people at Bethel. That was not an easy time for the congregation.”⁴⁴

Bethel did go through a difficult time after Pastor Schoeffel’s resignation. The congregation, which had grown to 122 souls during Pastor Schoeffel’s service, reduced in size to 109 souls by the end of 1997.⁴⁵ But even those numbers do not tell the whole story of how bleak the situation looked for Bethel. One man, who was serving as the chairman of Bethel during Pastor Schoeffel’s time of service and during the vacancy after his resignation, said about the frailty congregation at that time: “Fragile? We were well beyond that. There would have been a point in time, in 1997, when the chairman in Holmen and myself sat down to talk about selling both buildings and building one in-between because we didn’t think either one was going to make it. At one point in time during the summer, we averaged 28 people here.”⁴⁶

By God’s Grace, Bethel and Good Shepherd Split

“A struggling rural WELS church is considering closing its doors. At least, that’s how this story begins...”⁴⁷ Yes, in 1997, Bethel was struggling to stay alive and keep its doors open. “But that was in God’s plan,” one member notes. “It was time to kick us in the butt and tell us to get to work.”⁴⁸ God always knows what is best for his children, and he always seems to send the right person needed for a situation at the right time. God did have a plan for Bethel, a plan to turn things around for the congregation in a big way.

⁴⁴ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁴⁵ “Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for 1996,” 90. “Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for 1997,” 90.

⁴⁶ David Evenson, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

⁴⁷ *WELS Connection*, December 2005.

⁴⁸ David Evenson, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

God started Bethel's turnaround by providing them with a new shepherd. In May of 1997, Nathan Strutz was assigned to Bethel out of the Seminary. He was exactly who the members needed at this time. Some members describe Pastor Strutz as being "outgoing, someone who had a deep concern for people in the congregation, a man determined to save souls."⁴⁹ Another member says, "Pastor Strutz was someone I could open up to and bare my soul."⁵⁰ How did Pastor Strutz gain this reputation? Simply put, he showed a love for Jesus, a love for Jesus' words, and a love for Jesus' people. He made it a priority when he came to Bethel to conduct 'every member' visits. His love for the ministry was evident^{to} those who met him; he would often exclaim, "I can't believe I get paid to do this!!" Best of all, Pastor Strutz always gave credit for Bethel's success to one who rightfully deserved all the credit, God.

Of course, there were still lingering effects from Pastor Schoeffel's resignation. Pastor Strutz remarked that there were not always positive feelings between Bethel and Good Shepherd. Many people in both congregations wanted their own pastor, but it just was not feasible, mainly because neither congregation was capable of financially supporting a pastor on its own.⁵¹ Pastor Schoeffel, in a letter to Pastor Donald Buch, who was the Chairman of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board in 1996, shared the same sentiments: "I am aware of the tensions that exist between the two [congregations] and their having to share pastors...My gut reaction is that the best thing for these two parishes is for them to be served separately by separate pastors. This is not something that is going to come about quickly or easily."⁵²

⁴⁹ Russ and Darlene Johnson, interviewed on telephone by author, November 27, 2010.

⁵⁰ Frank Wilbur, interviewed by author, Galesville, WI, November 13, 2010.

⁵¹ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁵² Pastor Dan Schoeffel, letter to Pastor Donald Buch, June 1, 1996, Western Wisconsin District Mission Board file on Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church of Galesville and Arcadia, Wisconsin (Hereafter cited as WWDMB file on Bethel).

This move toward a split between Bethel and Good Shepherd was still some time away, but the relationship between the two congregations was not completely negative. Pastor Strutz remembers that these negative feelings were not really feelings of animosity, but rather members of both congregations had feelings of frustration with the close proximity of their service times.⁵³ They did not like their pastor having to run back and forth between the two congregations on Sunday morning. The Sunday morning rush did not give Pastor Strutz an appropriate amount of time to spend with his members before and after services. Pastor Strutz does note, however, that "leaders from both congregations got along with each other."⁵⁴ The leaders of Bethel and Good Shepherd demonstrated a commitment to making the dual-parish relationship work until they would both be able to support a pastor on their own.

One event which helped strengthen the bond between Bethel and Good Shepherd occurred in May of 2000, when members from both congregations attended a School of Outreach together in Sparta. Until this event, Pastor Strutz sensed that the general mood of the Bethel members was that "we can't really do anything...We're not going to grow until the towns grow, and the towns aren't growing."⁵⁵ But the school of outreach instilled a new attitude in the people. In his congregational monthly report to the Western Wisconsin District Board, Pastor Strutz shared some of the goals Bethel established at the School of Outreach:

Two main ideas from there were more offerings in the area north with the goal of establishing a satellite congregation or preaching station in the next few years...Another idea was to work with Good Shepherd in acquiring the services of a preaching assistant to allow each congregation to have worship at the optimal time with minimal expense...It may be a possible step toward each congregation having its own pastor.⁵⁶

⁵³ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁵⁴ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁵⁵ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁵⁶ Congregational Monthly Report, May 2000, WWDMB file on Bethel.

Refreshed and equipped with a renewed zeal for outreach, the members of Bethel began working on their first goal by searching for a location to establish a satellite congregation or preaching station. To help in their search, Bethel submitted a proposal to receive a portion of the *Forward in Christ* thank offering, which had been gathered from congregations throughout the Wisconsin Synod in celebration of the Synod's 150th anniversary. In this proposal, Pastor Strutz gave this description of their intended project:

A team comes to explore church-planting options in Trempealeau County, Wisconsin. [Our goals are:] 1) locate the unchurched in the county, specifically in the communities of Arcadia and Whitehall, 2) conduct interviews to determine possibility of establishing a congregation or preaching station in connection with Bethel congregation, and 3) determine minority population or the possibility of cross-cultural outreach.⁵⁷

Pastor Strutz considered Bethel's proposal a "shot in the dark," but in 2001, Bethel received \$25,000 to subsidize a *Forward in Christ* team to come and conduct what he called the "Trempealeau County Outreach."⁵⁸ That summer, a team consisting of three teacher-training students from Martin Luther College – Melanie Sosinski, Jackie Horton, and Amanda Koepsell – and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary student Joel Stuebs arrived and canvassed the three communities of Arcadia, Independence, and Whitehall with the assistance of Bethel members. In an email to officials on the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board, Pastor Strutz laid out the findings of Bethel's summer *Forward in Christ* team, as well as how Bethel wanted to respond to these findings:

There now are ten Bethel members who live in either Arcadia or Independence. One man serves on the council at Bethel and the others have become more active as the project has progressed. During the summer we have also received inquiries from other WELS members in the area who may have interest in joining a new congregation...The

⁵⁷ Forward in Christ Mission Teams – Proposal Review Form, May 16, 2000, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁵⁸ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

best and most feasible option that Bethel is currently pursuing is to become a new dual parish with a congregation to the north.

Current Activities: A Bible study will be started Thursday, July 26th at 7:00 p.m. and continue on Thursday nights. This same study will be repeated on Saturday evenings at 7:00 p.m. An adult BIC class and children's VBS/Sunday School type class will be offered using existing pastoral and member manpower...No timetable for services has been established yet, but the thought is that the Saturday night time slot could accommodate a Bible class and worship time in the future.

Personally, I believe this project helps fulfill the three main foci of the synod at this time: 1) To lead people to a passion for all the lost. (Our members' awareness of the number of lost in these communities is growing.) 2) Focus ministerial education on outreach. (We have already achieved that to some degree through the four students who have helped us this summer and through the students they will undoubtedly touch over the next years.) 3) Individualize spiritual growth and personal witnessing. (At least at the start we may have more people in Bible class than in worship. We will provide new opportunities for teaching and witnessing.) Finally, this project helps our synod carry out its MOV by starting a new group (I believe 30 per year was the goal) with limited financial assistance.⁵⁹

On July 18, 2001, Pastor Strutz held the first Bible study in Arcadia at the Electric Utility Building on Main Street, and on December 22, 2001, the first worship service took place at the same location.⁶⁰

Having completed its first goal of starting a satellite congregation, Bethel was ready to move on to the second goal it had established at the School of Outreach, to work towards finding a preaching assistant for Pastor Strutz. Actually, with outreach blossoming in Arcadia, it became quite apparent Bethel and Good Shepherd were going to need more aid than just a preaching assistant. It seems Good Shepherd had been planning for this situation. Bethel was not the only congregation growing. By 2000, Good Shepherd had been blessed with its own growth to over 200 members. In 2000, Good Shepherd began construction of an addition to its

⁵⁹ Pastor Nathan Strutz, email message to Pastor Keith Free, July 23, 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁶⁰ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Arcadia, Wisconsin," April 27, 2008.

original W/E/F unit. At this time, Good Shepherd was also beginning to plan to call its own pastor.

On January 14, 2001, Bethel held an open forum to discuss Good Shepherd's intent on calling its own pastor and what options Bethel would have if and when Good Shepherd did call a full-time pastor. Some of the options which members came up with included calling its own full-time pastor, becoming a dual-parish with another neighboring congregation, doing exploratory work in Arcadia or another community to the north, applying for assistance from the District Mission Board, issuing a retirement call, becoming a preaching station, or, finally, dissolving Bethel congregation.⁶¹ The final option, to dissolve Bethel, was quickly struck down. The members of Bethel were committed to keeping the doors of their church open. The three options which gained the most support were calling its own full-time pastor, becoming a dual-parish with another neighboring congregation, or establishing a new congregation north of Galesville.⁶² The Lord's guiding hand led Bethel to the third option when they started services in Arcadia later in 2001.

When the members of Bethel met for their open forum in January of 2001, they were under the impression that Good Shepherd would wait two years before calling their own pastor. By the time a special voter's meeting was held at Bethel on October 9, 2001, the scene had changed dramatically. Both Bethel and Good Shepherd were now only a couple of months away from each calling its own full-time pastors. Why did the situation change so quickly? Was it because of negative feelings between the two congregations? Bethel's staffing proposal at the special voter's meeting provided multiple positive reasons for the change in time:

⁶¹ Discussion Items from 'On Pastoral Staffing Situation' for Open Forum, January 14, 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁶² Congregational Monthly Report, January 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

Our outreach work in Arcadia has helped Bethel and Good Shepherd members see the need for a new pastor on board sooner. Both congregations are experiencing growth. This has increased the desire for a new pastor. Pastor's recent call, even though declined, has made each congregation reassess and evaluate its ministry. Both congregations came to the conclusion in the process that a new pastor should be called sooner than later.⁶³

One other main issue pushing both congregations to the necessity of calling their own pastor was Bethel's involvement with the Seek and Keep Group, which was a group which Bethel members hoped would distribute money to Bethel for the purpose of helping the congregation support its own pastor. Bethel later found out that their request for those funds was rejected because the funds were not intended to be used for pastoral support.⁶⁴

Two days later, at a joint council meeting of Bethel and Good Shepherd, Pastor Keith Free, the chairman of the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board, shared the Mission Board's recommendation on the calling process for both congregations. He advised both congregations to call Pastor Strutz to serve one of the two churches. Both congregations did eventually call Pastor Strutz. Pastor Free also encouraged both congregations, "As the Lord directs the heart of Pastor Strutz, it will be vitally important that when Pastor Strutz shares the final decision, that the leaders and members of both churches recognize the hand of the Lord and with the aid of our loving Savior and Lord respect that decision."⁶⁵

On January 27, 2002, Bethel and Good Shepherd officially dissolved their dual-parish arrangement, which had been a great blessing to each congregation for over twenty-five years. Soon after, both congregations called Pastor Strutz to serve them as their full-time pastor.

⁶³ Bethel Staffing Proposal Presented to Special Voter's Meeting, October 7, 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁶⁴ Long Range Planning Committee, November 20, 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁶⁵ Thoughts to Consider for Ministry Directions: Bethel, Galesville & Good Shepherd, Holmen, Joint Council Meeting, October 9, 2001, WWDMB file on Bethel.

Pastor Strutz mentions that by the time each church called its own pastor, it was a positive thing for members of both congregations because it resulted mainly because of the growth of Good Shepherd and Bethel's outreach work in Arcadia.⁶⁶ After difficult deliberation, Pastor Strutz accepted the call to serve exclusively at Bethel on February 10, 2002, and he began his full-time ministry at Bethel on March 3, 2002.⁶⁷

By God's Grace, Bethel Builds

One of the reasons Pastor Strutz gives for his decision to accept the call to Bethel was that Bethel was beginning to discuss building an addition to their W/E/F unit, and he wanted to be there to help guide the congregation through the process of building.⁶⁸ An addition had been on the mind of Bethel members for a number of years. At their church council meeting on April 14, 1992, Pastor Bauer had offered suggestions for adding classrooms onto the building for the Sunday School to use.⁶⁹ At that time, the council had turned away his ideas, pointing instead to all the necessary improvements that needed to be done to the existing building first. But years later, that mindset had transformed. At the congregation's annual meeting in 2000, one of the members brought up the idea of adding on to the building in Galesville. This member thought a twenty by twenty foot addition would provide sufficient space to store preschool items and to hold another Sunday School class.

It was only a matter of time before the congregation realized that a small maintenance addition would not be enough. Once Bethel formed a Building Committee in the fall of 2000,

⁶⁶ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁶⁷ Congregational Monthly Report, February 2002, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁶⁸ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁶⁹ Bethel Church Council Meeting, April 14, 1992, Bethel Congregational Records.

they began to investigate their options for a facility addition.⁷⁰ Soon, their building plans exploded to a 5,200 square foot expansion, with enough room for a worship space, an office for Pastor, and additional bathrooms. By the end of June of 2002, Bethel's plans for their addition had been approved by the state of Wisconsin. Later that year, Bethel also secured the services of *Builders for Christ* to assist in the construction of their addition.

The next hurdle for Bethel to jump over was financing the addition. Bethel had struggled with finances at many points throughout its history, and now, the congregation had to raise \$70,000 to qualify for Church Extension Fund (CEF) financing. Pastor Strutz notes that contributions toward the Building Fund were slow at first, but it picked up once several congregations in La Crosse donated money to the fund.⁷¹ In February of 2003, Bethel learned that their down payment had to be in with their loan application, even though the congregation had thought it was due by the end of construction.⁷² Thankfully, after Pastor Strutz made one announcement after church on one of the Sundays, the Lord moved the hearts of the members to give to the Building Fund. Bethel was able to secure their \$70,000 down payment on time.

Groundbreaking for the new addition occurred April 6, 2003. Bethel members teamed with *Builders for Christ* to volunteer their time in the construction phase so they could control costs of the addition wherever possible. Many members saw the service of *Builders for Christ* as a blessing from God. Some members even mentioned how enjoyable and how great a blessing it was to work together with fellow Christians to glorify God.⁷³ Members had the opportunity to get to know each other better. Best of all, the large amount of volunteer work

⁷⁰ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin, Dedication of Sanctuary Addition," September 21, 2003.

⁷¹ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁷² Congregational Monthly Report, February 2003, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁷³ Russ and Darlene Johnson, interviewed on telephone by author, November 27, 2010.

gave members of Bethel a real sense of ownership of their church. Construction of the addition was completed in August of 2003, and on September 21, 2003, the members of Bethel dedicated their new building to the glory of God.⁷⁴

God had truly blessed Galesville with a new worship facility, but he was also blessing outreach efforts in Arcadia. For about the first year and a half, from December 2001 to March 2003, Pastor Strutz conducted worship services at the Electric Utility Building on Saturday evenings. During that time, the mission in Arcadia experienced ups and downs. In a correspondence with Pastor Free, Pastor Strutz mentioned some of those struggles:

Speaking of Arcadia, we seem to be suffering one blow after another. The gentleman who died was a big helper in service set-up and takedown. One family that was going to transfer is reconsidering, one member is not driving his truck over the road and is not present very often. We often only have two callers for our twice monthly Saturday afternoon prospect follow-up days. And sometimes only that many to set up for the service. That really leaves us short-handed.⁷⁵

And yet, Pastor Strutz found reasons to be joyful despite the struggles in Arcadia: "There is still much to be thankful for...Bethel members who had been living in Brazil and working for Ashley have returned...We have had a couple of new guests join us...Our summer Bible study attendance has been very good, usually around ten or so. In fact, some Sundays every single worshiper also attended Bible class."⁷⁶

In March of 2003, services in Arcadia were changed from Saturday evenings to Sunday mornings in an attempt to increase attendance. It worked. In a few short months, the weekly attendance in Arcadia nearly doubled to over thirty worshipers. The services began attracting

⁷⁴ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Galesville, Wisconsin, Dedication of Sanctuary Addition," September 21, 2003.

⁷⁵ Congregational Monthly Report, July, 2002, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁷⁶ Pastor Nathan Strutz, email message to Pastor Keith Free, August 15, 2002, WWDMB file on Bethel.

WELS members in the area who were not too fond of worshiping on Saturday evenings, as well as more prospects. The small group in Arcadia was beginning to take shape and gain a foothold in the community.

The mission in Arcadia was progressing well, and it was about to get an even bigger boost. Right around that time, either in late 2002 or early 2003, Pastor Strutz began developing what he called the "Fazoli's Plan."⁷⁷ One day, at the monthly circuit pastors' meeting, the pastors of the La Crosse area were notified that the District Presidents had put out a plea for congregations around the synod to consider applying for vicars because the upcoming vicar class was larger than previous years. After the circuit meeting, the pastors of the La Crosse area gathered together to eat lunch at Fazoli's, a restaurant in Onalaska. Pastor Bill Bader, the pastor of St. Paul's in Onalaska and also the circuit pastor at that time, made the suggestion that the churches around La Crosse should pool their resources together to fund a vicar to help Pastor Strutz in Galesville and Arcadia.

This idea was well-received. With support from the other pastors, Pastor Strutz began forming a proposal for a vicar. Early in 2003, Pastor Strutz presented "The Coulee Region Vicar Plan":

The WELS congregations of the Coulee region, and other congregations as may be willing to support the Coulee region vicar plan, band together in Christ's name to support a vicar who would serve Bethel congregation. The vicar's primary emphasis would be expanding the outreach work in Arcadia under the supervision of Pastor Nathan Strutz of Bethel in Galesville and Arcadia

Purpose (Why make this proposal?): The Coulee region vicar program will assist our Seminary in training theological students at a time when there are many more vicars than normal and places for vicars to serve are desperately needed. The Coulee region vicar program will give one more vicar an opportunity to work with a beginning

⁷⁷ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

congregation and experience the ups and downs of an exploratory congregation (Arcadia) as well as work with a more established and growing congregation (Galesville). WELS congregations will have an opportunity to band together for hands-on Gospel ministry and direct evangelism to people who do not know Christ as their Savior. WELS congregations will have more ownership of the only mission congregation in the Coulee Region (Bethel in Arcadia)...⁷⁸

In Bethel's vicar plan, the costs for the vicar would be covered by the local congregations through mission offerings and special gifts. One stipulation some of the congregations made along with their gifts, however, was that the Bethel vicar would preach at their congregations for their Mission Festival.

Bethel's proposal for a vicar was approved, and on May 20, 2003, Tyler Peil was assigned as Bethel's first vicar. Tyler and his wife, Jill, moved to Arcadia on August, 15, 2003, and they lived in downtown Arcadia in a rented house on Jefferson Street. Vicar Peil's arrival instantly bolstered the morale of the Bethel members living in and around Arcadia. Pastor Strutz writes, "Vicar Tyler Peil and Jill his wife moved in August 15th. Almost every Arcadia family helped in some way. Even a couple of prospect families did. They'll be members soon, thanks in part just to having a called worker. We realize Vicar is not Arcadia's pastor, but the perception is that now someone is more available to serve Arcadia. That can only be good."⁷⁹ Having a vicar in Arcadia benefited the members there because the vicar provided a more visible presence in community, and he was someone who the people could go to when they needed assistance.

When Vicar Peil's time of service to Bethel was coming to an end, the congregation wanted another vicar. They almost did not get one the next year. In applying for a vicar this

⁷⁸ The Coulee Region Vicar Plan, 2003, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁷⁹ Congregational Monthly Report, August 2003, WWDMB file on Bethel.

time, Pastor Strutz submitted Bethel's application through the Vicar in Mission Settings (VIMS) program so the congregation could receive funding to help pay for the next vicar. Bethel was placed number fourteen on the VIMS list, but originally, only the first twelve congregations were going to receive vicars. The Lord, however, led these congregations to pitch in more of their own funds so that four more VIMS congregations could have vicars.⁸⁰ As a result, in August 2004 Bethel welcomed its second vicar, Dan Olson. In Bethel's history, seven vicars have served the congregation: Tyler Peil (2003-2004), Dan Olson (2004-2005), Michael Novotny (2005-2006), Jonathan Bourman (2006-2007), Noah Headrick (2007-2008), Benjamin Sadler (2008-2009), and Jason Strong (2009-2010).⁸¹ Throughout the years of having vicars, the number of members in Arcadia rose to over 100 souls.⁸²

When Bethel had been blessed with a *Forward in Christ* team in the summer of 2001, one of their goals was to learn about the minority population of the surrounding communities in order to determine the possibility of cross-cultural outreach. Because Arcadia was the national headquarters for two large companies, Ashley Furniture and Gold'n Plump Chicken, many Hispanics moved to Arcadia to work in those two factories. This was an area for cross-cultural outreach, and in 2005, with Pastor Strutz and Vicar Michael Novotny, who were both blessed with great Spanish-speaking gifts, Bethel began to reach out to the Hispanic community in Arcadia.

On multiple weekends in September and October, students came from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and assisted Bethel with canvassing Arcadia. They focused on meeting and

⁸⁰ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁸¹ Bethel did have an eighth vicar, David Sigrist, in 2010 for a little over a month, but Vicar Sigrist left Bethel and became the vicar at Resurrection in Verona, Wisconsin, when Pastor Strutz accepted a call to Resurrection in on August 29, 2010.

⁸² Congregation Monthly Report, June 2010, email message to author.

getting to know the Hispanics.⁸³ As a result of this canvassing, Bethel decided to begin English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. October 4, 2005, Bethel held its first ESL class, and twenty-three Spanish-speaking adults attended.⁸⁴

A couple months later, Bethel added a Spanish Bible class after their ESL classes. At first, the program seemed to be a success. In June 2006, Pastor Strutz informed Pastor Free, "ESL numbers are fairly stable and there is a more regular group. Some are getting quite good at English and we do much of the teaching in English now. Almost everyone who comes for the English stays for Spanish Bible class...We thought this would be a seed-sowing and love-showing ministry and already people are connecting with our congregation."⁸⁵ At the same, however, Pastor Strutz saw the potential downfall of the ESL program: "We are discussing possibly adding some worship elements to our Bible Studies. But we are concerned that our most faithful Bible Class attendees are devout Catholics and the Catholic church in Arcadia does not have a twice monthly mass in Spanish which they attend. We're not quite sure of our direction at this time."⁸⁶

The attendance began to steadily decline toward the end of Vicar Novotny's year. This drop-off in attendance occurred because a great majority of the Hispanics in Arcadia were devoted Catholics. As a result, the evangelism portion of Bethel's cross-cultural outreach was not successful. By its end in March of 2008, the ESL program was only reaching a couple Spanish-speaking families who were not going to join the church. Unfortunately, Bethel's ESL program ended during Vicar Bourman's year. Toward the end of Vicar Strong's year at Bethel,

⁸³ Pastor Nathan Strutz, email message to Pastor Keith Free, October 19, 2005, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Congregational Monthly Report, June 2006, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁸⁶ Congregational Monthly Report, April 2006, WWDMB file on Bethel.

however, the congregation was beginning to discuss trying to do some form of Hispanic outreach again.

By God's Grace, Bethel Builds...Again

Even though the ESL program did not end well for Bethel, the membership in Arcadia was continuing to grow. God's Church in Arcadia was expanding. Vicar Peil wrote about that Church in 2004:

We're still building an addition on the Church here in Arcadia. All the materials are paid for. The foundation was set before we got here, before time began. Now, according to the work and will of the Holy Spirit, human souls are being built together and added to God's Church...Our good and gracious Lord continues to build here in Arcadia and thanks to him we get the inestimable joy of watching and participating in his work.

Some statistics about the Church being built in Arcadia? Well, we've built it on a love so high, so wide, so tall, so deep, so precious, that it cannot fail. The builder has told us that nothing can topple it, not even the powers of evil. Our addition is currently 52 souls, with more expansion soon to come, as others continue in adult instruction. We continue to patch and repair broken hearts and guilt-filled souls every week, every day. The mortar of God's Word always works to repair our weakness. In the last months, we have gathered around that precious Word every Sunday, and on some Thursday evenings, to be strengthened and reinforced. Our members have been reminded of their baptisms again and again, each and every time that we have gathered for worship. We have been bonded together, joined into one at our Lord's table, through his body and blood.

Praise the Lord for the beautiful addition that he has built on his Church here in Arcadia. Because he is the builder, this Church shall stand forever.⁸⁷

With the blessing of growth, Bethel began thinking about the permanency of their congregation in Arcadia. It was time for Bethel to find a home for its members in Arcadia.

The time for that search began as soon as the building project in Galesville was completed in 2003. Pastor Strutz recalls a phone call he received the day after the addition in

⁸⁷ Vicar Tyler Peil, email message to Pastor Keith Free, August 6, 2004, WWDMB file on Bethel.

Galesville was dedicated, "It was the weirdest thing...We had dedication of the building in Galesville. The next day I got a call from someone in Arcadia, who's not a member of our church, who just says, 'Hey Pastor, I know you guys started a church but don't have a building. I just thought you should know this building is for sale, and maybe it would work for your church.'"⁸⁸ The building this caller had been referring to was an old church located on River Street in downtown Arcadia. The building presented a lot of problems, so Bethel never seriously considered purchasing it.

That phone call did get the ball rolling for finding a facility in Arcadia, however. In 2004, Bethel looked at several other buildings: a vacant building on West Main Street (now a Family Dollar), another building located next to the fire station (now the Ashley Wellness Center), and a vacant facility on the outskirts of Arcadia on County Road A.⁸⁹ Of the bunch, the Bethel did seriously look at the building on County Road A.

At this point, Bethel even had an Arcadia Building Fund of approximately \$8,000 started. Those funds came as a result of a \$5,000 gift from an anonymous donor and matching funds from WELS Kingdom Workers. That Building Fund quickly jumped up to over \$50,000, thanks in large part to the Antioch Foundation. The Antioch Foundation approached Bethel, offering to provide the congregation with some funds if Bethel had any mission work they were conducting in Arcadia. At first, the amount of the grant given by the Antioch Foundation was \$10,000, but by the summer of 2004, that grant had grown to \$50,000.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁸⁹ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁹⁰ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

Having a sizeable Building Fund, Bethel intently looked at the County Road A building. This building had potential for a worship facility. It had enough room for a worship space and classrooms, and it also had an upstairs apartment for the vicar to occupy.

As they did more research into the building, however, they found issues and problems which did not make the building look as appealing as it did when they first looked at it. Even John Tappe, a lay member serving on the Western Wisconsin District Mission Board, listed his concerns about the building in an email to Pastor Strutz:

Exterior appearance (negative appearance (negative image), very little parking, egress from parking to highway seems dangerous, point well in building – is this legal – is this conforming?, no visible evidence of a septic system on this property – no vents showing, no riser for pumping, etc. where and what type of system is there?, wood furnace in out building – does it meet code? – walls and ceiling – walls are concrete block, only 1 bath on main floor, one heating system for both levels, overall resale value of this building for any other use, I'm wondering if seller received any bids at all?, I'm not sure of the location either – this area seems older and more run down – seems that there is more housing and nicer properties to the south and west (hope I have my directions correct), The only concerns with the apartment are: long set of steps to it, possibly difficult to get large furniture into the unit, some carpet and decorating is dated.⁹¹

In September 2004, Bethel did offer \$70,000 on the building, but thankfully, that offer was rejected by the seller.

So Bethel went back to the drawing board. None of the facilities which they had looked at were sufficient, so the only option that they had left was to build their own church building. Having an abundance of funds, Bethel began searching for land. They found the ideal piece of property located just north of Arcadia on Highway 93. The cost of the land was over \$100,000, so Bethel met early in 2006 to discuss what amount to put down on the land. Pastor Strutz recalls being surprised at the meeting because he expected the people to vote to use all of their

⁹¹ John Tappe, email message to Bethel Lutheran Church, 2004, WWDMB file on Bethel.

funds to pay for the land, but in the end, the members chose to put the minimum of ten percent down on the land and to use the rest to finance the building.⁹² Bethel purchased the 7.6 acre parcel of land in February of 2006.⁹³

Now that Bethel owned land for a church building in Arcadia, it was time to decide what kind of building Bethel wanted to construct. This discussion could not have come at a better time. The Electric Utility Building which Bethel had been using for services for the past four years was becoming an impediment. Pastor Strutz explained on a form to the District Mission Board:

Our outreach is hindered, not only by lack of a visible community presence, but in other ways. We are starting to wear out our welcome in our current facility, not due to misuse, but simply because the amount of time we have been meeting there (over four years now) is beginning to wear on those who control use of the facility. We have seen increased fees for usage and other policy changes. We also lack a storage place for the float we pull in three community parades each year.⁹⁴

In June 2006, the voters of Bethel met to discuss the timing and the size of the building. Members already knew the cost for the building would be about \$100 per square foot, and the possibilities for the size of the building ranged all the way up to 5,000 square feet. Once again, Pastor Strutz was pleasantly surprised at the outcome of the meeting: "At first there was some (attitudes): 'Maybe we should wait. Maybe it's not the right time.' But it was interesting that as people spoke, you could see the tide turn to more positive."⁹⁵ The majority of the members voted in favor of constructing a 5,000 square foot building for \$500,000.

⁹² Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

⁹³ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Arcadia, Wisconsin," April 27, 2008.

⁹⁴ Basic Information and Request Form, February 19, 2006, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁹⁵ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

That shocking and wonderful decision was soon followed by an unexpected surprise. Pastor Strutz, in his monthly mission report to the District Mission Board, described this blessing, "On the building front, we received amazing news. A donor has agreed to provide a grant of up to \$500,000! That's right. I didn't put any extra zeros. He heard about our plans for a \$500,000 facility and said he will match that...It means we could go up to a \$1 million project and have half paid for. Basically, the donor has agreed to pay half the project cost."⁹⁶ But the anonymous donor did not stop at \$500,000. By the end of the project, he had contributed a gift of over \$1,300,000 to help build the facility in Arcadia.⁹⁷ Why did the donor give so much money toward construction of the building? Pastor Strutz asked the donor the same question, and donor gave these reasons for his generosity, "I'm giving this money because I don't want the church to fail. I want the church to succeed. I want the church to grow. I want more people to come...You guys have a real opportunity because Arcadia isn't always friends, and even the churches, so if your church can be friendly and welcoming, this facility will help."⁹⁸

Along with such a generous gift a few problems surfaced for Bethel. Because of the large monetary gift, the donor did exert a large amount of input on the building plan, but much of the input was good. Another lasting temptation rising from the donor's gift is for the congregation to become too reliant on the donor to bail the congregation out when it is in need but is not able to fulfill that need. In general, members in Arcadia struggle to take ownership, but they have been working toward taking ownership of their facility.

⁹⁶ Congregational Monthly Report, June 2006, WWDMB file on Bethel.

⁹⁷ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Arcadia, Wisconsin," April 27, 2008.

⁹⁸ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

Having funds for a \$1,000,000 building project instead of a \$500,000 project definitely changed the plans for the church building in Arcadia. Groundbreaking for the new building was April 1, 2007, and once again, *Builders for Christ* provided assistance in construction, arriving at the job site June 19, 2007.⁹⁹ When *Builders for Christ* left on September 8, 2007, the building was far from being done, and construction hit a lull as people began to lose enthusiasm. Members from both Galesville and Arcadia, however, remained committed to completing the project, and after countless volunteer hours, construction of the new facility was finished in the early months of 2008. Bethel held its first service in the new sanctuary on February 10, 2008 and dedicated the building April 27, 2008.¹⁰⁰

Only because of God's grace was Bethel able to build two beautiful worship facilities. By God's grace, Bethel grew tremendously throughout Pastor Strutz's time of service to the congregation. On August 29, 2010, Pastor Strutz accepted a call to serve God's people in Verona, Wisconsin. By the time Pastor Strutz left Bethel, the congregation had grown to over 240 souls.¹⁰¹ Interestingly, the vacancy pastor Bethel called to serve while they waited for a new pastor was Pastor James Mumm, the same Pastor James Mumm who had helped start the congregation almost thirty-five years earlier. So much had changed since he started the congregation, but one thing remained the same. People have come to hear the same message of Christ crucified faithfully preached by all of Bethel's pastors, and then they have carried the good news of the gospel out into the world and have told it throughout Trempealeau County.

⁹⁹ Cf. Appendix, "Building for Christ: Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Arcadia, Wisconsin," April 27, 2008.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Congregational Monthly Report, June 2010, email message to author.

Concluding Remarks

Bethel has had a rich history full of joys and struggles, but throughout all of it, the congregation has continued to grow. What has caused this growth? Pastor Strutz gives a beautiful answer, "It was God's timing and God's blessing...God just loved the people of Galesville and Arcadia so much that he put those churches there and aligned people, he put the funds in place, he worked on people's hearts."¹⁰² One Bethel member remarks, "There is a real sense of the Lord's hand working with us here because things have just fallen into place here, things we just couldn't imagine by human terms."¹⁰³

When talking about the growth of Bethel, Pastor Strutz will often talk about the 3 D's – Doctrine, Demeanor, and Determination.¹⁰⁴ Bethel, without excuse, has preached the truth of God's Word throughout its history, never changing its Doctrine. When referring to Determination, Pastor Strutz often relates a humorous anecdote:

It was maybe the fourth Saturday night we had church in Arcadia, and David and Eileen Hanson were a couple of the people who were coming, and he (David) says, "So Pastor, what are you going to do if this doesn't work out?" I said, "David, you must be talking in my deaf ear, because I didn't hear what you said." He says, "What are you going to do if this doesn't work out?" "Sorry David, you were talking in my deaf ear." "So what are you going to do if this doesn't work out?" Finally, by about the third time, he got it, "Ok, this not working out isn't really an option."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

¹⁰³ Fred Lintelmann, interviewed for *WELS Connection*, December, 2005.

¹⁰⁴ In the December 2005 edition of *WELS Connection*, Pastor Bernhardt further describes these three D's: "A Bible-based DOCTRINE that never changes, a DEMEANOR of friendliness and welcoming, and a DETERMINATION to get things done.

¹⁰⁵ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

Pastor Strutz had lost hearing in one of his ears because of an accident when he was younger, but the point of the story was that people at Bethel were determined to make the mission in Arcadia work. That determination has rubbed off on the entire congregation.

Demeanor has also played a major role in Bethel's growth. Many members have described Bethel as being a tight-knit family. But this tight-knit family gets excited to grow and welcome new members into the family. Both campuses exhibit a warm friendliness to visitors, making them feel like part of the church. Often, when visitors are asked what they liked best about the church on follow-up visits, many often respond with "good preaching and friendly people."

Finally, besides being friendly and welcoming, Bethel members literally go out and bring people to church. Pastor Strutz commented in the *WELS Connection*, "There isn't any gimmick behind this new ministry...it's just people reaching out with the Gospel where God provided an opportunity."¹⁰⁶ Bethel has thrived on friendship evangelism. Pastor Strutz says, "It's simple. People invite friends, you follow up on them, you invite them to BIC class."¹⁰⁷ Many members at Bethel came as the result of being invited to a service by a friend. Pastor Strutz gives one great example: "One person tells another. Paul and Debbie Koch came because of our doctrine...Debbie worked with Rosa at Kwik Trip for a very short time, but Debbie talked to Rosa, and Rosa and her husband David talked to me about having their children baptized, then Rosa brought her friend Dawn, they were friends with Robert and Laura (Ali), and they came..."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed for *WELS Connection*, December, 2005.

¹⁰⁷ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Pastor Nathan Strutz, interviewed by author, Verona, WI, November 12, 2010.

“Come and see! Go and tell!” By God’s grace, for almost thirty-five years Bethel has lived by that mission, has carried out the Great Commission, and has grown immensely because of its outreach efforts. God has seen the congregation through struggles, building projects, and countless joys. He has provided strong and faithful shepherds to lead the congregation throughout its life, and he has presented the right people to lead Bethel at the right time. It is this author’s prayer that by his grace, God would continue to supply faithful leaders to Bethel and continue to grow and strengthen the congregation as it continues to come and see, and then go and tell.

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