

God's Grace In Central Tennessee

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Church History

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Ever since the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod broke fellowship with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod in 1961, the WELS has opened missions in many new states where it did not have any congregations before. Tennessee is one of those states in which our Synod has carried out its mission work since 1961. Our Synod's first mission expansion in Tennessee had its beginning in the central part of Tennessee near Nashville. Consequently, this paper will focus on that first mission activity in central Tennessee and how God's kingdom has grown in that area to the present.

Like most other congregations, the congregation in central Tennessee had a very humble beginning. The Lord brought two families to the Nashville area from opposite directions, one from Florida and the other from Kansas. These two families provided the nucleus for this congregation. In the late 1960's, these two families, consisting of seven souls, began meeting together for Bible studies. They taught their children using the Synod's Sunday School materials. Occasionally they drove 130 miles to attend church services in Huntsville, Alabama. Above all, they prayed that a WELS mission might be started in the Nashville area.

In 1970 those prayers were answered. On March 6, 1970, they sent a request to Pastor R. J. Pope for exploratory services to be held in Tennessee. Pastor R. J. Pope was one of the Southeast Wisconsin District representatives serving on the General Board for Home Missions. (At that time, Tennessee was in the Southeast

Wisconsin District) Rev. R. J. Pope brought the request to the Southeast Wisconsin District Mission Board and the Board directed District Missionary John Raabe and Vicar Elwyn Klumb to canvass the Nashville area in the summer of 1970. Pastor Raabe and Vicar Klumb arrive the second week in June and began canvassing in the Nashville area. Pastor Raabe spent three days in the area, but Vicar Klumb remained for a couple of weeks to canvass more of the area, contact prospects, and look for a place to hold worship services.

Their efforts turned up a two more very interested families and some other interested prospects. They also learned that Metropolitan Nashville was a thriving area which had experienced a population increase of over 20% over the past ten years. They also learned that the city of Hendersonville, which was 40 miles northeast of Nashville, was the fastest growing community in Tennessee. Because this area had promising potential for mission work and because of the prospects already located, in August of 1970 the S.E. Wisconsin District Mission Board decided to begin services in the Nashville area as soon as possible. The Board scheduled services to begin in the fall and asked Pastor Myrl Wagenknecht of Huntsville, Alabama, to conduct evening services, but the Lord had a different plan for this fledgling mission field. A short time later, Pastor Wagenknecht accepted a call to Fort Worth, Texas. This put an end to the plans of beginning services.

The Mission Board delayed the start of services with hopes that the vacancy would soon be filled in Huntsville. By February of

1971, Huntsville still did not have a pastor and the Mission Board wanted to get services started in the Nashville area before their spring meeting. So they set March 21, 1971 as the day for the first service. The service began at 10:00 AM in the Phillips-Robinson Funeral Home chapel on Gallatin Road in Hendersonville, Tennessee. The service was conducted by Pastor John Raabe with 26 people in attendance.

Services continued to be held on every Sunday and were conducted by Pastor John Raabe or by Seminary students who were flown to Nashville each weekend. Two weeks after services began, the S.E. Wisconsin Mission Board sent a request to the General Board for Home Missions to grant "mission status" for the Nashville area. On May 4, 1971, the General Board for Home Missions granted the Nashville area "mission status" with the right to call a full-time, resident pastor. The congregation was now a member of the Wisconsin Synod and "Rock of Ages Lutheran Church" was chosen as the name for the congregation. On May 25, Seminary Candidate Richard Stadler received the call to Rock of Ages and accepted to serve as the first resident pastor.

On July 25, 1971, Pastor Stadler was ordained and installed at a 4:00 PM service at the Phillips-Robinson Funeral Home chapel in Hendersonville. Pastor John Raabe conducted the service and Pastor Gary Schroeder of St. Philips Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, preached the sermon. Pastor Karl Peterson of Birmingham, Alabama, and Pastor Ralph Waack of Huntsville, Alabama, were present for the laying on of hands. At that time, the congregation, including his ^{Pastor Stadler's}

wife and son, numbered 9 souls.

When Pastor Stadler received the call to Nashville, he was informed that he would be expected to jump off to Memphis and Knoxville to get missions started there as soon as he got settled in Nashville. His first work was aimed at Memphis and as a result of this work, a mission was started in that area. A year and a half later this mission also was granted "mission status" and they called Seminary graduate, Rodney Busch to be their pastor.

In 1973, the WELS created a new district, the South Atlantic District, composed of congregations in Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida and part of Louisiana. Because of growth in this area of the country and because of geographical distances, the Synod decided that it was best to form another district. Now the 21 congregations in these states would be able to participate more fully in the Synod's programs. Rock of Ages has the honor of being one of the charter members of this district.

In the early years of its existence, Rock of Ages Ev. Lutheran Church was a very mobile and flexible congregation. The members met for services in a number of different places depending on what was available at their desired time slot and on what day of the week they were having services. They met at places such as the funeral home mentioned before, a teen center, a bank basement, a store front, a community hall, and an elementary school. On some occasions services had to be held in the pastor's home because there was no other place available. Despite this bouncing from place to place, the congregation still enjoyed a favorable amount

of growth. At the end of 1971, the congregation consisted of 7 communicants and 11 souls. At the end of 1972, the congregation had grown to 17 communicants and 27 souls. By 1973, the congregation totalled 30 communicants and 41 souls. By the end of 1974 the church had 44 communicants and 75 souls. Needless to say, the congregation was now looking for a more permanent place to worship.

In 1974, the congregation purchased six acres of land located along Campbell Road in Madison for \$24,000. In November of 1974, the General Board for Home Missions granted the congregation building funds in the amount of \$131,502. Mr. Gerald Vanselow from the Synod's architectural office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was engaged as the congregation's architect and drew up plans for the congregation's first place of worship.

Groundbreaking took place on August 24, 1975, and construction of the new worship facilities was begun by Christian Builders, Inc. of Brentwood, Tennessee. The chancel furniture was built by Lindsey's of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. The total cost of the land, chapel and the parsonage, which was built later, came to about \$220,000.

Although the congregation was experiencing a fair amount of growth and was in the middle of a building project, Pastor Stadler did not remain in Tennessee to see the completion of the new worship center. The Lord had other plans for him. He accepted a call to St. James Lutheran Church in West St. Paul, Minnesota and left Rock of Ages in October of 1975 shortly after construction had begun. During his pastorate in Tennessee, the Lord blessed his

efforts and the fruits of his work are still evident today. He carried God's Word in all directions from his base of operation in Nashville. He traveled east to Knoxville, west to Memphis and north into Kentucky and was instrumental in planting the seed which sprung up into congregations in a couple of these areas.

The building project continued without a pastor on sight and the congregation was without a pastor for eight months. On June 20, 1976, Pastor Joel Schroeder was installed as the new pastor. Everything went as planned and the new worship center was completed. The first worship service in the building was held on July 25, 1976. Dedication of the new building was set for October 31, 1976. This service was also planned to serve as the Reformation service. Three days before the Dedication service, Pastor Schroeder received a heart-stopping call from the builder that the new church building was filled with smoke. On his way to the church, Pastor Schroeder was praying that the damage would not be serious.

In an article that he submitted to the Northwestern Lutheran, Pastor Schroeder describes the scene when he arrived at the church:

When I turned into the church property just off Interstate 65, several fire trucks were on the scene, feeding their hoses into the building like tubes into a dying body. "Oh no! It's worse than I thought!" When my eyes scanned the inside of the building, my heart sank even lower. The carpeting was tracked full of ashes, and firemen were ripping out charred drywall, furring strips, and four-by-fours. Throughout the entire seven-sided stucco building there was a thin, black, oily film.

As the Madison fire chief tried to determine the cause of the blaze, several possibilities were explored. The wiring received the most votes as the culprit, but to

this day the direct cause of the fire is not known.

How the fire started is not the important thing. How it stopped is! It was when the fire chief examined the five-pound fire extinguisher lying near the fire that I knew how merciful God had been. The chief showed us a plastic part in the head of the extinguisher. When this piece melted from the heat, the extinguisher set itself off. The pin was still in position. It seemed that by discharging its full load of CO2 in the small kitchen, the extinguisher had kept the fire under control until it could be discovered at 1:00 PM Thursday. The smoke damage indicated the fire must have started already on Wednesday evening.¹

At this point the situation looked rather bleak. It didn't seem like it was at all possible to go through with the Dedication service, but a call to the insurance company brought a claims adjustor to the scene immediately. He made sure that a cleaning crew would be on the job early Friday morning. The crew worked all day Friday and most of the day Saturday. By the time worship service came Sunday morning there were very few traces that a fire had soiled the building just three days earlier. That Sunday afternoon at 4:00 PM the congregation again gathered and held their Dedication service.

In 1977, the congregation was involved with another building project. A seven room brick parsonage with a basement was built on the north end of the property where the church was located. This project was completed in November of that year.

During the next few years, things followed according to normal

¹. "And, Oh Yes, Thanks for the Fire!" The Northwestern Lutheran. Feb 6, 1977, pg. 43.

church business. By the late 70's, the congregation had grown to over 130 souls and its membership remained between 130 and 140 through the mid 80's. One other interesting thing to note is that over three successive years (1978, '79 & '80) Rock of Ages was a popular place for the touring chorus' of our Synod's schools to stop. The Seminary Male Chorus, the Northwestern Prep Singers and the Michigan Lutheran Seminary Choir presented a concert there.

In January of 1982, Pastor Schroeder accepted a call to Overland Park, Kansas, and left Madison in the middle of February. Just over a month after he left, Pastor Randall Bartelt was installed as the next pastor on April 25, 1982. During the years that Pastor Bartelt served the congregation, things took a turn for the worse. Church attendance dropped and offerings dropped. The congregation was not able to meet the budget and relied on the Synod to give them more support. After four and a half years, Pastor Bartelt felt that it was in the best interest of the congregation to step down from the public office and he resigned his call in November of 1986.

The congregation struggled through a year without a pastor. Then in the fall of 1987, Pastor Keith Kruck accepted the call to Madison, Tennessee, and was installed on November, 1, 1987. During the next year, Pastor Kruck got things turned around and headed in a positive direction. The congregation was again looking forward to doing outreach.

It so happens, that at this time the Synod decided to start a new program which would involve college students in the work of the

church. This new program was called the Summer Evangelism Experience program or SEE for short. This program trained Northwestern College juniors and seniors in different aspects of evangelism during the course of the school year. The following summer these students would then go out in pairs into a mission congregation and help do evangelism work. In return for their work, the congregation would provide the students with housing and find them a job for the summer.

Rock of Ages got involved with this SEE program when it was first implemented in the summer of 1989. One of the students, who was assigned to Rock of Ages Lutheran Church, is the writer of this paper, Dennis Reichow. His partner "in crime" (that's how they were referred to by some of the members) was Kevin Cortez.

Dennis and Kevin arrived in Tennessee on Sunday, May 21, eager to learn about and carry out evangelism work in the congregation. Their housing arrangements were no problem. Members of the congregation volunteered to put them up for the summer. But where would they find a job? Pastor Kruck chauffeured them around, tracking down leads on a number of possible jobs. None of them seemed to be promising. Kevin, an experienced foundry worker, was even calling up foundries in the area to see if they needed any help. But there was no need to fear, the Lord had something all planned out for them, but had not revealed it to them yet. This brings us to a completely new subject matter which has had a very big impact on this small congregation in the heart of Tennessee.

This small congregation would be influenced by the decisions

of one of the nation's largest corporations, General Motors. Already in the early 80's, GM had visions of forming a new corporation which would innovatively design and manufacture small cars in America in order to successfully compete with foreign imports. The following items are some of the significant events in the continuing development of this new corporation. On June 15, 1982, Alex Mair, a premier member of GM's engineering staff, summoned to his office two other engineers, Joe Joseph and Tom Ankeny. They discuss a new and innovative "small car project." The following month, "Saturn" ^{was} is selected as the code name for this project. (Saturn refers to the Saturn rocket that carried Americans to the moon during the space race with the USSR. The Saturn car project's goal was to design an American vehicle that could beat the Japanese in the current small-car race.)

In October of 1983, Don Ephlin, who was vice president and director of the United Auto Workers' General Motors Department, and Al Warren, who was vice president of GM's Industrial Relations staff, agreed to pursue the concept of a GM-UAW Study Center to explore new approaches to building small cars in the United States. In November of 1983, this new Saturn project was announced to the public and on December 19, Ephlin and Warren held a press conference at the Solidarity House in Detroit to announce the creation of the new GM-UAW Study Center. Members of this study group would review new relationships and approaches for the operation of the Saturn project.

This study group historically became known as the "group of

99." It was comprised of 99 people, who were UAW members, GM managers and staff personnel. They represented the collective knowledge of 55 General Motors plants and 41 UAW locals in the GM system. The majority of positions represented were plant managers, superintendents, union committee men, production workers and skilled tradesmen along with several UAW and GM staff personnel. Together, this group was to identify and recommend the best approaches to integrate people and technology to competitively manufacture a small car in the United States. Immediately they separated into research teams to study intricate aspects of what it would take to efficiently produce a competitive car in the market.

During the next two months, the teams visited 49 different GM plants and 60 other companies throughout the world. Their objective was to become acquainted with different methods of operation and to determine what would be the best method for the Saturn project. From their findings, the "group of 99" presented two key elements. First they recommended the use of a new resolution process in which all stakeholders in a particular project would participate in the decision making process and would be given all information relevant in making those decisions. With this they wanted to achieve a win-win environment for all the stakeholders. Each participant would understand the reasons why a certain decision was made and then would not hesitate to give 100 percent commitment in implementing the decision. Secondly, they felt that General Motors had the technology and resources to be more competitive if they were properly integrated, so that people would support what they helped

create. This required an environment where partnerships on all levels were demanded, from the partnership between the union and management to the partnerships between members who worked on the assembly line. To incorporate such mentality in the work place and to free themselves from the union/management struggles in their existing plants, GM thought it was best to start all over and build a whole new plant from the ground up.

On January 7, 1985, GM announced the addition of this new automotive operating unit, the Saturn Corporation. Thus the vision had become a reality. Now, where would this new corporation locate its auto plant. They considered a number of different sites throughout the country. On November 20, 1985, Spring Hill, Tennessee, was selected as the site for Saturn's manufacturing facility. GM felt that Spring Hill's central location in the nation would be an asset for bringing in supplies and also for distributing the finished product.

This decision to put the Saturn plant in Spring Hill has had a lasting effect on Rock of Ages in Madison, Tennessee. Spring Hill is about 50 miles to the southwest of Madison. In the years ahead, GM would transplant employees from their other plants to Tennessee. Naturally these employees would bring their families. Some of these families would even be members of the WELS looking for a WELS congregation in their new location. Others would simply be looking for a church home. What a blessing and what an opportunity the Lord had placed before this congregation in central Tennessee!

Now, back to the summer of '89. When things were looking

rather dismal for those two students concerning summer employment, Pastor Kruck called one of his members, Harold Buelow, to see if he could find some work for them. Harold, a GM transplant from Michigan, was one of the engineers overseeing the construction of the new Saturn plant. He learned that some of the contractors were looking for help so he informed the students about hiring procedures and the students were soon working as "pre-apprentice" sheet metal workers and enjoying the opportunity of a lifetime to be part of such a momentous undertaking.

Besides their construction job, the students also helped out with the evangelism program at Rock of Ages during some of their free time. Most of their efforts were focused in Madison and in the immediate neighborhood of the church. Because of their work schedule, the students were not able to go out canvassing on week nights which generally was the best time to do this. Instead, they tried canvassing on the weekends, but they did not have much success. It was very hard to find people at home during the weekends in the middle of summer. Although it was somewhat discouraging, the students did learn from their experience.

Although their participation in the SEE program had not been as successful as they had hoped, nevertheless, Rock of Ages was not discouraged. Instead of just focusing their attention in the Madison area, they began to turn their attention to the Spring Hill area which was becoming more and more an ideal place to do some mission outreach. But since Spring Hill was 50 miles away, it was kind of hard to find the time and resources to reach out to the

growing number of people in that area. So they sent a request to the Synod for manpower to do exploratory work in the Spring Hill area. The request was turned down due to insufficient funds, but the congregation was not willing to give up so easily. Pastor Kruck talked to Pastor Herbert Kuske, who was the Mission Board chairman of the South Atlantic District at that time. Pastor Kuske came and checked out the situation without having anyone from the area show him around. From his survey of the area, he also did not think it was feasible to start exploratory work. Pastor Kruck still did not give up. He filled out demographics and feasibility studies. He talked to other members on the District's Mission Board. Finally he convinced Pastor Larry Zahn to come with Pastor Kuske to the Spring Hill area again and do another survey of the situation. Pastor Zahn and Pastor Kuske did a more thorough survey of the area and they agreed that it was feasible to do exploratory work in the area. The District Mission Board sent their request to the Board for Home Missions and in January of 1990 they were granted funds for manpower to do exploratory work.

On February 25, 1990, Pastor Marvin Radtke who was District Mission Counselor at the time, came to Madison, Tennessee, and explained how the Mission Board would proceed with the exploratory work at Spring Hill. They decided to try calling an experienced Pastor from the field. On March 17, 1990, they sent the call to Michael Spaude in Antigo, WI. He returned the call. On April 22, 1990, they sent the call to Walter Oelhafen in Flint, MI. He also returned the call. The Mission Board then decided to call a

graduate from the Seminary. On May 14 1990, Charles Westra, an '88 graduate who had finished serving as tutor at Northwestern College, was assigned as Mission Explorer in the Spring Hill area.

Charles Westra arrived in Tennessee in the summer of 1990. He spent the first few weeks getting to know the area. He would drive around to find out where the different sub-divisions were. He handed out brochures to let people know that a WELS mission congregation was in the area. He had interviews with the city officials so that they would know what kind of work he would be doing in the area. He held Bible classes in his home for WELS members and other interested prospects. The major part of his work for those first four months was doing door to door surveys from July to October of 1990. This was done to determine the feasibility of opening a mission church in the area.

On July 17, 1990, the first formal meeting of the nucleus families was held. (These nucleus families in the Spring Hill area were members of the Rock of Ages congregation.) "Christ Our Savior" was chosen as the name for the new mission. On August 5, 1990, Charles Westra was installed as Mission Explorer in Spring Hill area. The service was held at Rock of Ages in Madison, TN. Pastor John Guse, the District President, preached the sermon and Pastor Thomas Westra did the installation. On October 21, 1990, Pastor Westra held the first worship service at the Steeple Chase Inn located in Spring Hill. 91 people attended the service to praise the Lord for this new beginning. After that, worship services were held only on a monthly basis for the next five months. The nucleus

families continued to travel to Rock of Ages in Madison on the weeks when there was no service in Spring Hill.

During February of 1991, a phone survey was conducted by the nucleus families of Christ Our Savior in preparation for the first weekly worship service which was going to be held on March 3. In this survey, the members of the congregation made 5,000 dial-ups. Out of those dial-ups, 3,000 people were contacted and informed about the start of this new church and the worship services that were going to be held. From those contacts more prospects were located and follow-up work was planned to reach these people.

On February 24, 1991, a commissioning service was held at Rock of Ages in Madison for the nucleus families that were transferring to Christ Our Savior in Spring Hill. Pastor Keith Kruck of Rock of Ages officiated. 21 communicant members and 37 souls were commissioned to carry out the Lord's work in the new congregation. Christ Our Savior was officially established.

On March 31, 1991, Christ Our Savior began weekly worship services. 100 people attended that service. On March 31, 152 people joined in proclaiming the praises of our risen Savior in the first Easter service held at Christ Our Savior. From March 1991 to the present, weekly worship services have been continued. Christ Our Savior continues to reach out with God's Word in the community around them and God continues to bless them with spiritual growth and with growth in numbers. At the end of August 1992, the congregation had 64 communicant members with 104 souls. The Lord has richly blessed the proclamation of His Word.

In May of 1992, the Board for Home Missions granted mission status to Christ Our Savior. This officially made the congregation a member of the Wisconsin Synod and they were no longer considered an exploratory outpost. They were also granted "planning authority" which gave them permission and funds to begin planning for a new worship facility for the congregation. Since May, they have purchased a plot of land, and in February of 1993 they built a parsonage on it. They have also purchased another 5 acre piece of land, on which they are planning to build a worship facility. Presently they are raising funds to make a down payment for their new worship facility and they are in the process of finalizing the building plans for that project.

Although Rock of Ages had experienced a considerable decrease in membership due to the people who transferred to Christ Our Savior, it continues to thrive and grow. Already in June of 1991 Rock of Ages began looking into the feasibility of building an addition onto their worship facility. Due to the increasing number of members, the congregation realized that they would soon need to provide more space for Sunday School classes. Plans were made to add some class rooms and a fellowship hall to their worship facility.

In the spring of 1992, they decided to go ahead with their plans. They felt that it was a good time to build. The price of building materials was low and interest rates were also low. On May 3, 1992, they had groundbreaking for their new Family Enrichment Center. Construction of the new facility and remodeling of the old

worship center was completed during the next few months. On September 20, 1992 they held a dedication service for their new Family Enrichment Center and the remodeled sanctuary.

Certainly the Lord has richly blessed these two congregations throughout the past years. May he continue to bless them in the future.

Note: I thank the members of Rock of Ages, Pastor Kruck, Pastor Westra and Harold & Marge Buelow for all their help and cooperation in helping me obtain the information for this paper.