

Lord of Life Lutheran Church

Thornton, Colorado

1983 – 2004



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Church History
December 13, 2004

Back in the early 1980's there were very few WELS churches in the Denver area, or in Colorado for that matter. Members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod had to travel significant distances to attend church. Denver itself was slowly becoming a booming metropolis with more and more people moving into the area. This area then became a prime area for mission activity in the WELS.

Over ten members of the graduating class of 1983 from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were assigned to exploratory mission stations around the country. One of these assignments was to start a church in Northeast Denver. With downtown Denver growing and becoming more and more congested, people were starting to move out to the suburbs in all directions. Housing developments were popping up all over the place. This was deemed then a good location to start a church. The assignment to start a church in this area was given to Mark Birkholz.

1983

After being installed and ordained in the summer Pastor Birkholz got right to work. There was a good core group of WELS members to start with. All were members of Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Aurora, an eastern suburb of Denver, and Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Westminster, a western suburb of Denver. This group along with Pastor Birkholz got down to business and things started quickly. Services were held at Leroy Elementary School in the city of Thornton at 9:15 on Sunday mornings. A Sunday School was started immediately as well as a Sunday Bible Class. They achieved Exploratory Status and picked the name Lord of Life for their church. Keeping in mind their mission to spread the good news they sent out 2,000 flyers in

November to make people aware of this new church that had started. By the end of this year they had 45 souls at their church with 31 of them being communicant members.

1984

God continued to bless this fledging congregation in the second calendar year of its existence. Mary Weise became their first new member early in 1984. The first Lenten services were held at Pastor's home on Wednesday nights. Lord of Life applied for and was granted Mission Status by the Synod in May of 1984. A committee was started to attempt to find some land to purchase for the building of a church. A number of children from the congregation attended Vacation Bible School at Shepherd of the Valley. By the end of the year God had blessed them with visible growth to the point of 74 souls with 43 of them being communicant members.

A couple of wise moves early on in the life of the church proved to be beneficial for years to come. They began a rotation system for their Sunday School teachers. Initially it started with six teachers taking turns teaching on Sundays. It was started to help avoid any burnout if there was just one teacher and to give others the chance to get involved in the work of the church. This practice continued throughout the history of the church even after tremendous growth. In present day, there are two teachers for each grade level and they rotate on a monthly basis. Through this practice they have had well over one hundred different Sunday School teachers in twenty years. The decision was also made to have Sunday School during the summer months. While it began with just the three and four year olds, it has blossomed to the point where all grade levels have Sunday School throughout the year.

1985

Lord of Life received some help for their outreach efforts in late May and early June when a Travel-Canvas-Witness (TCW) team arrived to help them canvas the surrounding neighborhoods. Many doors and homes were reached and the church now had a better idea of where their efforts should be placed. They renewed their zeal for outreach once getting the results of the canvas and seeing how many in the area were unchurched. The land search committee made great strides this year and by December a land purchase was on the table. Also this year Lord of Life had their first confirmand, Jenny Grunewald. The teens in the congregation enjoyed their first ever lock-in. This event was hosted by Pastor and included games and mini Bible Classes. This quickly became an annual event (every once in a while a bi-annual event) with attendance growing every year. In what quickly became a trend in this congregation, they experienced growth in numbers, at the end of the year they were up to 105 souls.

1986

This year was marked with a number of significant events. In April the land at 120th Street and Northaven Circle was purchased. (This remains the site of the church today) The church's plans for a Worship/Education/Fellowship (WEF) unit were approved by the city and the Synod. Groundbreaking for the building of the WEF unit occurred in November. Despite all of this work going on, the church did not rest on its laurels. A Sunday Bible Class on Evangelism was conducted to help the members with their outreach efforts. An advertisement was taken out in the yellow pages to increase their exposure. They started a prospect newsletter that was sent to all prospects every month to keep them abreast of what was going on at Lord of Life. This newsletter has been sent every year since and remains a part their outreach efforts. The church also

began use of the Sampler in addition to *The Lutheran Hymnal*. Growth at the church continued with membership up to 117 souls.

1987

The WEF unit was completed on schedule and the dedication for the building was held on May 17th. The church also undertook plans to build a parsonage on the church property. This process moved very quickly as the house was finished by August 1st. Even after all these projects the church immediately started another building committee to look into the costs for building a chapel and perhaps expanding the WEF unit for more classrooms. Another evangelism seminar was held this year and the Evangelism committee was expanded to ten members. This year also marked the first year of "Every Member Visits" by the Pastor. With the congregation growing at such a great pace the council decided it would be a good thing to give every member an opportunity to sit down with Pastor one on one. This practice is still in place today and is a vital part of the church's operation. Again the growth continued, membership was up to 132.

1988

This year proved to be a very eventful one for Lord of Life. On July 1st of this year they officially went off of Synod subsidy, taking them off of mission status to full-fledged congregation. They adopted a summer schedule for services, holding one service on Wednesday nights. They held their first Vacation Bible School with 61 children in attendance and eleven prospect families came from it. Advent services were held for the first time. A new-member picnic was held with great success, and it was decided to continue this event on an annual basis. Pastor Birkholz was appointed to the Colorado Mission Board. Lord of Life also received its first vicar this year, Michael Quandt. The

Wisconsin Synod, in an effort to train more mission minded pastors, began a program of placing vicars in mission settings. Lord of Life became a guinea pig for this operation. The church continued to grow this year, but at a slower rate, up to 137 members.

1989

In a renewed effort to improve on their outreach efforts another evangelism seminar was held on April 8th, this was followed with a Visitor's Sunday the very next day. Soon after the church canvassed 500 homes in the area. They received approval from the city of Thornton for a multi-purpose addition to their WEF unit. The church joined together with other Denver area churches to form a high school federation. Unfortunately, the congregation suffered through the year financially. They were consistently behind on many payments, but the Lord saw them through it.

1990

Despite their financial problems of the year before the new addition was built and was dedicated on April 29th. For the first time Lord of Life hosted the Colorado Pastor's Conference. A marriage seminar was started by Pastor with many members in attendance. A teen Bible class was started as well as an additional midweek Bible Class. Through it all the Lord continued to bless their efforts with the congregation growing to 144 members.

1991

This year was marked again by serious financial issues as offerings dropped tremendously. To help them continue to do their work they received some outside assistance. Another TCW team arrived in the spring to continue to do more canvassing as many new people had moved into the area. The church also received a Summer Vicar

by the name of Tad Fellers. Vicar Fellers did most of his work with following up on the work of the TCW team and meeting with prospects. The church started making Monday night visits to any and all visitors that were in church the day before. This practice has proven to be very beneficial and is still in practice today. The growth of the church continued with membership now at 155.

1992

This year was not marked with many significant events except how greatly the Lord blessed the work that this church was doing. The first photo directory was started. A Friendship Evangelism Seminar was held. Attempts were made to start some small group Bible Studies. Membership, by God's grace, jumped to 177 members.

1993

Yet another TCW team arrived and this time canvassed 1000 homes in the area. This resulted in a prospect list of 72 families in June. The church celebrated its 10th anniversary with a special service on September 12th. They also began using the new hymnal, *Christian Worship*, in October. Due to Pastor Birkholz's continued role and business with the Colorado Mission Board, the Nebraska District Mission Board made available the use of funds to hire a part-time secretary for him. The secretary was hired in the fall of this year.

1994

Lord of Life was prepared and ready to have Summer Vicar Mike Roth work with them, but it was rescinded. Nevertheless, work continued with another Evangelism Bible Class held as well as many door to door visits made. The church formed a Long Range Planning Committee to help give the church direction for the future years. Pastor

Birkholz added to his busy schedule by helping out at a preaching station in Eagle, CO. The church also started using both individual cups and the common cup for communion. This year is also marked with the church jumping over the 200-membership barrier with 214 total members.

1995

Many new things were started in 1995. The Synod renewed the vicar in mission settings program and Lord of Life received its second full-time vicar, Jon Zabell. His work would be especially in evangelism and education. Yet another TCW team did work for Lord of Life. A debt reduction task force was started to find ways to encourage good stewardship and improve the church's financial status. The first Called Workers Care Committee was started to make sure that Pastor and Vicar were doing well and had everything that they needed. The Ladies Guild held their first garage sale at the church with the proceeds going to church work either at Lord of Life or elsewhere in the Synod. This has now become an annual event, growing year by year.

1996

The Long Range Planning Committee completed its work with a number of recommendations. Among them were building an education wing and starting a Christian Day School, building a chapel, adding a staff minister or 2nd pastor and daughtering a church in Brighton, another suburb to the north and east of Thornton. Mark Hayes became the third full-time vicar at Lord of Life. TCW work was again done in the area with phone survey completed as well as many door to door visits. A Mission Festival was held in the fall with former vicar Michael Quandt coming back to be the guest preacher. A School of Outreach was attended by members of Lord of Life, where

they learned more about assimilation of new members and formulating a five-year plan of evangelism. The congregation boomed this year, jumping to 247 members by the end of the year.

1997

In response to the idea of daughtering a congregation in Brighton, Mission Counselor Gene Ahlswede had a presentation on daughtering congregations. Also in response to the Long Range Planning Committee a building committee was started to look into the possibilities of building a chapel and/or an educational wing. Lord of Life also hosted its second Pastor's Conference. In continuing their outreach efforts a booth was hosted at Thorntonfest, a local festival, to get the name of the church better known in the community. Tom Glende also arrived in the fall as the church's next vicar. Growth continued at a positive rate with membership up to 279.

1998

With many opportunities of service to the Lord out there the church plowed forward with planning, deciding what the best course of action would be. In the meantime another vicar began his work in Thornton, Michael Schroeder. A marriage seminar was lead by Pastor Birkholz. A new constitution was written and adopted. For the first time membership did not grow but actually dropped by two to 277.

1999

This year Lord of Life had their first staff minister intern, Alyson Harmon, join their midst. She worked mainly with visitation and tracking of prospects as well as the assimilation of new members. Another TCW team arrived to do more canvassing and witnessing. The building committee moved forward with plans for building a new chapel

so that the WEF unit could be used for classroom space. An internal audit was completed of the church's funds and everything was found to be in order. Curt Schaser served as vicar this year as well.

2000

The building committee was hard at work all year long and groundbreaking for the chapel was achieved on December 3rd. Kristin Buch became the second staff minister intern and started a couple of women's group bible studies. Jared Oldenburg was the next vicar to serve at Lord of Life. He along with Pastor Birkholz began working with the Urban Outreach Center in downtown Denver, teaching bible classes and English as a Second Language classes to the Hispanics in the area. More work was done with the high school federation and a name was chosen, Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School (RMLHS). With all of this going on renewed growth was achieved with membership at the end of the year standing at 313 members.

2001

All of the hard work for building a new chapel reached completion with the dedication occurring on September 16th. Also during the project a contract was signed with AT&T and Cricket to have them build cell phone towers on the church's property. The money was used to help defray the costs of the new chapel. A preschool task force was started to check into the feasibility of starting one. A Brighton task force was started to look into starting a church there. A website was developed and started for the church and began to bring in a few visitors. Nathan Sutton became the next vicar. Growth continued at a high rate with 367 members at the end of the calendar year.

2002

Jon Ruddat was added to the staff as a staff minister in May. Pastor Birkholz moved out of the parsonage to his own home and Jon Ruddat and his family moved in. RMLHS began its first year of existence, using Lord of Life for its base of operations. Aaron Mueller became the next vicar in August. A Christian Day School task force was started to begin work at starting a Lutheran school for Lord of Life. Jon Ruddat's stay at Lord of Life was a short one as he accepted a call to Appleton, Wisconsin and moved in December. With the new chapel many new visitors were seen on a weekly basis and membership reached new heights at 408 members.

2003

With so many new members and visitors most of the work of the church was centered on educating the new members and new prospects. Information classes were held non-stop as so many people wanted to join the church. So many people were coming in that outreach was not even needed. RMLHS moved out to its own facilities for the 2003-2004 school year. Joel Vogel became the church's tenth vicar.

2004 and beyond

With the intent of continued witnessing the members decided to open a Christian day school and preschool. The school was designed specifically towards outreach. Josh Glowicki was called to be the first teacher and principal and he accepted in the spring of the year. Congregational member Carol Schmidt was called to be the preschool teacher soon after. By the time the next vicar, Ben Schmeling, arrived, so many children had enrolled in the school that the church called Vicar's wife Annie to teach the lower grades. Lord of Life experienced continued growth with membership nearing the 450 mark.

God has truly blessed Lord of Life Lutheran church over the past twenty years. They have quickly grown from a small mission church to a large vibrant congregation. The mindset of the church continues to be one of outreach and witnessing. Despite the tremendous growth that they have experienced, they are still keenly aware of the Great Commission, and strive to follow this command of God. While this has occurred those who are already members have not been neglected. A total of seven Bible classes are offered during a given week. There are many fellowship opportunities throughout the year. There is a lively teen and youth ministry. God has created a strong congregation in Thornton, Colorado, and by his grace it will continue to be for many years.