

David Horton  
December 8, 2008  
Church History  
Professor Korthals

## **Our Savior Lutheran, Phillips, WI**

### **A Summary of the Video Interviews with Pastor Mark Gass and Pastor Nathan Wilke**

Imagine a world filled with forests, streams, and lakes. Such a location abounds in natural beauty. Such a location attracts visitors from multiple states. But the devastation caused by sin plagues even the souls of those who live in the most remote locations in the nation. The church of Our Savior Lutheran in Phillips, Wisconsin, originated with a natural need for the gospel message to be proclaimed in the area, and the family of believers continues to this day to reach out and share God's truth with neighboring souls.

This project features interviews with two of the former pastors of Our Savior Lutheran. The first interview was held with Pastor Mark Gass, who is currently serving at Redeemer Lutheran in Tomahawk, Wisconsin. In the interview, Pastor Gass illustrated where the church has been by sharing his experience and memories. Pastor Nathan Wilke, the current tent minister at Our Savior Lutheran, has also shared his impressions of ministry in Phillips, as well as the current evangelism efforts the church family has undertaken.

## **A Snapshot of the Community**

Phillips, Wisconsin, is a small town located on Wisconsin State Highway 13, in northern Wisconsin. The healthy manufacturing presence in the community acts as the backbone of the local economy, along with the year-round influx of tourism as a secondary source of income. As an outdoor vacation destination, one which attracts visitors from southern Wisconsin, Chicago, and beyond, the community of Phillips has assumed a fairly relaxed attitude among its people. Pastor Gass added that while “the membership is primarily located within the vicinity of Phillips, it has 6 families from the Park Falls area, a community of 2,700, approximately 20 miles north of Phillips.”

## **Early History**

In the early and middle 1980's a handful of WELS members had relocated to the Phillips area on account of job transfers. Some were WELS members from Tomahawk, some from Minocqua, and some were already settled in the local area. Considering the central location of the city, Our Savior began as a satellite preaching station in the fall of 1987 under Pastor Schumacher of Redeemer, Tomahawk. Our Savior was founded on October 25, 1987, Reformation Sunday.

## **Pastor Mark Gass**

The next minister to follow Pastor Schumacher was Mark Gass. Pastor Gass grew up in Appleton, and served his vicarship in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. The congregations he attended in both cities were well established, so when his assigned call out of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary included the daughter congregation of Phillips, it was a change of pace. “After Pastor Schumacher took a call in the spring of 1988, I was

assigned to Redeemer. I served both Redeemer and Our Savior until 1992,” wrote Pastor Gass. The members who attended in these days often needed to shift their worship spaces – renting churches, public buildings, and even a local technical college. They carried their hymnals in boxes from place to place and would usually sing the hymns acappella. At the beginning of his call Pastor Gass was advised to close it down, but he would remark, “in the early ‘difficult’ days of my ministry at Tomahawk, this congregation was a ‘breath of fresh air’ for me.” In the video interview he mentions feeling frustrated concerning the lack of time he was able to spend on the ministry at Our Savior, but he rejoiced greatly in the initiative of the members there – as well as in the power of the gospel and work of the Holy Spirit who grew the church family upwards to about 70 members.

### **The Years between Both Pastors**

In the years between both pastors, the congregation underwent a decline in growth for a number of reasons. As it happened, a pastor was taking a sabbatical to write a book in the area, and was given a call to serve Our Savior on a part-time basis, but his relationship with the congregation at Phillips ended abruptly. A long period then ensued in which no vacancy pastor was provided for them, as Our Savior began its move from the Northern Wisconsin District, to the Western Wisconsin District, and then back again. During this time frame, a tent minister was called in collaboration with the church in Mercer, Wisconsin, located approximately 55 miles away. However, this next scenario ended with a resignation, as conditions in the congregation continued to worsen. In general, the congregation appeared to “fall through the cracks” and off synodical radar. Pastor Gass mentioned this “not as an indictment of any one person but it is an

unfortunate situation of a congregation that simply suffered from a variety of mis-steps and miscommunication caused by the switching back and forth between districts as well as the changing of circuit pastors.” As a result, membership at Our Savior decreased, and six semi-retirement calls were extended and declined over the course of about one and a half years.

### **Pastor Nathan Wilke**

Pastor Nathan Wilke was born and raised in Helenville, Wisconsin. With two parents teaching as called workers, he and all of his siblings pursued various tracks of the public ministry. Pastor Wilke served in Zumbrota, Minnesota, during his vicar year where he met his wife. Much like Pastor Gass, Pastor Wilke also had experienced congregational life at established churches, and Phillips, Wisconsin, was something different. When it was time for his initial assignment, Pastor Wilke was 1 of 61 men eagerly awaiting a full time call into the ministry. By comparison, the average Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary class currently numbers around 40. He was not initially assigned and although somewhat disappointed, it only took a few weeks to be presented with a different type of tent ministry call. After hearing about the struggles and efforts of the family of believers at Our Savior, Pastor Wilke and his wife had a similar response: “How can we not go?” He has been serving at Our Savior for the last three years, since the summer of 2005.

### **Challenges**

A number of challenges face the congregation of Our Savior in Phillips. Both ministers talked about the economy, and the tremendous impact it has concerning the

members. With employment opportunity being scarce, if one of the major factories closes down or moves, the ripple effect rocks the congregation to the point of losing significant numbers of members. Another problem presents itself among perhaps a surprising group within the community. Pastor Wilke described the area as "Wisconsin's playground," at least as far as the male population is concerned. For the outdoorsman, there is fishing and boating in the summer, hunting in the autumn, and skiing, snowmobiling, and ice fishing in the winter. However, many of the wives in northern Wisconsin do not gravitate towards such activity, and as a result there is an increased number of women suffering from alcoholism and depression. A third major issue, especially when considering evangelism, is the remote location of many homes. Pastor Gass estimates that two out of three individuals are unchurched, yet the challenge is to locate their homes "hidden" around lakes and woods. Locals will calculate: "How many roads does it take to get to my house?" Many times this seclusion is intentional; an "escape" from things such as organized religion, and even doing church work can be viewed negatively as part of the hustle-and-bustle of city life. While Pastor Wilke joked about joining the golf and horseshoe league, his intention is to go where the prospects are located, and incorporate himself within the community he serves.

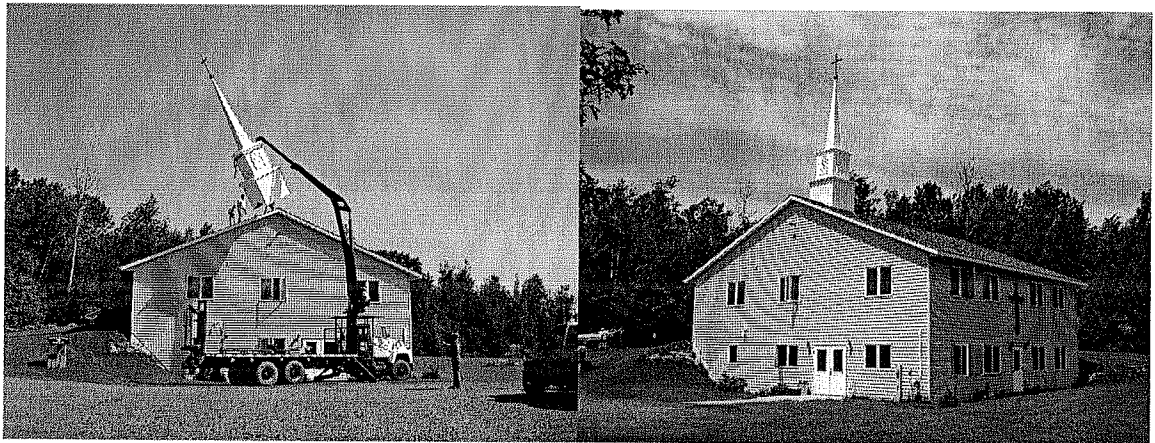
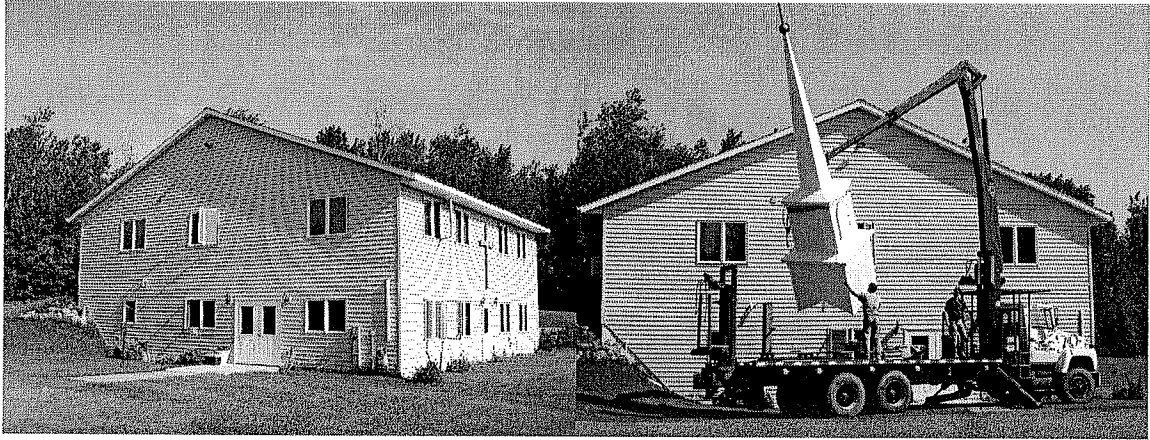
### **Blessings**

Both men acknowledged that there were incredible blessings which came with serving at Our Savior in Phillips. Both ministers had numerous stories to tell about God at work in the hearts of his people. Both ministers were encouraged by the faithfulness of members who willingly served the kingdom in a variety of capacities. Both ministers appreciated the family feel Our Savior possessed - a family united in the truth and love of

the Scriptures. Both ministers were amazed at the importance friendship evangelism played in the growth of the church – as the young and the old were willing to invite friends to hear God’s Word. And both ministers were humbled by the power of the gospel in the lives of their members.

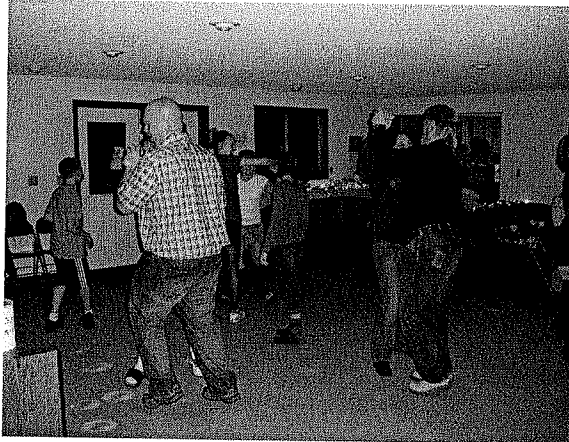
This concludes the summary of the video interviews with Pastor Mark Gass and Pastor Nathan Wilke. A great deal of thanks is offered to both men for being willing to free up a portion of their Saturday afternoon for video taping. Their insight, experience, and memories are greatly appreciated. May God continue to bless the work of these men in his kingdom, and his children at Our Savior, in Phillips, Wisconsin.

**Raising the New Steeple, Summer of 2007:**



**Evangelism Events, 2008:**

**“Raise the Roof Dance”**



**“County Fair”**



**“4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade Promoting VBS”  
(Pastor Wilke dressed as Gorilla)**



**“Christmas for Kids”  
(Frosting Cookies)**

