
God's People Working Together
*A History of Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in Clarksville,
Tennessee.*

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When one sits in the library of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, WI, there are 157 Wisconsin Synod churches within fifty miles. This heavy concentration of churches is not shocking in light of the roots of the Wisconsin Synod. The Midwest in general and particularly the Milwaukee area is where many of its Lutheran forefathers made a new home. Quite obviously, this density of congregations is not the case in other parts of the country. While the Lord has richly blessed the Wisconsin Synod, her churches in the majority of United States are separated by a more considerable distance. That distance of fifty miles is roughly the mileage between Clarksville, TN and Rock of Ages Lutheran Church in Madison, TN. That distance along Interstate 24 in Northwest Tennessee is one example among many in the WELS of a trip that faithful Christians made weekly to attend a church that faithfully proclaimed the Word of God. That distance was a challenge that the Lord would use to bless his people and enlarge the work of his kingdom in Tennessee.

In late 1998 a small group of Lutherans had a decision to make. These men and women lived in Clarksville, TN, a city just south of the KY and TN border. It is a city that was formed by the joining of five smaller communities and whose population in the late 1990's was slightly under one hundred thousand. It was a city without a WELS congregation. Thus, these Christians headed south to Rock of Ages Lutheran Church, which is located in Madison on the north side of Nashville. But the idea to seek support from the synod to begin an exploratory outreach in Clarksville was beginning to gain strength. After much thought and prayer, the decision was made to begin the steps toward starting a church. Richard Mackdanz wrote a letter to Pastor Larry Zahn, who was then the chairman of the South Atlantic District Mission Board. In that letter, the small group explained the reasons why a church starting in Clarksville was a sound decision for the synod. The Clarksville area was growing quite rapidly. There was a

small but strong nucleus of Lutherans who were willing to carry out the work needed to start a church. The religious scene was one dominated by the fire and brimstone preaching of legalism in which the unconditional gospel would be a strong comfort. All signs seem to point to Clarksville being a good place for a church to be planted.

But the initial request to the synod was turned down. The reason for the denial was because of an entity that would later prove to be one of the strengths of the congregation. The denial was based on Fort Campbell. Fort Campbell is a large US Army base that stretches across the TN and KY border and is intricately connected with Clarksville. It is the home of the 101st Airborne Division known as the Screaming Eagles. An army base of this size is essentially another community located within or adjacent to a city. While that seems to be a very positive situation in an area one plans to begin a church, recent experiences weighed on the minds of the synod's leaders. Other cities and communities had experienced a population and economic boom due to the presence of a military installation. But in instances where that installation closed or relocated, the boom was short lived. Thus, several churches that had been started in what seemed like growing communities were closed due to the decline in people and support that followed the departure of the installation. The synod did not want Clarksville to be another example of these failed mission starts.

While disappointed by the denial to begin the exploratory outreach, the group in Clarksville was not deterred. Since the synod had made clear the reason behind the rejection, they had a single task laid before them. They needed to demonstrate to the synod that Fort Campbell was not going to go anywhere. Mackdanz and Art Ebbinger secured information from the base that served as evidence that Fort Campbell was not in danger of closing. Ebbinger spoke with a representative of the post's Public Affairs Office. This representative, a Mr.

Minton, said that the base's current strength of 23,400 was not expected to significantly increase or decrease in the forthcoming years. Also, if for some reason the 101st Airborne Division was to be relocated, Fort Campbell would remain functional as the new home of the U.S. Army's Special Operations Command. Finally, since the base spans two states, instead of only two senators, four senators held the post's future close to their hearts.¹

With this information provided to him, Pastor Zahn wrote the Mission Expansion Committee again on April 3rd, 2000. He explained that the future of Fort Campbell was not something in doubt. In addition he provided more information about Clarksville. The Board for Home Mission representatives had visited the city on March 22nd, 2000 and found even more reasons for starting a church in Clarksville. This city's growth was augmented by the base, but was not dependant upon it. The leaders of the city gave the BHM members three reasons for the city's growth. Clarksville's proximity to Nashville caused growth as a "bedroom community" at a much more economic price. The city was aggressive in trying to bring in new industry. And there was a tendency for retired military personnel to stay in Clarksville. Pastor Zahn ends his letter, "Besides all the arguments presented to start in Clarksville, how about this one, 'If [one] can do it in Spooner...???[sic]' God guide you in your decision."²

God did guide the Mission Expansion Committee's decision, and they approved Clarksville for the status of an exploratory outreach. The call to serve as pastor in Clarksville was brought to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and on May 24th, 2000, Matthew J. Brown of Fort Atkinson, WI was assigned to Clarksville. Some of the Lutherans in Clarksville had been waiting patiently for years for this opportunity. Through the help of the synod, they had their own pastor and the work in Clarksville was about to pick up dramatically.

¹ Letter of Arthur G. Ebbinger dated October 15th, 1998. Addressed "To whom in may concern."

² Letter of Pastor Zahn dated April 3rd, 2000. Addressed to Mission Expansion Committee.

Upon arrival in Clarksville, Pastor Brown found a small but dedicated group of people. While conducting worship services in Clarksville was a goal from the beginning, the first step they took was a weekly Bible class. The group met at Kleeman Community Center on Wednesday nights and averaged twenty-five people per night. The family of believers also chose the name for the church. They chose Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church. Much of the pastor's first work was visiting and becoming acquainted with the roughly ten to fourteen families that made up the church. While doing this, the church formed a list of people who could be contacted by the pastor and other members. This list included some WELS people in the area, but also many who had no prior connections to a Lutheran church.

The challenge facing the church early on was making contacts with those around them. The church received some press in the local "Leaf Chronicle" when they began meeting together at the community center. Pastor Brown had the chance to use some air time on the local radio station to talk about the new church. But the way in which word of the church spread the most was through the work of her people. In September and October of 2000 the pastor and members combined to canvass almost 800 homes. The list of people with whom the church had contact was growing rapidly.

During the fall and winter of 2000 the people were very eager to begin having their own worship services. The members of Beautiful Savior were still traveling to Rock of Ages to worship, and while enjoying worship with their brothers and sisters in Christ in Madison, they looked forward to getting started in Clarksville. The church did have a few occasional services, including Thanksgiving and Christmas services. It was at these services that the first new members of Beautiful Savior were added to the church. One child was baptized in September, one on Thanksgiving, and two more on Christmas. Along with these blessings of the Lord, the

date on which the church planned to begin regular Sunday worship was quickly approaching in the following months.

But for the church to begin worship, a location needed to be determined. On February 4th, 2001 a commissioning service was held at Rock of Ages. At the service twenty-five people were presented to the congregation to be commissioned to the church in Clarksville. The following Sunday, February 11th, was the beginning of weekly worship for Beautiful Savior. The service was held at the Holiday Inn in Clarksville. Seventy-three people attended. While the service was a reason for the people to rejoice, the location of their services would not be staying at the hotel for long. In fact, the Holiday Inn was the first of four different locations that Beautiful Savior would occupy in 2001.

The first move came after only five weeks at the hotel. A different church was also renting a room for worship. This church practiced a much different style of worship that caused some uneasiness for the young Lutheran church. And so Beautiful Savior began renting a room from the Clarksville Department of Energy. The facility at CDE was the type of facility that the church wanted and there were no issues with any noisy neighbors, but the church's stay at CDE would also prove to be a short one. The Department of Energy was happy to rent the facility to the church but was unwilling to commit to a contract of any meaningful chunk of time. The members of Beautiful Savior wanted to make sure that the location upon which they settled would be one they could occupy for a time. Thus, the search for a long term home was begun again.

The church found what they were looking for in a storefront located on Warfield Boulevard. The size of the facility was adequate for the young church and a more long term commitment was arranged. This storefront would actually be the fourth location for the church.

The time spent at the Clarksville Department of Energy expired at the end of May and the storefront lease did not begin until July 1st. So for the month of June, Beautiful Savior held her worship services at the Clarksville Jaycee. Beginning in July the church worshipped at the storefront which would serve as its home for almost five years.

The four different moves in six months did pose some challenges. Prospective visitors may not have been up to date as far as where the church they wished to visit was now meeting. The multiple moves may have also taken their toll on the members' optimism as they wondered if they would have to continue to move from place to place to worship. But in the end, the new location was a great blessing for the church. They now had the appearance of a church that was planning to be a member of the Clarksville community for the long term. The size of the storefront would facilitate 100 people, which allowed for growth as the church's average attendance at this time was in the mid fifties. Most importantly, the facility provided a place for the Word of God to be proclaimed in different ways to both members and visitors.

At the beginning of 2001, Beautiful Savior became involved in the Travel Canvass Witness program. This program gives college students the opportunity to go and work with a congregation on one of their breaks during the school year. The TCW students provide some bonus manpower to churches that are working to become more visible in their communities. In January, Beautiful Savior had its first experience with TCW and it was a very positive one. Together with the pastor and members, the students covered about 600 homes in their time in Clarksville. Throughout the next three years, Beautiful Savior would have multiple teams come to help them in their ministry. The work done by these teams would range from canvassing to summer Bible Camp. As one looks at the congregational reports from the months in which TCW

teams were in Clarksville, the large numbers recorded in “Laity survey calls” serves as a testament to the hard work of those Christian young people.

In the latter half of 2001 Beautiful Savior began two events that would shape the history of the church. The first was the church’s festival of friendship. On October 14th, the church invited its friends and neighbors to a special outdoor service at Billy Dunlop Park. Despite the weather being an acknowledged deterrent by some, the service contained seventy-seven people, fourteen of whom were first time visitors. While many churches have such a friendship Sunday or church picnic, Pastor Brown believes that the church’s festival had a large impact on the identity of the young church.³ It helped the people of the congregation to realize that outreach was something important to their church, and something that they could do with a simple invitation to their friends and family. It is uplifting to look through the church’s monthly reports and see the number of first time visitors each month. Many of these visitors came as a result of the people of Beautiful Savior wanting to share the message of their Savior with those around them. While this attitude was in the church before the festival of friendship, that Sunday service made the desire for outreach physically visible.

The other big event in 2001 came in December, but the plans for it had been in motion since early that year. In the February congregational report Pastor Brown noted that two of the women in his Bible information class were native Germans and that he was finding a number of Germans who lived in the area.⁴ Many of them were interested in the church’s German heritage. At first glance it seems strange to find a cross-culture opportunity with Germans in the northwest corner of Tennessee. But once again, the impact of Fort Campbell needs to be noted. Many

³ Pastor Matt Brown, interviewed by David Barkow, digital recorder, October 24th, 2008 at Beautiful Savior, Clarksville TN. In our interview Pastor Brown listed this event as one of the three biggest in Beautiful Savior’s history.

⁴ Matt Brown. Congregational Monthly Report, February, 2001.

soldiers from the base spent time stationed at installations in the southwest part of Germany. It was not an uncommon occurrence that a soldier would marry a native German and then return back to Clarksville, either as active duty at the base or as a retiree. And so in Clarksville there are authentic German food stores, a noticeable amount of cars with German flag stickers, and a yearly Oktoberfest. Pastor Brown continued to make connections with the German community as a member of the Edelweiss Club and as a frequent attendee to their Schnitzel nights.

But as much as one likes Schnitzel, there was an even greater opportunity in front of Beautiful Savior. Many of the Germans had grown up in a Christian church in Germany, some even in Lutheran churches. In America however, they had not found a church home. Beautiful Savior now had the chance to remind them of what they had once learned and to provide for them a church that focused on Christ the same way Luther had. With this in mind, a German Christmas service was planned. It was unknown what type of response to expect for the service, but the church decided to go ahead with the plans and see what would happen.

The local "Leaf Chronicle" wrote an article leading up to the service and helped to spread the date and time of the service to the community. It must have been an exciting scene to see car after car pulling into the small strip mall parking lot. The facility that seated 100 was filled with over 150 people, many of whom sat on the floor and stood in the back as they sang out the hymns of Christ's birth in their native tongue. Pastor Tom Ehnert preached on the birth of the Lord in German. The service was a blessing for the church and brought many men and women to hear the Christmas story.

Following that first German service the Leaf Chronicle did a follow up article that again made Beautiful Savior more visible in the community. Plans were already in mind to hold another service on Palm Sunday of 2002. A new location to rent for those services would also be

sought out. The German services would continue to be a part of Beautiful Savior's worship year. The average attendance for the Christmas service quickly reached 200. Different men from the Seminary and other churches in the synod who had strong German gifts were invited to lead the worship services. The services provided opportunities for the church's German members to enjoy their heritage and for German visitors to hear the Gospel. Following each of these services, several Germans would continue to visit the church for Sunday worship and some would eventually become members of Beautiful Savior. These members, who liked to refer to themselves as the "German mafia", brought a unique and beneficial presence to the church.

One other sub-culture that makes up Beautiful Savior that must be mentioned is the military. As seen above, from the beginning the church recognized that Fort Campbell would have an impact on them. The biggest impact of the base was that it gave the church a transitory nature. Transition brings with it certain challenges, but also many assets. It is challenging to have many members gone at one time during a deployment. It is disappointing to see a church leader or someone who had just finished BIC transferred to a different base. But a transfer to a different base does not mean a transfer out of Christ's kingdom. In addition to that, there is a steady stream of people brought into the Clarksville area with whom the church can strive to make contact. Some of those people were leaders in a different WELS church in another part of the country and bring with them fresh ideas for their new church home in Clarksville.

Overall, the military members of Beautiful Savior bring a beneficial attitude to the congregation. Despite the many varied backgrounds of those serving in the military, a spirit of unity prevails. Many are involved in different ways at the church and help further the ministry in Clarksville. The church also has unique opportunities to support their soldiers. They pray for their soldiers. The soldier support program allows members to write the soldiers. The church

provides opportunities for soldiers' families while their soldier is deployed. The base that was viewed with some hesitancy at the beginning of Beautiful Savior's history has been one of the Lord's means of blessing both his church as a body and his individual children.

Before moving into the next chapter of the church's history, it is important not to overlook the ministry that had been going on in the church from the beginning. While a month by month listing of numbers in Bible information class and of baptisms would be monotonous, each one of those souls was evidence of God's grace and his people's faithfulness. The Lord's hand is evident when one looks at the way transfers in, baptisms, and confirmations vastly outnumber transfers out and releases. The total number of baptized souls went from 59 in August of 2000 to 100 just two years later. The church continued to seek out ways to make contacts with people without a church home. Vacation Bible Schools, holiday meals, mother's day outs, farm days, German services, canvasses, and other means were carried out with faithfulness. And while a church can do countless types of these things, only the Lord's grace brings success. He was giving that success to Beautiful Savior and that growth was what led to one of the biggest events in the church's history.

Already at the end of 2002 the church was considering finding a new location with more space. In January of 2003, a solution seemed to present itself. The current landlord was open to the idea of removing part of a wall in order to increase the church's worship area. But in March, the remodeling was no longer a possibility and a search for new facilities loomed on the horizon. In June the church extended its lease one more year with the understanding that by the end of the year they would need to switch to two Sunday services.

At the end of the summer the plans for the church's future made a shift. The church had planned on applying for one more year of exploratory mission status before advancing to mission

status. But the mission board and mission counselor encouraged the church not to wait a year, but to apply for mission status and also for the authority to begin a land search for a permanent church. The church did so. They began a building fund and had a few members looking for pieces of property that might meet their needs. In addition the church needed to become more structured in order to become incorporated by the state. So in October the church's Steering Committee officially began with Joe Roth serving as president of the congregation.

On October 6th the church received a letter informing them that the Board for Home Missions had granted their request for Mission Status at its September meeting. Along with mission status came a Mission Program Grant Agreement, that detailed the support the synod would be giving the church in the next five years. On November 18th, the church was officially notified that they were also approved to search out and purchase land. They could also now seek a loan to finance the land purchase from the Church Extension Fund.

In November, a piece of land was located that held great promise. It was located along the third busiest road in the area at a controlled intersection. The land was owned by two farmers who were brothers and wanted to keep the chunk of land together. So the total size of the property the church would have was 17.8 acres. The cost of the land would be \$600,000. The church wanted to cover the down payment of \$120,000 and sought a grant from the CEF for the remaining balance. The need for expansion was in the minds of the people as December saw them begin using two services on Sunday morning. While this in itself is a testament to the growth and blessing the congregation was experiencing, the people hoped it would not be long before they could again worship together in one service.

January began a very dramatic 2004 for Beautiful Savior. For the most part the changes were exciting and clearly blessings, but early on the church dealt with a loss. Mike Blaise, who

was one of the original members of Beautiful Savior, was called home to heaven while serving in Iraq. Despite the joy that the church knew Mike now enjoyed at his Savior's side, it was still a difficult time for a church that was very close and who had many members involved in the military.

But January also brought approval for the land grant from CEF and in February the church closed on their purchase of the land. The process of planning for the future facilities would begin soon, but first the land needed to be cleared. Located upon the property were two barns and a farm house. Pastor Brown demolished the two barns using a backhoe. The matter of the farm house was a little trickier as there was a certain amount of red tape involved with tearing a house down. But the problem was solved rather mysteriously. The work week concluded with the digging of a large hole by Robert (Ed) White, one of the church's leaders in the process of finding land. Saturday came and went with the house still sitting there next to White's bulldozer and the hole he had dug. But with the rising of the sun that Sunday morning, a passer by would not have found any traces of a farm house. Meanwhile, Ed sat in the early service at Beautiful Savior that morning, surprised that the Old Testament lesson was not the account of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

During the next few months the steering committee worked hard on developing plans for the new facility. Mission counselor Ed Schuppe met with the church's leadership in May to continue to review and adjust their plans. In June the steering committee presented the plans to the congregation. The people received them well. The pastor and leadership planned every member visits to talk about the support that was needed to go forward with the church. The people were enthusiastic. Being able to see the land and the plans for ministry tied to that land moved the people to give generously.

Fall of 2004 continued to see steps toward breaking ground for the new church building. Ed White was willing to serve as a general contractor and the church also received the donated service of a licensed architect. Both of these facts lowered the estimated cost of the project. In November the church sent in the application of facility planning and for a loan from the church extension fund.

In the beginning of the next year the church received approval for the facility planning and for the loan. But January also brought with it a new idea for the new facility. The leadership of the church recognized the fact that a preschool would serve as a great opportunity for outreach. A committee was formed of different members of Beautiful Savior who would investigate the possibility of starting a school. It did not take long for that committee to arrive at the conclusion that Clarksville was the ideal place to begin such a school. A lack of institutions for that age group was quite visible from their research. The school quickly became part of the planning process of the new church.

In March the beginning of the building process seemed to be approaching rapidly. On March 6th the church had a groundbreaking ceremony. The plans for the initial concrete work were submitted to the city. The church hoped to begin pouring in mid-July. But July did not turn out the way the church expected. The city rejected the building plan and requested more engineer work to be done. It would take until September for everything to be ready for another attempt for the permit. This time the city approved the plan and construction began on October 31st.

While the church was growing weary of waiting, the spirit of enthusiasm did fade. Ministry was still being carried out from the storefront with God given success. Visitors were still coming to the church. The school committee continued to make plans. Several women of

Beautiful Savior began working on a service program called F.U.E.L., which would provide food for hungry children attending a grade school in close proximity to the church's future site.

Church leaders began to discuss the possibility of applying for a vicar. The people's focus was not solely on the land and beginning construction. The church continued to carry out its ministry in many different ways.

Progress marked the end of 2005. Construction had advanced to a point where the sanctuary was enclosed. Two representatives of Forward with Lutherans Schools came to evaluate the congregation and its ministry. Based on their findings, they encouraged Beautiful Savior to go forward with starting a preschool. In January the church applied for a grant from BHM for the preschool. It was approved. The leadership of the church also decided to go forward in applying for a vicar in mission setting. The church building continued to progress into the early spring.

May brought the completion of construction of the new church. A transition period took place and by the last weekend in May worship was conducted in the new building. While the cost incurred was slightly higher than expected, the congregation's support was also beyond expectations. The dedication service took place on June 11th. From the very beginning the new building generated interest from the community around it. Visitors came to worship to see what was happening at this "new" church. Worship returned to one service with Sunday School before it. The church which only six years ago was looking for a place to hold their first worship services now had a very visible sanctuary with large possibilities for ministry.

One of those possibilities that would quickly materialize was the preschool. In April Beautiful Savior called Barbara Noon to serve as the preschool director. She was led by the Lord to accept that call. The school committee continued to plan with a goal of opening the preschool

part time in the fall of 2006. With the Miss Noon and the committee working hard, the church was ready for the school to open in the fall and even had a list of students. However, difficulties arose obtaining the needed approval from the state fire marshal. The wait for approval was short lived. On October 16th the preschool opened with a total of six children. This number increased throughout the remainder of the school year and by April 2007 enrollment reached twenty-six.

In addition to a preschool director, Beautiful Savior gained a vicar in 2006. In May, David Parsons was assigned to the church. It was an exciting time to serve in Clarksville. A new building had just been finished. A preschool was gearing up to open. Opportunities for outreach and ministry abounded. The many blessings that the congregation enjoyed would serve as valuable experience for a young man preparing for pastoral ministry.

The winter and spring continued to see growth in almost every area of Beautiful Savior's ministry. The average attendance continued to expand in the new facility. The preschool continued to increase in enrollment. These blessing led the church to continue to seek ways to expand its ministry. A summer program was added to the preschool. A second vicar was applied for and assigned. Preparations were being made for another Level 2 request in order to call a staff minister to work with the preschool and church. In July the congregation approved these plans and the request was made.

The preschool began its second year in August 2007. The number of children had increased, as well as the different schedule options. But most importantly, the connection between the church and the school grew stronger. Preschool families often visited Sunday worship. In one case, the enrollment of a young man named Hunter in the preschool led to four generations joining Beautiful Savior. This attitude of cooperation was evident in the school and church. The Lord blessed the church through its school.

Growth in the church continued through the remainder of 2007. In December the congregation decided to begin a schedule of two services on Palm Sunday. The Board for Home Missions approved the request for a staff minister, but the congregation approved a change from staff minister to a second pastor. While a staff minister would be a great blessing in fostering the connection between church and school, a pastor would be able to work with those parents as well as be involved in the church's ministry. In March 2008 Beautiful Savior called Pastor Kent Holz who was serving in Appleton, WI. The Lord led Pastor Holz to accept the call to Clarksville and he was installed on June 29th, 2008. With the second pastor, Beautiful Savior made a commitment to not only continuing to reach out to those around them, but also to growing their own spiritual lives. Pastor Holz describes this growth as going from "I go to church" to "I am the church."⁵

The growth of Beautiful Savior is a positive example of how the Lord uses his people to further his work of preaching the Gospel. From that small group that began gathering together for Bible study, the Lord has been using the individual members of Beautiful Savior to reach out to their friends and neighbors with the message of Christ crucified. He also used the church body that is the Wisconsin Synod to further the work beyond what those members could accomplish. Throughout the church's history, the Lord has blessed the efforts of his people in Clarksville and brought many into contact with his saving word. May he continue to do so.

⁵ Pastor Kent Holz, interviewed by David Barkow, digital recorder, October 24th, 2008. Beautiful Savior, Clarksville, TN.

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