



A History of Peace Lutheran Church:
How the West Mesa was and continues to be won

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Imagine high mesas and plains, sage brush and beautiful sunsets, amazing thunderstorms and more stars than you would have dreamed twinkling in the sky. This is not the opening scene in a country western movie and you don't have to imagine it. This describes New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment. As you follow the Rocky Mountains down from Colorado, eventually the range of the Sandia Mountains appears. In a valley, at the foothills of this range, New Mexico's largest city was established, Albuquerque. It was here that mission work, as far as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is concerned, began in New Mexico.

It is from Albuquerque, the city of lights that another mission field was opened. Christian's from Shepherd Lutheran Church decided the West Mesa was ripe for harvest. In 1983, with money from a special fund raising campaign called "Reaching Out", the WELS finally was able to address the desire of Shepherd and assigned the West Mesa with a graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) in Mequon, Wisconsin.¹ The resulting church becomes the topic of this paper. In the newly developing city of Rio Rancho, the city of vision, Peace Lutheran Church has for 20 years communicated the visions and prophecies of God and the wonderful Gospel message to this growing community, in the Land of Enchantment.

In the early 1980's, the desire for a mission in the West Mesa of Albuquerque really emerged among the members of Shepherd. This particular area was taking off and growing very rapidly. Then in the 1982/1983 school year the Board for Home Missions (BHM) was granted a graduate of WLS to pursue the possibility of starting a mission in the area². Pastor Butler, then a Vicar interviewed Pastor Vogt, the Pastor at Shepherd, concerning his senior paper, *Land of Enchantment: Mission Work in the Rio Grande Circuit*. Pastor Vogt recalled,

¹ Butler, Heath. *Land of Enchantment: Mission Work in the Rio Grande Circuit*. Essay File # 2689. WLS Library, Mequon, WI. 1998. p 36

² *Ibid.* p 36

We had about 25 people from Shepherd who lived west of the Rio Grande River. They were very active in worship, so again we knew we had a solid core of people to begin the work. Rio Rancho was just beginning to mushroom as a development. Intel had built a huge plant in Rio Rancho. Land prices were starting to escalate; we had talked to the mission Board for a number of years about beginning there. The time was right.³

The time was definitely right. When WLS had its annual call day, in May that year, the call to investigate the mission in the West Mesa was issued to Steven Wilkens. Pastor Wilkens recalled in an interview, “We were told that five of the thirteen of us would not make it. I just remember thinking to myself ‘I’m not going to be one of those five.’ I guess that motivated me”⁴. In July, Pastor Wilkens, his wife Karen, pregnant with their second child, and their daughter Rachel traveled down to their new home.

On July 10, 1983, Pastor Wilkens was ordained at Shepherd Lutheran Church in Albuquerque.⁵ Pastor Wilkens described the warm welcome extended to him and his family by Shepherd in Albuquerque and members of Messiah in White Rock, but also mentioned an “anxious/nervous” feeling he had at his installation as well⁶. There was much to be done and everyone was anxious to get going.

July 26, 1983 marked a milestone for the exploratory mission. The first organized meeting was held in the parsonage of Pastor Wilkens. Among the things that needed to be discussed was a place in which the congregation could hold worship services. One of the possibilities was the Rio Rancho Senior Citizens Center⁷. This would be the home of the congregation for the next year. The congregation had a worship space.

³ Butler, Heath. p 37

⁴ Wilkens, Steven. Telephone Interview. 4 Dec. 2004.

⁵ Pictures and call letter are included in CD-ROM attached

⁶ Ibid. In response to the question, “What was the atmosphere when you arrived in New Mexico?”

⁷ Minutes of the West Mesa Mission Congregation, July 26, 1983.

The next meeting took place on August 17, 1983. It was decided that September 18, of that year would be the first official worship service of the West Mesa congregation. However in order to do so, first they needed to name their group. While speaking to his vicar at the end of his ministry in New Mexico, Pastor Wilkens recalled that meeting.

The organizational meeting was held in the parsonage and it was a night we wouldn't forget. It was a typical night for Albuquerque. The clouds came and there was a great deal of lightening. With about 15 people there the lights went out and the roads were flooded. But we went ahead and chose our church officers. The men said, "you do this and you do that ," etc.... Also we picked a church name. It was fitting on such a violent night, we chose the name PEACE.⁸

Actually, that night the church's name was Hope. However, on looking into the phone book the next morning, the council decided to go with its second choice, the name it carries still today.⁹ With a name, a council, and a service scheduled, the congregation was now up and running. There was much work to be done, but first would come the first service at the Rio Rancho Senior Citizens Center.

The council met again in August, to prepare to the first service. The Church had to be completely movable because it had to be taken down and set up every Sunday. God's hand, however, provided Peace with a membership of handy men who were able to construct a podium, and a cross for use in the make shift church. A communion set was needed and provided by a willing member. Even an organist stepped forward to play the organ already present in the Senior Citizen Center. All the needed materials would be prepared.

September 18, soon came and went.¹⁰ The festivity of the first service was no doubt joyous and exciting, but now it was time to begin to work. The small congregation would have

⁸ Butler, Heath. p 39

⁹ Minutes of the West Mesa Mission Congregation. Aug. 17, 1983

¹⁰ Pictures and Service included in CD-ROM attached.

to get its name out and to evangelize as is common for all beginning churches. They also had to start looking into establishing themselves as a mission church so that they could receive assistance from the WELS, as well in their endeavors.

Pastor Wilkens recalled the challenges that lay before the young church when responding to the question, “What were some challenges that Peace encountered?”

Not all Shepherd members who signed up to start the church actually became members ... I had little training on starting a church or evangelism. Back in those days training at seminary was much different than it is today. I didn't even really have a working knowledge of the working of a council and my call was vague. Just check it out was pretty much all I was told.¹¹

No doubt that thought from his call day repeated in his head often, “Five of the thirteen won't make it.” However, under the guiding hand of God, this new congregation and its recently installed Pastor pressed forward.

On December 7, 1983, Pastor Reaume, the chairman of the Arizona – California Mission Board, visited the group. He discussed the requirements of seeking mission status in the WELS with the council. The council was not at that time in alignment with all the requirements, so at the December 13 meeting they decided to begin taking steps to conform to the requirements of Synod.¹²

In a special council meeting on December 27 of that year, Peace decided to seek mission status in February of 1984 if they received the permission of the voters in January.¹³ However, before the meeting another council meeting was held. In this meeting, the president at the time, Jerome Peterson announced a move that would take him from the congregation and away from

¹¹ Wilkens, Steven. 4 Dec 2004.

¹² Peace Lutheran Church (PLC) council minutes. Dec. 13, 1983.

¹³ Ibid. Dec. 27, 1983.

his duties there.¹⁴ This would become common place in the congregation and in the council.

Pastor Wilkens spoke of the job related turnover that became normal in the congregation.

Probably the worst thing. When people didn't look you in the eye on Sunday morning, I just knew they were probably going to be moving...It was more difficult for the Pastor than the congregation...It was draining to always be looking for council members.¹⁵

The problem did not last long, however. The congregation elected a new president at their voters meeting that same January as well as accepting the council's decision to apply for mission status. But that wasn't all the good news offered in the February meeting. Pastor Wilkens had already completed his first Adult Bible Information Class (BIC). He requested that Mrs. Borman be accepted into membership. Of course, the council approved.¹⁶

In April, eight months since Wilkens arrival, the statistics were calculated. The congregation had roughly doubled in size already. Beginning with sixteen members the congregation had grown to twenty-nine, gaining ten communicants in the process. Included in those numbers were four baptisms (three children and an adult), two adult confirmands and four professions of faith.¹⁷ God was blessing his congregation across the Rio Grande.

In May of that same year, Pastor Wilkins began filling a vacancy for White Rock, NM.¹⁸ This too would become common among the pastors of the New Mexico area. After receiving the news that there was more on his plate already, in a May voters meeting, Pastor Wilkens announced that Peace's request for mission status had been temporarily deferred. Apparently the congregation had not quite gotten to the point it needed to be, but it would not take long. This had little to no effect on the spirit of the congregation. In that same meeting, they announced

¹⁴ Ibid. Jan 17, 1984.

¹⁵ Wilkens, Steven. When asked to speak on the turnover issue in the congregation. 4 Dec, 2004.

¹⁶ PLC council minutes. Feb. 14, 1984.

¹⁷ PLC Eight Month Statistics – Sept. 18, 1983 through April 1984. (See Addenda on CD-ROM)

¹⁸ PLC council minutes. May 5, 1984.

monthly evangelism training and meetings to reach out to the rapidly growing community God had given them.¹⁹

September marked another milestone in the congregation. The Mission Board of the WELS met and Peace was on the agenda. With this in mind, the congregation established a building committee to begin looking for land to build a church.²⁰ They had not hoped in vain. One year after the congregation's first service, Peace was in fact no longer an exploratory mission but a full fledged mission church. In a letter dated September 28, 1984, Norman Berg, the executive secretary of the General Board for Home Missions (GBHM) congratulated the new congregation.²¹

With mission status, came requirements. The young congregation had to draft a constitution. On December 4, of 1984 they had completed a draft to submit to Synod²², however, they would not complete the process until July of 1985²³. In the mean time, Peace would set its sights on finding some land.

January 8, brought three possibilities for the site of the new church. Golf Course Road and Southern Boulevard, Twentieth Street and Southern Boulevard, and Golf Course Road at Saint Joseph's Hospital were all considered by the council as probable sites for the church.²⁴ All of these sites would be brought before the voters for their consideration. By February 12, 1985,

¹⁹ PLC voter's meeting. May 5, 1984.

²⁰ PLC voter's meeting. Sept. 9, 1984.

²¹ Letter from General Board for Home Missions. Sept. 28, 1984 – "Please inform the exploratory group at Albuquerque, New Mexico that the General Board for Home Missions has granted it mission Status.... We rejoice with the congregation at this sign of commitment by the Synod to work with the group permanently in our cooperative evangelistic work in the Lord." (see addenda on CD-ROM)

²² PLC council minutes. Dec. 4, 1984.

²³ Ibid. July 14, 1985.

²⁴ Ibid. Jan. 8, 1985.

they had expanded their possibilities to five cites which were all submitted to the GBHM for consideration.²⁵

In the mean time, Peace continued to grow, so that in that same council meeting it was announced that the membership had reached forty-four souls served by Peace.²⁶ The congregation had almost tripled in size from its original number of sixteen. Shepherd had been correct in pursuing the mission in the West Mesa. God's blessings continued to rain down upon the new congregation.

It was after church then on March 24 that a special voters meeting was held to discuss the land search's results. The Congregation had thought about it for some time, and the decision was made to purchase the plot of land that was slotted to be near a new housing development in the community. They would purchase the land off of Southern Boulevard on 19th Street.²⁷ It would become the home of this small congregation and its pastor right up until the present.

It wasn't until May, however, that the paper work was prepared and ready to send to the GBHM for approval. The congregation would request \$70,000 to purchase three acres of land in the area.²⁸ The GBHM would approve. On June 24, 1985, Peace had its land.²⁹ In august of that same year, the constitution of Peace was accepted and the congregation became a member of the WELS at the Synod convention in Saginaw, Michigan.³⁰

The congregation continued in its efforts to evangelize in the community. Multiple ads had been taken out in the local paper, the Observer, and seemed to be paying off. Combined with a congregational focus for evangelism and efforts among the members to get friends to

²⁵ PLC council minutes. Mar. 12, 1985.

²⁶ Ibid. Mar. 12, 1985.

²⁷ PLC special voters meeting minutes. Mar. 24, 1985.

²⁸ PLC council minutes. May 13, 1985.

²⁹ PLC Ten Year History. 1994. (See addenda on CD-ROM)

³⁰ Ibid.

church, the congregation was growing. By December 10, 1985, the congregation could now boast fifty members on its rosters, thirty-five of whom were communicants.³¹

When asked about evangelism efforts and programs at Peace, Pastor Wilkens recalled, “We tried many different evangelism techniques. I mean, we tried everything!”³² The hard work was paying off and the congregation was standing on the threshold of a permanent church structure. January 14, 1986 started the third year Peace had been in existence and on that day the council announced the hiring of Bill Buckley as the architect for their new Worship Education and Fellowship building, WEF for short. It was also on this day that an Evangelism board was started to better direct the evangelism efforts of the congregation.³³ It is in such actions, that we can then see the spirit of these people. While planning milestones, they refused to stop looking to the future and continually sought to spread the gospel to people who need it.

March 22, 1986, saw the plans for the new WEF completed and ready for Synodical approval.³⁴ They would not get the approval until they clarified some of the specifications. Peace, however, received this approval in October of that year.³⁵ More important than the plans was what continued to occur in the church. Council minutes become littered with names of people coming into the congregation. While receiving many members, others begin to transfer out because their jobs were relocating. As was said before, this is an interesting dynamic that presents itself still today in the congregation. Jobs opportunities in this area seem to move from place to place quite often. In the opening days of the congregation, things were no different.

With plans to build the new WEF unit accepted by the GBHM and the money to build the facility (a reality thanks to Synodical help), the working plans had been drawn up and submitted

³¹ PLC council minutes. Nov. 12, 1985.

³² Wilkens, Steven. Dec. 4 2004.

³³ PLC council minutes. Jan. 14, 1986.

³⁴ PLC voters meeting. Mar. 22, 1986.

³⁵ Ibid. Oct. 19, 1986.

to the synod for approval, by December.³⁶ By March 8, 1987, the congregation was waiting on the city to okay the plans for their new worship facility. In the mean time, they had continued growing. They could now boast of sixty souls in their membership and forty-five communicants partaking of the Lord's Supper.³⁷ God's blessings were not subsiding and April held still more stepping stones for the congregation.

April of 1987, saw the ground breaking ceremony of Peace.³⁸ April 12 was no doubt a day of much rejoicing among the rapidly growing mission church. Pastor Wilkens presided at the short service and Warren Pleyte, the building committee chairman, broke the ground, kicking off construction on the future home of Peace Lutheran Church.³⁹

And while the ground breaking was done as a notable milestone, in April, another event was also occurring that may not have been as noticed, at least at its beginning. Seven days after the ground breaking Peace worshipped in Haynes park, across the street from the Senior Citizen Center they were now preparing to leave. It was one of those ideas that Pastor Wilkens had heard and because they were "trying everything" had placed before the congregation. April 19, two hundred and fifteen people gathered on Easter morning, at 7:00 A.M., to hear the good news of Jesus' resurrection.⁴⁰ As future years would show, the turn out was small.

When asked about the Easter Sunrise service, Pastor Wilkens remembered, "I think there were people who would ride up on horse back and tie their horses to the fence and sit down for worship. It just kept growing and growing...It was really cool...It was the only time I felt like Billy Graham."^{41,42}

³⁶ PLC council minutes. Dec. 9, 1986.

³⁷ Ibid. Mar. 8, 1987.

³⁸ Service and pictures on attached CD-ROM.

³⁹ PLC 20th Year Anniversary Pictorial and directory. 2004

⁴⁰ Easter sunrise Service flier, 1987. (See Addenda on CD-ROM)

⁴¹ Wilkens, Steven. Dec. 4, 2004.

⁴² Pictures included on CD-ROM.

Only three days earlier, a contractor had been selected and bid the job sending it to Synod for approval.⁴³ Work would start in May.⁴⁴ August brought the purchase of the congregations main worship instrument, an organ. It was purchased in full by a thoughtful donor and Pastor announced it to the council on the thirtieth.⁴⁵ Four months later, the congregation was able to have its first worship service in a brand new building that was their own. No doubt spirits were high as sixty-seven people attended church on September 6, 1987. Peace was established. It had a building to call its very own. Pastor Wilkens commented on the condition of the WEF, “I always thought we had one of the finest looking WEF’s in the Synod.”^{46,47} I’m sure his opinion was unbiased.

Pastor Wilkens and his young family were also, no doubt, in high spirits not only from the new worship facility but also from the fact that the congregation had moved them into their new home just days earlier, on August 23.⁴⁸ It had been added on to the plans and accepted by Synod in late January of 1987.⁴⁹ The congregation had purchased its land, built its WEF and the parsonage at a total cost of \$240,000.⁵⁰

The first of November marked the dedication of the new WEF. Pastor Alan Eckert, chairman of the Arizona – California District Mission Board, preached for the service.⁵¹ Peace had already decided that the past was behind them and that the next year was to be a “year of

⁴³ PLC council minutes. Apr. 14, 1987.

⁴⁴ Ibid. May 12, 1987.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Aug. 30, 1987.

⁴⁶ Wilkens, Steven. Dec. 4, 2004.

⁴⁷ Pictures included on CD- ROM

⁴⁸ PLC Ten Year History. 1994. (See Addenda on CD-ROM)

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

evangelism”.⁵² God’s blessings had been poured out on his people and they were not about to stop doing his work.

Throughout the rest of the year, events like “festival of friendship” Sunday⁵³, as well as proposed workshops on evangelism became the focus of the congregation. The efforts produced abundant fruit so that in the January voters meeting, Pastor Wilkens was able to declare a year of blessings for the church. The membership had grown to fifty-three communicants and seventy-four souls.⁵⁴ Peace had surpassed fifty communicant members and they had no intention to stop growing.

1988 brought more blessings from the Lord to the congregation. In September of that year, the congregation had grown to eighty-nine members of which sixty-two were communicant members.⁵⁵ October of that month brought the formation of a telephone evangelism campaign to the congregation. Combined with advertising that was already being done in the local paper and friendship Sundays during the year, the congregation was focused on getting the Word out to as many people as possible.⁵⁶

With the church growing, it was no doubt obvious that the WEF would not be their worship space forever. However, no one could have anticipated the speed in which the congregation would once again be looking to build. That October, in a voters meeting, the congregation decided that the WEF was already becoming crowded. The solution was phase two of the building process, the construction of a chapel. The congregation began looking into acquiring the money to expand their WEF that was not even one year old. Synod mission specifications to justify construction required ninety communicants but even the rules said that

⁵² PLC council minutes. Sept. 8, 1987.

⁵³ Ibid. Oct. 14, 1987.

⁵⁴ PLC voters meeting minutes. Jan. 17, 1988.

⁵⁵ PLC council minutes. Sept. 11, 1988.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Oct. 9, 1988.

exceptions could be made if necessary.⁵⁷ The building committee was reestablished and began looking into possibilities.

In December of that year, the congregation spilled to over a hundred members with seventy-nine communicants.⁵⁸ Eleven members off of the mission target for the building of a new Chapel was a small enough gap to relax the mission standards and, sometime between February and May⁵⁹, permission was granted for Peace to build a chapel addition.

In January of 1990, Peace had asked the contractor who built the WEF to bid the chapel building as well. With permission of the Chapel program for Peace, also came the acceptance of the proposed plans totaling \$100,000. Plans accepted and contractor selected, Peace broke ground again on June 10, 1990.⁶⁰ It had been a total of three years and two months since their last ground breaking service. By August of that same year, the construction team had already placed a concrete slab where the chapel would soon be.^{61,62}

In September, Peace's attention would be drawn to another aspect of Christian living. The first major budget shortfall found Peace three thousand dollars in debt.⁶³ It was time to start a stewardship program. The council and its Pastor would make visits to members to discuss this opportunity that was given by the Lord to support his work in the church. The congregation responded quickly realizing that there would also be costs for the new chapel building coming up.

⁵⁷ PLC voters meeting. Oct. 9, 1988.

⁵⁸ PLC Ten Year History. 1994. (See addenda on CD-ROM)

⁵⁹ There is a discrepancy between PLC Ten Year History (February 6, 1990) and PLC 1990 Statistics (In March, the District mission Board accepted plans and, in May, the Synodical Home Mission Board accepted the plans) (See addenda on CD-ROM)

⁶⁰ Pictures included on CD-ROM.

⁶¹ PLC 1990 statistics. (See addenda on CD-ROM)

⁶² Pictures of chapel construction included on CD-ROM.

⁶³ PLC council minutes. Sept. 6, 1990.

In October, another issue arose. In the midst of all the building preparation and business that had surrounded the congregation that year, they were looking at the possibility of seeing their first year with out growth. The council decided that evangelism should also be discussed with the members to once again draw God's Gospel Imperative before their eyes. Peace's focus was beginning to require multiple tasks. It was being introduced into the reality of operating a church with over a hundred members.

However, by the time dedication for their new chapel had rolled around, the congregation could boast forty-two families with a communicant membership of seventy-nine and a total membership of a hundred and fourteen souls.⁶⁴ While it may appear that the congregation had seen it first unproductive year, as far as numbers were concerned (for in other aspects it was far from unproductive), it is important to note that in 1990, five entire families had moved because of job replacement.⁶⁵ Peace was in fact still growing even though it may not appear so at first.

The new chapel was dedicated on October 28, 1990. Pastor Phil Koelpin, Second Vice President of the Arizona-California District, preached for the service. Peace now was in possession of a worship facility with room for Sunday school and fellowship. Along with the building completion came a total debt of \$390,000.⁶⁶ Building was now complete for a while. Looking back at the process and the mindset of the people through the building stages of Peace, Pastor Wilkens praised the forward looking tendency among the people. "The church was never satisfied always looking forward to the next thing. The mindset was joy but also we have a lot to do."⁶⁷ There still was truly much to do. An entirely new phase in the history of Peace was about

⁶⁴ PLC Ten Year History. 1994. (See addenda on CD-ROM)

⁶⁵ PLC voter's meeting. 1990.

⁶⁶ PLC Ten Year History. 1994. (See addenda on CD-ROM)

⁶⁷ Wilkens, Steven. Dec. 4, 2004.

to begin. It was time to pay down the debt and seek to become self supporting while continuing to evangelize.

Already, in 1991, the congregation began to feel the debt it was carrying. At the December council meeting, it was brought to the council's attention that they had failed to keep the proposed budget for October.⁶⁸ By the end of the 1991/1992 fiscal year, they were still in debt. They were, however, able to take the excess that had accumulated in previous years to pay the bills.⁶⁹ This was a trend that would not be able to continue forever.

In November of 1992, the treasurer announced that a downward trend was evident in the congregation and it was continuing.⁷⁰ However, at the beginning of 1993, due to increased giving, the council was told that they had broken even.⁷¹ The bills were being paid but debt retirement was suffering.⁷² The council would need to concentrate its efforts on getting things back on track and the only way to do that was to get the congregation into God's Word.

While money was slowly becoming a nuisance, work in the congregation continued. People continued to evangelize and bring others to church. The calling and the varied programs were working as well and the membership was growing. In March, Pastor Wilkens announced that they now had a hundred and three communicant members. The numbers would grow through out the year.⁷³

June marked the acceptance of the new hymnal. *Christian Worship* was accepted by the congregation in an annual voter's meeting and a hundred and fifty new hymn books were ordered. At that same time, the congregation was informed that they had now grown to a total

⁶⁸ PLC council minutes. Dec. 17, 1991.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Oct 18, 1992.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Nov. 17, 1992.

⁷¹ Ibid. Jan. 19, 1993.

⁷² Ibid. Mar. 16, 1993.

⁷³ Ibid.

membership of 150 members.⁷⁴ In almost ten years, they were almost ten times their original size.

The year Peace celebrated ten years of ministry in Rio Rancho brought good news. By the February council meeting the Treasurer was able to announce that the budget was back on track. The Holy Spirit had moved the people to increase their offerings. In the very same meeting, it was announced that August 7 would be the ten year anniversary service.⁷⁵ Peace had much to be happy about and much for which to thank God.

August 7, came and went like so many other milestones of the congregation. In fact, the actual day hardly gets mention in the council minutes following it.⁷⁶ Congregational business stayed busy. On June 26, 1994, the congregation had accepted the transfers or removals of twelve members and had accepted into membership forty-two individual souls.⁷⁷ Turn over was going to be with the congregation through out its history. In spite of the turnover and the general busy nature of the congregation, by November of that year, they were a hundred and seventy-two souls strong. Included in that number, were a hundred and twenty-five communicants.⁷⁸

By December 20, 1994, the budget again makes it into the minutes. Contributions were falling short of the previous years accepted budget. However, realizing that money was available to cover the shortfall⁷⁹ the council felt confident applying for the “vicar in missions” program for the next school year.⁸⁰ In May of that same year, Peace would be assigned a vicar, James Borgwardt. Peace would have another called worker to assist in the evangelism of the area and

⁷⁴ PLC voter's meeting. June 14, 1993.

⁷⁵ PLC council minutes. Feb. 24, 1994.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Aug. 25, 1994.

⁷⁷ Ibid. June 26, 1994.

⁷⁸ Ibid. Nov. 17, 1994.

⁷⁹ Ibid. July 19, 1995.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Apr. 25, 1995.

was now also helping out in the training of future WELS pastors. They had come a long way from an exploratory mission struggling to even define themselves as a church.

In the July council meeting, the vicar program was finally nailed down. The vicar's wife would be able to serve at Shepherd throughout the year with their school and the installation was scheduled for August 20, 1995. Having attended classes on what to do with the vicar, Pastor Wilkens also announced that the Vicar would concentrate on evangelism.⁸¹

With the help of the Vicar and a massive telephone campaign, Peace had a hundred prospects to make calls on in 1995. With the added help, there was even time to go door to door to check them out.⁸² In February, it was no surprise that the congregation announced that they would continue the program for another year. They had accepted seven new members and two more prospects were in training.⁸³ They had no idea just how helpful that decision would be.

August 6, marked Vicar Borgwardt's last council meeting and the next Sunday would be his last among the congregation. Peace had, however, been assigned another Seminary trainee, Health Butler. He would be installed on August 28, 1996.⁸⁴ Before that date though, Pastor Wilkens would inform the council that he had a call to Bethany, in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.⁸⁵

Vicar Butler was installed on the twenty-eighth of August, as was planned, and life in the congregation went about as usual. On October 15, it was turnover as usual, fourteen members were added in a voter's meeting that month and two members were transferred to Arizona.⁸⁶

However, it was the following month that brought that year's biggest news; the Holy Spirit had led Pastor Wilkens to accept his call. His last Sunday would be December 12, 1996.⁸⁷

⁸¹ PLC council minutes. July 17, 1995.

⁸² Ibid. Dec. 28, 1995.

⁸³ Ibid. Feb. 20, 1996.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Aug. 6, 1996.

⁸⁵ Call letter included on attached CD-ROM.

⁸⁶ PLC Voter's Meeting. Oct. 15, 1996.

⁸⁷ PLC council minutes. Nov. 12, 1996.

Peace was once again going to embark on uncharted territory. They now had to start a calling process. When asked what he would like to say at the close of his interview, Pastor Wilkens, still at Bethany, responded, "With the exception of my marriage and the birth of my children, Peace has been one of my happiest memories. It was only joy. I know there were trying days, but I don't remember a single one of them."⁸⁸

Pastor Wilkens last Sunday was an emotional one. There were many tears and hard goodbyes, but as always, the congregation continued to look ahead. Pastor Martz, the current pastor at Shepherd Lutheran Church would serve as the interim pastor during the vacancy but most of the preaching and Sunday worship would be handled by the current Vicar, Heath Butler, who no doubt now understood what Pastor Wilkens had meant when he described that "anxious/nervous" feeling.

A call list was also drawn up, headed by Pastor Connel of El Paso Texas. Four Pastors were to be considered for the new spiritual shepherd of their flock: Pastor Richard F. Hennig of Orange Park, Florida, Pastor Paul. R. Johnston of West Salem, Wisconsin, Pastor James H. Winterstein of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Pastor Eric J. Ziecker of Montrose, Michigan. After the votes were tallied, Pastor Ziecker was issued the call⁸⁹ for the next Pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Rio Rancho.⁹⁰

The next month, the council was able to announce that Pastor Ziecker had accepted his call to the congregation.⁹¹ Peace counted it as a distinct blessing because the Synod was at that time experiencing a called worker shortage.⁹² With the acceptance of the call the congregation would now set its sights on getting ready for his arrival. The parsonage had to be refurbished

⁸⁸ Wilkens, Steven. Dec. 4, 2004.

⁸⁹ Call letter included on CD-ROM.

⁹⁰ PLC voter's meeting. Nov. 18, 1996.

⁹¹ PLC council minutes. Jan. 15, 1997.

⁹² 20th Anniversary History of Peace Lutheran Church. 2004.

and the installation date had to be set. It wouldn't be long at all and Peace's new pastor would be there.

February 2, 1997, was the day of Pastor Ziecker's installation.⁹³ No doubt a day of smiles and warm welcomes, Pastor Ziecker described the atmosphere as he started his ministry in Rio Rancho. "It was a big transition for them I think. There would be lesser man power and there were always vacancies to be filled."⁹⁴ Surely this was a time of transition for Peace. The only Pastor they had known for twelve years was gone and with him would go the vicar program. Add to that the vacancies common in New Mexico that would tie up its new Pastor already early in his time with them. Finally, add the assessment of Pastor Wilkens, who commenting on the turnover Peace often experienced said, "the turnover didn't effect the congregation that much because they were always able to rely on the fact that the Pastor would be there on Sunday." It was no doubt a trying time. Things were certainly changing.

July 12, 1997, brought Vicar Butler's last council meeting. Synod had also decided that with a new pastor, it would probably be best to remove the vicar program as well⁹⁵, giving Pastor Ziecker some time to adjust to the new surroundings without any added pressure. In October of that same year, Peace voted to take the church off mission subsidy, feeling it would ease the burden on Synod to support them and also so that they could turn their attention to possible school expansion in the future.⁹⁶ The balance at the time stood at \$326,000. The congregation again stood on the edge of change. The congregation was now going to need to learn how to support itself and what life was as an independent congregation.

⁹³ Service included on CD-ROM.

⁹⁴ Ziecker, Eric. Telephone Interview. Dec. 4, 2004.

⁹⁵ PLC council minutes. July 12, 1997.

⁹⁶ PLC voter's meeting. Oct. 5, 1997

In November, the turn over continued with twenty-five transfers out and fourteen souls accepted as members. The membership stood at a hundred and sixty-five with a hundred and twenty-four communicant members.⁹⁷ The congregation still had the same old challenges even though they were now self-supporting.

February brought the growing pains of independence. The congregation was facing the possibility of not being able to pay the bills.⁹⁸ However, it should be noted that while the congregation was low on treasures, its members were supplying their time and talents wherever they could. March soon brought an offering spike that was able to get the congregation back on track.⁹⁹

June brought with it the end of the fiscal year and a recap of membership. So far that year the congregation had six baptisms, nine transfers, one transfer out, 10 releases (mostly people who had simply moved out of contact and not informed the church¹⁰⁰), seven professions of faith, five confirmands and two deaths.¹⁰¹ The congregation was continuing to grow even in the face of the struggle to establish themselves as a self-supporting church.

August of that year brought a canvassing campaign in the congregation to once again reach out to the surrounding community.¹⁰² October saw money back in the concern category of the council.¹⁰³ However, a November census found that there was still perhaps a misunderstanding of the ideas of stewardship, not uncommon in any church, let alone one that was just becoming self-sufficient. The council discussed ways of getting the idea of “giving to

⁹⁷ PLC November Annual Report. 1997.

⁹⁸ PLC council minutes. Feb. 7, 1988.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Mar. 7, 1988.

¹⁰⁰ Ziecker, Eric. Dec. 3, 2004.

¹⁰¹ June 1998 Fiscal Year Statistics. 1998.

¹⁰² PLC council minutes. Aug. 8, 1998

¹⁰³ Ibid. Oct. 10, 1998.

pay the bills” out of the congregation and “giving out of thanks for the amazing gifts of God” into the congregation.¹⁰⁴

By the end of that year, despite monetary issues coming up, the congregation was able to report that the debt was down to \$319,900. The debt was not shrinking fast, but it was shrinking. Unfortunately, the congregation came out six members shorter due to the turnover challenge. They had transferred or lost twenty two that year. They had also gained sixteen souls to make the figure. Congregational membership now stood at a hundred and twenty four communicant members and a hundred and ninety-three baptized members.¹⁰⁵

By the next voter’s meeting in July, the congregation was back looking at dollar signs. Many short term solutions were suggested but the long term solution was the best, a return to a scriptural understanding of stewardship was in order. It was time to stop giving to the budget and begin giving to God. Of course no such solution is a rapid fix and the resulting years up to present have seen their fair share of peaks and valleys in this area but in recent years the congregation has experienced a leveling off¹⁰⁶ of sorts that will allow them to hopefully plan all that more effectively for the years to come.

Regarding those years in between, Pastor Ziecker spoke when speaking to the observation that the finances seemed to be a challenge in the congregation. He listed some factors that may have cause or contributed to the rocky situation.

The congregation had gone off mission subsidy and that’s when things became a bit of a challenge. It takes time to instruct anyone that things are different now than they were before. Even now, with things leveling out, there is always room to grow.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ PLC special voter’s meeting. Nov. 4, 1998.

¹⁰⁵ PLC 1998 Yearly Report.

¹⁰⁶ Ziecker, Eric. Dec. 3, 2004.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Money struggles pretty much dominate the minutes as the major issue until 2003 in the congregation when some other issues come up. In June of 2003, eleven members transferred in as a result of some trouble Shepherd was going through. The next month eleven members from Peace transferred out on account of some personal reasons they brought up. Pastor Ziecker commented on the situation.

There had previously been an arrangement between myself and Pastor Martz that we would not allow members to use the two congregations to escape problems that should really be worked through. With Shepherd facing a vacancy, some of our members used that as a way to avoid issues that really should have been addressed.¹⁰⁸

Becoming joined to the personal issues was an issue that arose with AAL at the time. The local branch was seeking “full access” to the bulletin. Again, Pastor Ziecker commented, “Some people may have seen that as the straw that broke the camels back. The branch sought full access to our bulletin. When those views were not shared by the majority of the congregation, they left the congregation.”¹⁰⁹,”

As we draw closer and closer to the present day, Peace sits on the brink of some exciting possibilities. As you recall, Peace chose its land site because of an impending development that would put it in a new housing development. However, legal problems held the process up for many years. It is only presently that the developer has been cleared to start work on the new development in Peace’s backyard.

This news brought up the last question of this paper, “What is peace planning on doing now that this development is coming in?” The congregation, which has always had its eyes focused on the future, has already started making plans.

¹⁰⁸ Ziecker, Eric. Dec. 3, 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. The congregation had decided at there voters meeting to stop using AAL if stipulations were to be involved.

With the turn over that Peace so often experiences because of its highly mobile membership it can be hard for members there, especially newer members to feel really comfortable about the prospect of evangelism. When asked “What Peace planned to do in the development area?” Pastor Ziecker listed many things the congregation has done or is gearing up to do when a community springs up around it.

We plan to train ten people to evangelize and canvass in the new area. We have also prepared a tri-fold that tells people about our church and why we are here. They have also been “practicing” in some other nearby developments and sub-divisions so that when the time comes we plan to let the community know that we are there.¹¹⁰

Today, the Congregation has a hundred and ten baptized members. Its numbers have fallen a bit due to solid doctrinal teaching among its members which has resulted in some members seeking release from the congregation. Other members have transferred out because their jobs have taken them to other congregations. However, the congregation remains strong and willing to extend the message of sin and grace to the community of Rio Rancho and the surrounding areas.

Peace Lutheran Church may still be young in comparison to some of the other churches with whom it shares fellowship in the WELS, but it already has developed a rich history. It has much that it looks to with pride. Both Pastors spoke of a “strong family feeling” that is prevalent in the congregation and both have seen the members extend that family to the community as the congregation grows.

Today the congregation has a hundred and ten baptized members and much to be proud of, over 600 souls have benefited from their presence in the community¹¹¹. They have reduced their debt to under \$300,000 and are currently giving nine percent of all general offerings to the

¹¹⁰ Ziecker, Eric. Dec. 3, 2004.

¹¹¹ 20th Anniversary History of Peace Lutheran Church. 2004

missions of the WELS. They have seen one member graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and are expecting to see two more in 2005. They have a student at Martin Luther College and also Luther Prep School, other Synodical training facilities.

Only God truly knows what is still in store for these proclaimers of his visions in the city of vision. One thing is certain, however, they will meet God's will with eager expectations and focused zeal, trusting God and the power of his Word to help them along the path. Perhaps the best words with which to describe the future are words used to close the congregations 20th anniversary history.

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.¹¹²

With these words, Peace looks to the future, confident in God's power and firmly holding to his promises. With these words, this history draws to a close as well confident that while beautiful sunsets always come to a close. The promises of God and his Son never end for his people. Regardless of histories or projections, God's will is always good and his Word always effective.

¹¹² *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (Is 55:10-11). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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