

The Relocation of Sola Fide Lutheran Church Lawrenceville, Georgia



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Preface

Sola Fide Lutheran Church in Lawrenceville, Georgia will always hold a special place in my heart. The first ten years of my life were spent there as my father served as the pastor. When I think of Sola Fide I remember it as the red brick church located atop a hill at a major intersection. Almost sixteen years have passed since I was a member there, and with the passing of time, Sola Fide has experienced many changes. Many members and a few pastors have come and gone. A Christian Day School and Preschool were started. Even the address for the church has changed. Sola Fide relocated in July of 2000 from 875 Scenic Highway to 1031 Web Ginn House Road in Lawrenceville.

Sola Fide is not the first congregation to relocate. Many other churches in our Synod have gone through the process of relocation in the past. There will also be many congregations who undergo this process in the future. With the possibility of serving a congregation that might have to relocate, Sola Fide's relocation peaked my interest. God willing, those who read this paper will find it helpful as the process of Sola Fide's relocation is described in the following pages. There were many questions the leaders and members of Sola Fide had to ask themselves and answer before they decided to take this step. What are the factors that have brought us to this point? What possible avenues are there to expand ministry in the present location? How is the church's mission kept in focus during this entire process? What goals or plans exist for the congregation's future? What are the blessings and challenges we might face? These are all hard questions that needed answers as Sola Fide went through their relocation process. Relocation is not a quick process.

It is not as though the church president or pastor wakes up one morning, stretches, opens the window and shouts aloud, 'It's time to move!' Relocation is not a last minute, let's go in 'with guns a-blazin' decision made by only a select group of people in the church. A very complex process is undertaken with every relocation, involving many different people as well. Whereas it is hardly ever the first step, when it happens, it is seen as either the necessary step, or to some, the *only* step.¹

¹ Andrew Schwartz, "The Impact of Relocation on Churches in the South Atlantic District," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2952 c.2, 2001, p. 2.

With the help of many individuals, through email and phone interviews, information was gathered to the best recollection of each individual's memory. Through this paper I have attempted to clearly and accurately convey the information passed on to me. To refrain from causing offense to any who might read this paper, the individuals whom I interviewed remain nameless in the document and bibliography.²

To those members, both past and present, and to the pastors who have faithfully served *Sola Fide* as ministers of the gospel, this paper is dedicated. Above all, this paper is dedicated to our gracious God, who has called us in his love to be members of his Church. He has also equipped us as members of his Church to faithfully proclaim his saving grace to the lost. God grant to us his abundant blessing as he continually equips us and others to diligently carry out the work he has entrusted to us. "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

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² None of the individuals I interviewed objected from being named in the paper. I, however, thought it would be best to keep their quotes anonymous.

Building Up the Church – Spiritually and Physically

Sola Fide began as an exploratory congregation meeting in a Kinder Care in 1977. Blessed with an average worship attendance of thirty-nine that year the congregation began looking to buy land.³ Under God's blessing four acres of land were purchased late in 1978 for the church to take up permanent residency at 875 Scenic Highway in Lawrenceville, Georgia. In 1980 plans were developed for a Worship Education Fellowship (WEF) unit and construction followed for Sola Fide's first building. "The new combined chapel and educational building was dedicated in February 1981. The building contained 2,100 square feet. As the physical structure had grown during 1980, so had the congregation totaling 81 souls with an average attendance of 45."⁴ The WEF would serve the congregation well for a couple of years until a larger sanctuary was needed to provide adequate room for Sunday worship.

Two years after Sola Fide built the WEF the congregation made plans to build a parsonage on the property. "In Fall of 1983, the congregation sought Synod's approval to construct a parsonage. Weather delayed work on the parsonage, but in November 1984, the Zahn family moved out of rental housing and into the new three-bedroom house. Around the same time, Sola Fide received permission to begin planning for a new sanctuary."⁵ One year later bulldozers, concrete trucks, carpenters, and construction managers were again on Sola Fide's property. This time the building project was a larger sanctuary. "The new sanctuary was dedicated on March 2, 1986. By the

³ -----, "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1977. Cf. Appendix 1. The bar graph located there charts the "Average Sunday Worship Attendance" for Sola Fide from 1977 to 2004.

⁴ Len Brown, "Sola Fide Evangelical Lutheran Church and School: The First Twenty Years," n.d., p. 1. (Hereafter cited as Brown, "The First Twenty Years"). Len is a member of Sola Fide and has written other histories of Sola Fide.

⁵ Len Brown, "A History of Sola Fide Evangelical Lutheran Church and School," n.d., p. 1. (Hereafter cited as Brown, "A History of Sola Fide").

end of 1986, average attendance was 150, and the new worship facility was able to accommodate it nicely.”⁶

Over the first nine years of its history Sola Fide saw firsthand God’s blessings poured out on the congregation. Their membership had grown. The land they had purchased went from wooded acreage to now having three buildings on it. God’s blessings were certainly evident and would continue to be seen.

When Sola Fide constructed their sanctuary in 1986, they were now able to use the WEF for Sunday School and fellowship opportunities without having to set up and tear down from Sunday worship. Soon the WEF was unable to provide enough space for the large Sunday School classes. Some of the classes moved into the parsonage basement and the balcony in the church.⁷ While they were thankful for many more members, the congregation again had to address their space issue. “In 1989, plans for a Family Life Center were completed in April. The cost was estimated at \$120,000 and it was decided to begin work when \$60,000 had been received in pledges. Contributions for the Family Life Center continued to come in, but by year’s end the goal of \$60,000 was not yet reached.”⁸

In 1989 emphasis for contributing toward the proposed Family Life Center continued. Many changes also occurred that year. Sola Fide’s founding pastor, Larry Zahn, accepted a call and moved in November to serve a congregation in Maitland, Florida. As the congregation extended calls for another pastor they were served by their vicar and a vacancy pastor.⁹ Despite being without a pastor

⁶ *ibid*, p. 1. Some of the worship attendance figures reported in Mr. Brown’s histories of Sola Fide are different than those reported in the WELS Statistical Yearbook. All statistical references in the paper not quoted from “Sola Fide Evangelical Lutheran Church and School: The First Twenty Years” and “A History of Sola Fide Evangelical Lutheran Church and School” are according to the WELS Statistical Yearbook.

⁷ -----, Phone interview by author, 7 December 2005. Cf. Appendix 3. The bar graph shows attendance for Bible Class, Sunday School, and Teen Class (this did not start until 1986 according to the WELS Statistical Yearbook) for Sola Fide from 1977-2004.

⁸ Brown, “The First Twenty Years,” p. 3.

⁹ In August of 1988 Sola Fide received its first vicar, Jeff Bovee and the program would continue until 1995 when a second pastor was called. When pastor Zahn moved in November of 1989 John Vieths was serving as Sola Fide’s second vicar. Brown, “The First Twenty Years,” p. 2, 3.

for nearly an entire year, Sola Fide continued its ministry to nurture members with the Word, do outreach work in the community, and build the Family Life Center. On November 18, 1990 the Family Life Center was dedicated and Sola Fide's second pastor, Edward Schuppe, was installed.¹⁰

With a new pastor the congregation moved forward expanding ministry opportunities.

Under his guidance and with the continued work of the leadership and members Sola Fide Lutheran continued to grow and flourish. Many within the church began reading the Daily Bible in 1991....As we moved further into the 1990s the congregation continued to look toward the future. Careful study and planning enabled us to refinance our loan and free up money for needed programs. The church became involved in the Lawrenceville Food Bank that evolved into the Quinn House and the Lawrenceville Cooperative Ministry. In 1993 the first Festival of Friendship took place. A concentrated effort brought nearly 300 people to church that February Sunday including 50 visitors. Later that same year we began the introduction of the new hymnal, *Christian Worship*. By the end of 1993 there were 417 souls and 300 communicants on the rolls with average attendance for the year of 234 each Sunday. Realizing that we had not reached a plateau, but merely a stop on a rising slope a Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) was created late that year.¹¹

As the congregation looked forward to carrying out gospel ministry in the future talks began about starting a school. "Beginning in 1994 a group of concerned parents began to work toward the creation of a school as part of the mission of Sola Fide Lutheran Church. Their efforts were rewarded in August 1995 when the elementary school opened with two teachers and 19 students."¹²

Eighteen years after the church started out as a small exploratory congregation in northeast Atlanta, the congregation could certainly look back and see the many blessings God had showered on them. From fifty-seven baptized members in 1977 the congregation grew to four hundred forty-six in 1995.¹³ "The incredible growth of Sola Fide was a reflection of the Lord's blessings. Located in Gwinnett County, one of the fastest growing counties in the nation, Sola Fide's rate of growth

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 3.

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 3.

¹² *ibid*, p. 4.

¹³ -----, "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod," 1977, 1995. Cf. Appendix 2. The bar graph shows the Baptized and Communicant membership for Sola Fide from 1977-2005.

from 1980 to 1994 was 1.8 times greater than the county's (380% increase as compared to 160%)."¹⁴ While at one time they held services in a Kinder Care the congregation now enjoyed the blessing of their own property with four buildings on it.

As Sola Fide's membership flourished during the 1990s and with the school's enrollment increasing, it became obvious they again had to confront space issues.¹⁵ The only question now became 'how'? With four buildings on four acres options were limited. One member describes the challenge in this way:

I think that most of the congregation felt that we needed to expand the school and the sanctuary. The greatest need was to expand the school so that we could accommodate preschoolers, kindergarten and first through eighth grade. We probably could have gotten by with just an increase in the school building and not expand the church building. As we looked at various options of expanding the facilities the limitations on the site became apparent. As you know the location was excellent. However, there were several limitations: 1. The school building was not permitted for preschoolers. 2. We only had one access to a public highway and after the road was widened and a median installed access and egress were limited. 3. The property only had a size of four acres. 4. If the school and/or sanctuary were enlarged then the required parking, sedimentation ponds and septic system would not fit on the site.¹⁶

Another member adds, "Basically, we were landlocked and were at three (3) services in the sanctuary. We had no more room to add on buildings...Any additions would have to be added to existing facilities which would then require upgrade of the facilities and new building codes. Furthermore, we would have to increase paved parking spaces which would have basically paved the complete lot."¹⁷

Pursuit for Expansion Leads to Relocation

¹⁴ Brown, "The First Twenty Years," p. 1.

¹⁵ In the fall of 1985 Sola Fide began holding two worship services in the WEF unit to help alleviate spatial needs. Even after the dedication of their new sanctuary the second service continued. Brown, "The First Twenty Years," p. 2. During the mid 1990s Sola Fide would offer a third service to accommodate for larger worship attendance. -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

¹⁶ -----, Email interview by author, 7 October 2005.

¹⁷ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

It was stated earlier that late in 1993 an LRPC was formed. Considerations for the church's current and future space needs were addressed to see how this problem could be solved. Focus was given to expanding their current sanctuary and WEF unit.

Early on in 1994 a design architect was hired to draw up plans to expand the current sanctuary and fellowship hall. The conceptual design would move the back wall of the sanctuary back 30 feet, allowing for approximately 30 to 40 more seats in the sanctuary. The square footage of the fellowship hall would double in size – 1,400 square feet to approximately 3,000 square feet. With Gwinnett county regulations for parking, every piece of green grass would have required paving.¹⁸

The proposed design for expansion on the church's current facilities did not seem feasible. "For the \$600,000 dollars we would have spent, the return investment would not suit us well. The congregation recognized this too."¹⁹ Since the option for expansion of its current facilities would not work, Sola Fide looked into purchasing undeveloped land around the property. The congregation's property was surrounded by pastureland to the south, Georgia's famous kudzu to the west, and a McDonalds to the north.²⁰

Sola Fide went to the owner of the pastureland, Mrs. Alexander, to see if she would sell some of her property to the church. "The congregation had been waiting to purchase a portion of the property next door for several years to expand the church and school."²¹ Efforts to buy some of Mrs. Alexander's land were unsuccessful. One member recalls, "Our neighbor lady had turned over management of her property to her daughter, with the understanding that the property would not be sold until after her death. She wanted to be able to look out her window each morning and still see open space. She would not make any changes to allow us to purchase up to 5 acres."²²

¹⁸ -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. Appendix 5 and 6 for aerial pictures which show both the property of Sola Fide and the land surrounding the church's property.

²¹ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

²² -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

With Mrs. Alexander not willing to sell off any of her land the church looked at other options. One of Sola Fide's members owned a home and property that abutted Sola Fide's property to the west. "We looked at buying some property to the west of our site and then doing a property swap with the Sunrise Baptist Church. This would have increased our property size to be eligible for annexation and also given us access to Sugarloaf Parkway. [Johnson Hwy was changed from a two lane road to a four lane road. The name also was changed to Sugarloaf Parkway]"²³ The plans to try and purchase this land were unsuccessful for two reasons. The first reason was because "a veterinary clinic had already placed a contract on the land. The veterinary clinic had to seek rezoning for the property. When the zoning for the property was cleared by the county, the purchase went forward with the clinic."²⁴ If Sola Fide would have been able to purchase the member's property, they would have sought an acre for acre swap with Sunrise Baptist Church whose property line was next to Sola Fide's. This plan would not have been feasible for the Baptist Church. "The Baptist Church had already made plans for future expansion on their property. If they would have swapped land with us the land they would have received would not have worked well for the plans they had designed for a future building."²⁵

Sola Fide had looked into purchasing the undeveloped land around them, however, their pursuit turned up empty. "Efforts to acquire ten acres of open pasture to the south and later to seek land trade with Sunrise Baptist Church both proved by the last months of 1996 to be impossible."²⁶ With no possibility to purchase land around them, Sola Fide discussed an option to use the parsonage differently.

Sola Fide discussed moving the pastor off the property and using the parsonage for classroom space. "We did consider it for early childhood education. We found that we would not

²³ -----, Email interview by author, 7 October 2005.

²⁴ -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

²⁵ -----, Phone interview by author, 8 December 2005.

²⁶ Brown, "The First Twenty Years," p. 3.

have been able to use the basement of parsonage for early childhood education.”²⁷ If the parsonage could have served the school in this way, Sola Fide would have had to relocate the pastor off the property. “The cost of rebuilding [remodeling] the parsonage and relocating pastor and his family offsite would not have been cost efficient. In addition, this would not have solved the problem of three services because there would not be enough room to build a new sanctuary to accommodate service sizes desired.”²⁸

Still another option was discussed. At some point “there were a few who suggested starting a sister congregation.”²⁹ The congregation talked about this possibility, but “felt we needed a larger size congregation to develop programs we felt the community needed and/or wanted.”³⁰ While daughtering a congregation might have hampered the development of future programs the church was planning, the congregation also did not wish to separate. “The idea of starting a daughter congregation was not real popular at the time with many members because they enjoyed the fellowship with each other and did not want to break that apart. Many also enjoyed the different ministries that were being offered by a larger congregation. They would miss that in a start up congregation.”³¹ Furthermore, Sola Fide’s members were scattered all over town. It would have been difficult to find a nucleus in one location to start a daughter congregation.

Daughtering was ultimately determined not to be feasible due to the current geographic’s of our congregation which still is a problem today. We are in reality not set up as an old fashion neighborhood church as the majority of the members have drive times of up to 30 or more minutes and are not located in pockets that were conducive to daughtering. If this route was taken we would have had to daughter more than one congregation.³²

²⁷ -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

²⁸ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

²⁹ -----, Email interview by author, 3 October 2005.

³⁰ -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

³¹ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

³² -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

For nearly three years the LRPC carefully studied every option keeping in mind the question, “How do you get more land without moving?”³³ In the end none of these options were really viable or cost efficient. They still needed more space, but had not yet found a solution to their dilemma. What were they going to do? Discussion in 1996 turned toward locating the school offsite.³⁴ Sola Fide sought the help of member, Dee Ellen Cook, to locate property that might allow them to do this.

In one week she found three parcels within four miles of Sola Fide. One sold to another buyer on December 16. The other seven acre property would have had limited use because of terrain. The third on Webb Gin House Road was available for \$606,000 and the owner, a member of Sunrise Baptist Church, was willing to work with us.³⁵

At this time, anyone would have agreed that the price for these twenty-two acres was “a steal. The price was right and pushed us over the edge to move forward.”³⁶ When it may have seemed like all options were lost, God had a way of reminding his people that he was in control.

In a period of six weeks beginning in early December, Sola Fide moved from a “land locked” owner of four acres of land to approving the purchase of 22 acres of land on Webb Gin House Road a mile and a half from the current property....The Church Council acted to make an offer on the full 22 acres on December 16 contingent on the approval of the Congregation and assurance of financing. Financing of the property was assured by the Wisconsin Synod Board of Trustees. On January 12, [1997] the Congregation approved the purchase of the land under terms agreed to with the owner. On March 15, we closed on the property. More than one member of Sola Fide commented that the Lord’s hand was present and his blessings evident in the events of the previous four months.³⁷

After purchasing the twenty-two acres Sola Fide’s property was placed on the market for sale. It was not long before a buyer was found.

Around June of 1997 a verbal agreement was reached with Peace Presbyterian to purchase the property for the asking price of \$585,000. The target closing date was set for September, but did not occur until October of that year. The buyer delayed the closing so they could get a better deal on the funding. We, in return, leased the

³³ -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Brown, “The First Twenty Years,” p. 4.

³⁶ -----, Phone interview by author, 2 December 2005.

³⁷ Brown, “The First Twenty Years,” p. 4.

building for 30 months instead of 24, which turned out as a blessing for us as we needed the extra time.³⁸

With Sola Fide's property sold the congregation began making plans for their future home. The county required Sola Fide to submit a twenty year plan for the use of the land in order to obtain a permit to build on the property.³⁹ As Sola Fide looked toward the future what did they hope to see in twenty years on those twenty-two acres? "We tasked the long-range planning committee with no original guidelines other than to dream and dream big on how best to approach our current circumstances taking into account the L/R plans that were in place for over ten years."⁴⁰ Some of those plans that had been floating around included "a larger sanctuary and a desire to build a larger school with a gymnasium."⁴¹ Connected to a larger Christian Day School was the hope of one day starting a high school. This concept of a high school was first spoken about in 1995. "In the early months of 1995, Sola Fide attended a School of Outreach Seminar. At the Seminar we were encouraged to make short term and long term goals for Sola Fide's future. The concept of a high school was suggested for a long term goal. Others were suggested, and we brought them back to the congregation to start planting the seed for the future."⁴²

These goals and visions were what Sola Fide planned for the future.

These were now included in the twenty year plan when the twenty two acres were purchased. These were given to the architect who designed drawings for the land based on what we planned for the future – a larger sanctuary, a school building, and gymnasium. We basically said, 'This is what we would like to do' and the architect designed drawings for the property to include all of these concepts."⁴³

Also included in the future plans was a retirement community. "The plan for a retirement community evolved from a need to do something with a lower portion of the land where a lake/pond

³⁸ -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁴¹ -----, Phone interview by author, 7 December 2005.

⁴² -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

⁴³ -----, Phone interview by author, 7 December 2005.

is located. The desire was to utilize it somehow. Comments came from the retired generation in the church that it would be a blessing to have the opportunity to serve the Lord and have close connection to fellow Christians.”⁴⁴ What plans for the future did the congregation have? What would they hopefully build on the property? “The long range plan included the building of a school with half a gymnasium for worship. The school would be expanded as it grew. A sanctuary to seat 750 was also planned. A high school. And a retirement community.”⁴⁵ Certainly, this was “an extremely ambitious long range plan including a high school, a retirement facility and even a college. It was more of a vision for the next hundred years though. In the minds of most members they looked forward to a larger facility for worship fellowship and school. The high school and retirement facility were regularly talked about and committees were formed to start the planning.”⁴⁶

These plans were approved by the county when they were presented and the congregation could move forward.

The congregation broke ground in May of 1999, with the intent of being in its new facility in December of that year. When the architect drew up the plans, the contractor said that he would not be able to complete the job for the price he quoted, and backed out as a result. So, in September, the congregation went out seeking bids by contractors for the project. The bids came in and construction then started in early 2000.⁴⁷

Despite some obstacles along the way, the congregation dedicated its new facility at 1301 Webb Ginn House Road in Lawrenceville, in July of 2000. The 14,000 square foot facility included classroom for the school, offices, a worship area, kitchen, and storage space.⁴⁸

Emphasis on the Church’s Mission

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

⁴⁶ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

⁴⁷ -----, Phone interview by author, 1 December 2005.

⁴⁸ -----, Email interview by author, 11 November 2005. Cf. Appendices 7-9 for aerial pictures of the twenty-two acres of land Sola Fide purchased, the building they constructed, and interior pictures of the worship area and classroom.

The time and energy expended in the relocation process had potential to crowd out the reason why Sola Fide was engaged in a relocation process. Focus on “where are we going to move and what are we going to build” could have easily replaced “why are we are doing all of this.” Both sets of questions should always stand before God’s people as they relocate. It is the latter question; however, that needs the prominent position. “How is the congregation going to reach out to the lost in its new location?” This question was emphasized repeatedly to the members of Sola Fide during the relocation process. “The focus was always on reaching more of the lost in the community...Applications were made in sermons and Bible classes in regard to what it would take to reach more of the lost.”⁴⁹ The temptation, however, existed for a new building to be the silver bullet to reach more souls as one individual said. “I think the leadership had a pretty good outreach mindset. Looking back though, I think the idea that more programs and a bigger facility were looked at as the silver bullet to growth. The congregation's ministry overshadowed the individual's responsibilities to minister to our family and neighbor.”⁵⁰ On this side of heaven that will always be a struggle. The temptation would easily disappear if the devil would not tempt people to think such thoughts.

Challenges from the Relocation

Anyone who asks the question, “Does relocation work?” must not expect an immediate answer. A proper answer might be ‘yes.’ The gospel ministry at Sola Fide continued as the message of Jesus Christ was proclaimed. Whether or not relocation was the best move will not be fully

⁴⁹ -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

⁵⁰ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005. In a follow-up conversation with this individual he further explained his comment. “If I were to do anything differently, I would have spent more time, bringing that point out. The desire in this entire process was never to lose the focus on you sharing Jesus with your neighbor. At the same time, however, congregational ministry was a “we” project. As a congregation we have to talk together as we go forward together. Much of the congregation's ministry emphasized what “we” are committed to doing, and we had to have everyone together. At the same time, though, that mentality has to go hand and hand, side by side, with my individual responsibility to carry God's work out. It's always easier to look back and see what we could have done better but I'm convinced that the direction, ideas, and the way we did proceed was used by the Lord.” -----, Phone interview by author, 2 December 2005.

known for decades or even generations. One must recognize challenges do not suddenly disappear because a congregation relocated or expanded its facilities.

Five years have passed since Sola Fide relocated to their new home. Over those five years God has allowed the church to carry out ministry at their new location with a new facility. The congregation, however, has faced some challenges. “With the normal challenges one has when one moves into a brand new home compounded greatly due to the relocation and the realization that there was more work, physically & financially, we were tested as a congregation.”⁵¹

Some of the challenges Sola Fide faced were in their newly constructed facility. The classrooms in the school portion of the building did not provide the needed space for the school’s increasing enrollment. “We did not build as much as we needed only as much as the congregation thought they could afford. Within one year we had to purchase portable classrooms. Our preschool had grown so much it forced the upper grades into portables.”⁵² Sola Fide Lutheran School’s enrollment continued to increase after the relocation, but in 2002 the enrollment dropped significantly and has fluctuated since.⁵³

Challenges were not only evident in the school’s facility, but also the church’s worship area. Currently, worship is held in a multipurpose room which is half of a proposed gymnasium. “The actual plan was to double the current multipurpose room for a full sized high school gymnasium.”⁵⁴ Challenges with this space were soon evident. “The multi use building presented space challenges immediately - no narthex to keep noise out of sanctuary - constant take down and set up for every activity.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁵² -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005. “The preschool, Little Lambs, was started in the fall of 2000.” -----, Phone interview by author, 4 December 2005.

⁵³ -----, “Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” 2000-2004. Cf. Appendix 4. The bar graph shows the school’s enrollment from 1995-2004.

⁵⁴ -----, Phone interview by author, 4 December 2005.

⁵⁵ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

While the physical structure built on the property presented its challenges, financial ones also occurred. The challenge to pay off the mortgage on twenty-two acres of land and a 14,000 square foot building stood before the congregation.⁵⁶ One individual stated the financial challenge this way, “The ‘giving fire’ was slowing dying out regarding the building fund. Prior to the move we were averaging 100K plus over and above gifts per year, if my memory serves me correctly, and when the mortgage was a part of the regular budget; something was lost.”⁵⁷ September 11th and the subsequent events that followed did not help either. “I wish I could respond that with the Lord’s blessings we as a congregation rose to the occasion and have moved forward. Unfortunately, the economy took a dive.”⁵⁸ Also contributing to the financial challenges was membership loss as “some moved due to job relocations or search for work.”⁵⁹ Some other members also joined “other WELS churches, or other denominations...the financial support has not grown to meet the present or future needs for expansion, or building the sanctuary, or enlarging the school.”⁶⁰ Many factors contributed to the financial challenges Sola Fide faced and still faces. As one member stated, “Bottom line, the Lord allowed obstacles to be put before us and we stagnated as a congregation trying to handle the demands of the ministries at Sola Fide as well as the financial load of the land/buildings. So our initial plans/dreams/goals were met but the growth of our ministries has not yet materialized.”⁶¹

It would be easy for the members of Sola Fide to dwell on the challenges before them: “Unanimity on recasting the vision, debt which is handcuffing ministry, staffing needs that can't be filled, divided opinions on land use, paralysis on moving forward with what we have because of not

⁵⁶ The financial costs for purchase of the land, construction of the facility, and purchase of the modular unit are as follows: “\$606,000 plus \$25,422 closing costs for a total cost of \$631,422; Building Costs- \$1,593,723; Modular Unit Cost- \$68,947.” -----, Email interview by author, 11 November 2005.

⁵⁷ -----, Email interview by author, 2 November 2005.

⁵⁸ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ -----, Email interview by author, 3 October 2005.

⁶¹ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

knowing if we're going to keep it; a building which fit into an old vision but doesn't really fit the current circumstances.”⁶² Aware of their challenges the leadership continues to plan for the future. “The long-range planning committee is still active and working with faithful and prayerful consideration of where the Lord will lead us as a congregation.”⁶³ As they move forward, learning from the past, they continue to refine and restructure their future plans and goals as a congregation.

We have needed to get away from the mega church vision and get back to the realities of coming together more closely as fellow members and working toward the numerical growth that God gives. We have moved back toward contentment with what we have and not worry about what the old vision called for. In these areas, I believe the challenges we've faced have moved us back to the things that people recognize are important and necessary for ministry - nurture, fellowship and outreach. Those were all there before, but they're more in focus now.⁶⁴

When a congregation faces challenges after any decision they might make it becomes easy to look only at the challenges. Yet, God's people can look at what he allows them to encounter as a blessing. He uses the challenges his people face to draw them closer to himself both as individuals and as a congregation.

Blessings from the Relocation

When members of God's church here on earth carry out the work he has entrusted to them they can rightfully anticipate his blessings on their labors. Sola Fide experienced God's blessings after their relocation. While one of the challenges stated before revealed that Sola Fide suffered membership loss, statistics show that their membership increased. Between 2000 and 2001 twenty-three members joined Sola Fide.⁶⁵ “The new location peaked the interest of prospects and we gained new families immediately. The congregation had good participation through out the process and

⁶² -----, Email interview by author, 14 September 2004. In a follow-up conversation the individuals states, “The congregation has been approached by a developer who would like to purchase parts of Sola Fide's land for development.” -----, Phone interview by author, 4 December 2005.

⁶³ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁶⁴ -----, Email interview by author, 14 September 2005.

⁶⁵ -----, “Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” 2000, 2001. Cf. Appendix

they looked forward to new opportunities for fellowship and worship.”⁶⁶ Sola Fide’s membership has increased over the past five years. Truly this is a blessing from the Lord.

Another blessing was the space the new facility provided. One individual comments from his perspective, “We had an expanded worship facility, a large multi-purpose room that provided lots of options for programs, and more spacious classrooms. There was an especially larger facility for preschool and ladies’ Bible study.”⁶⁷ The facility brought the added space Sola Fide needed and allowed the congregation to cater to the needs of the community. “Initially the blessings were great that the Lord our God provided for us to realize a start on the long-range plans/dreams to service our community. We were blessed with a great sense of fulfillment of the opportunity to service the community with a facility/property that allows us to do things on site that we never had the space or facilities to do before.”⁶⁸

Numerous opportunities for outreach work surround Sola Fide as many families are moving in to the immediate area. “Booming housing construction in the area spoke and still speaks toward an ability to reach many people in the area.”⁶⁹ With more families moving into the area there exists potential for the school’s enrollment to increase. The school could be “a school and preschool that would seem to fill a need for Christian education where others were rather busy and full.”⁷⁰

The Lord also used the relocation to serve as a blessing for the members of Sola Fide.

Members had a new sense of purpose, initial enthusiasm about a new place and a number of people committed to supporting it. Many had the feeling that this was just what was needed, and certainly in a number of ways it was – adequate space, property value much higher than when purchased, possibly 500% to 600%. We’re a little closer to subdivisions than we used to be and neighborhood families have hooked up with the preschool.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

⁶⁷ -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

⁶⁸ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁶⁹ -----, Email interview by author, 14 September 2005.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

All of these blessings are reasons to rejoice and serve as a reminder that it is God alone who showers blessings upon his people.

Considerations for others to think about

God willing, my labors to describe the rationale and process of Sola Fide's relocation will benefit the reader of this paper. Faced with a desire to grow and expand its ministry Sola Fide's leaders and members had to ask and answer difficult questions before they decided to relocate. Those congregations who find themselves contemplating relocation must ask and answer some of the same questions. What possibilities exist to continue gospel ministry at our present location with an increasing membership and decreasing space? What do we envision our congregation to look like in five, ten, or twenty years? How can we continually keep the church's mission at the forefront during this entire process? No decision is easy. No decision happens with the flip of a coin. No decision pleases everybody. No decision may necessarily produce the results you planned. Decisions still have to be made.

In gathering information on Sola Fide's relocation and then writing about it, certain questions and conclusions have come to mind that I feel are worthwhile to share. I am aware that there is some information about Sola Fide's relocation that I do not know. Individuals who read the following may not agree with the questions I raise or the conclusions have drawn. I gladly understand and respect that.

Do your homework!

Sola Fide's relocation process shows evidence that the LRPC and leaders studied, expansively, all options to purchase the undeveloped land around the church before they decided to relocate. These individuals meticulously studied every option that presented itself to see if it would allow the congregation the ability to carry out their future plans. This task is of primary importance. Leaders and the congregation as a whole need to do their homework before decisions are made.

What are the reasons for relocating and implications that may follow?

There are a couple of questions a congregation would do well to consider here. “Is your congregation relocating because the mission field is not where you are at? Are you relocating because your growth has increased, and expansion of your current facilities will only serve as a band-aid fix?” The latter question is a legitimate reason to relocate, but is not always *the* reason to do so. Maybe thought could be given to daughtering a congregation in that scenario. If relocation is pursued, how will this affect you congregation’s identity in the community? If your congregation has been located in a certain spot for a number of years, God willing, you have built an identity in the community. Many individuals, who would drive past Sola Fide, could identify it as the church that sat on top of the hill with the large and beautiful stained glass window in the front of the sanctuary. Later, a member could say to someone asking for directions to the church, “We are located next to the McDonalds at the intersection of Scenic Highway and Sargarloaf Parkway.” Hopefully people could locate it with these obvious landmarks. If you find yourself having to relocate how will identify yourself in the community at your new location? Such a question must be asked.

What implications will your relocation have on your members?

A church’s relocation does not just impact the congregation’s identity in the community. The members of your congregation may also be affected. Ask yourself the following questions. “If we relocate, how does this affect the members who are already traveling thirty minutes to church? Will their travel time increase? Will their travel time decrease? Will this move decrease member participation in ministry because of travel time?” While these questions have their place, they are not the number *one* reason not to relocate. If congregational members are committed to the church’s mission of gathering the lost, they will make concessions. I recognize this is easier said than done!

Planning for the future needs congregational involvement and support

As a congregation makes plans for its future ministries, they might dream a big dream. The pastor and congregation must wrestle with the question “Where are we headed and how are we going to get there?” The plans that evolve from these questions must come from the congregation and find support from the congregation too. The ministry is not just one person’s work, but the whole congregation’s. If plans are to be successful the congregation must agree that this is where they want to go in five, ten, or twenty years.

When planning takes place it is also important to remember there are three different categories members fall into. Some desire to take a leap of faith and move forward with a plan while saying to themselves, “Just do it.” Others might proceed with extreme caution. These people might ask, “Is there any possibility of moving forward, but with mild changes?” The last group of people might not have a strong feeling and need encouragement in making their decision. How do you plan for the future with members of your congregation falling into each of these categories? How are you going to achieve congregation support and move forward with the plan? Remember too, the congregation has to support the plans financially. These are questions the pastor and leaders must consider. How you answer them is the question you must wrestle with.

How big a dream do you dream?

It is absolutely necessary to make goals and set a vision, if you will, for the congregation’s future ministry. The only question is, “How big?” I wrestled with this question as I wrote the paper. The dream you dream is not set in stone, but just a dream. When I read the vision for Sola Fide’s twenty year plan I will admit I was a bit skeptical – a sanctuary that would seat 750, a high school, and a retirement community. These seemed to me like very idealistic goals, but not that realistic. I asked myself, “Can a congregation’s dream become too big there is no possibility for it to come to fruition?” If I said ‘yes’ to that question I would be labeled as too much of a realist – one who plans simple goals that will most likely succeed. If I said ‘no’ to that question then I would be labeled a

very good optimist – one who thinks no matter how big the dream trust God to bless it. So I find myself stuck between a rock and a hard place. Certainly we cannot play God and see into the future or program the Holy Spirit to bring in the numbers of people we want. Yet, planning for the future is necessary. It requires some sort of dreaming, but I would also suggest it requires a bit of realism too.

What are your plans? Are they big dreams for the future or smaller ones? As you plan for twenty years from now, do not forget in order to arrive at that plan you must also plan for tomorrow. What goals are you setting with the people you have now to carry out ministry over the next year? These too are important questions.

Be flexible!

As man attempts to make plans for the future, it is fitting to remember the words of Solomon, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). Solomon is not saying that every plan proposed by man will fail, but it is God who determines the steps he takes in attempting to reach his goals. This truth applies to congregations. As God’s people plan for the future they can look back and rejoice in the blessings God has given to them. They can also rejoice that he has provided for them a need to plan for the future and envision where the congregation is headed. Those plans may or may not include relocation. Now matter what plan is proposed, God’s people do well to remember that though they plan, God may allow opportunities to arise where the original plans need refinement. Consider Sola Fide after their relocation. The financial challenges, membership changes, fluctuating enrollment in the school, and other reasons have caused them to refine and tweak their original twenty year plan. This is a reality of the present situation they face, and they have had to adjust their plans.

Any congregation who is looking at their future plans would benefit from asking, “Has the Lord allowed us to take steps toward achieving our plans? Has he led us to take different steps than

we initially planned? Are there needs that have risen among our people and in our community that necessitate attention? Are we willing to refine and tweak our plans?" Flexibility is needed. With the passing of time you may find that your original plans need to change. Are you willing to exercise flexibility? Is your congregation?

Keep the Church's Mission at the Forefront!

Communication is a vital link between leaders and members of a congregation, especially as they move forward in a relocation process. Without constant communication confusion arises. People are left out of the loop. Not everyone is on the same page. The plans for the future are clear to some, but not to all. Communication is an important part of making such a process run smoothly. While it is necessary to keep members informed with land purchase updates, building designs, or construction updates, it is of greatest importance to communicate continually the reason why all of this is happening. Very easily the reason why the church is doing this can become lost in the pressing needs for land, building designs, and even what color carpet will be chosen.

Eagerness and anticipation naturally rise in member's minds when they see advancement in the relocation process – land acquisition, building designs, a church or school being constructed. During the entire process it is necessary for the pastor as the spiritual leader of the congregation to continually focus members on the reason why the church is doing this. I have heard it said that a pastor has to be a visionary. He has to dream dreams and envision visions for a congregation. While some might agree with that thought I believe the pastor already has a more important responsibility to the congregation. It is keeping Law and Gospel before God's people. It is showing them their sin and need for a Savior who offers forgiveness. It is showing them how this relocation will serve as a means for the message of Jesus to be proclaimed. This continual focus and encouragement comes through applications in sermons, Bible Classes, devotions before board and congregational meetings, and conversations with members. Without this encouragement to remain

focused on the reason why, the planners have planned in vain. The laborers have labored in vain. Keep before God's people the reason why you are relocating, but also rejoice with them in the many blessings God brings to his people in the entire process – land acquisition, a new facility for worship, a new school building. Let these tools serve as a place to equip God's people with the beautiful gospel message that they might depart from them with the message of Jesus to share with others.

Further thoughts...

In my email interviews, the last question I asked was this: "What further insights would you share with a pastor whose congregation is considering the relocation of their church?" Below are a variety of insights each individual shared.

- **For the pastor who leads God's people forward in the relocation process...**

He needs to be thoroughly sold on the idea and confident this is the direction God wants the congregation to go (as far as that is humanly possible with a spirit of discernment). Always look at how this will enable you to reach more of the lost. Examine your motives so that you are sure relocation is the best way to reach the lost not simply more convenient or comfortable or safe for the congregation.⁷²

- **Leading God's people forward needs to be centered around the Means of Grace...**

I have learned that the mission of the church can not be assumed. Reminding ourselves that the ministry all revolves around the means of grace is key. It is so easy to become focused on "We need more money to build bigger buildings for more members so we can gather more money." The vicious cycle turns the church into a club or business trying to survive. When we remember that it's Jesus' Church and His Ministry we receive the comfort and empowerment to do his work. We pray, "Your will be done!" We work like everything depends on us but know and trust that it truly depends on the Lord. Being practical and realistic must not conflict with faith and generosity. The attitude of humility described in Philippians 2 and James 4:13-16 are helpful reminders.⁷³

- **A reminder that relocation is not the end, but just the beginning...**

As a congregation it was very easy for everyone to sit back and say OK we made it now which was unfortunately our sinful human nature kicking in. The devil never takes a holiday and always looks for ways to sow discontent. The end result is

⁷² -----, Email interview by author, 25 September 2005.

⁷³ -----, Email interview by author, 27 September 2005.

always obstacles to our faith and the testing of our faith. We were not different than most congregations who have blessings bestowed upon them only to find that our sinful natures don't always allow us to reap the full extent of those blessings. In summary, it is my opinion that the Lord blessed us every step of the way in our relocation and initial build. One could venture that as we, Sola Fide, became complacent and lost sight of the Lords blessing bestowed upon us with the relocation and initial build, the L/R plans and realistic goals merged. In fact, we can easily state that the Lord our God has tested Sola Fide and continues to test our faith and resolve to this day. Ultimately, the Lord has a plan for Sola Fide that may or may not continue to utilize our land/facilities. Ultimately through continued prayerful considerations, thanks and praise for the multiple of blessings the Lord had bestowed upon us, prayerful consideration for guidance and strength, the Lord's desires will ultimately be revealed and implemented as God's will, not ours, will be done for the advancement of HIS kingdom and the salvation of all our souls.⁷⁴

- **Properly prepare your future plans...**

In summation any long range plan needs to have the spiritual, physical and financial requirements fully developed so that the how, what, when and where questions can be answered.⁷⁵

Another person suggests...

Plan your building program around the ministry needs and within a financial framework your congregation is committed to handle.⁷⁶

- **Build a building that will serve the needs you have...**

Unless you have compelling reasons to do so, don't build a school building that accommodates a church and think that the church will be built soon afterwards. Things change. Get more money up front before taking on a huge amount of debt. If you do take on a large debt, make sure it's the facility that will serve you well for a long time, not just what is pressing at the moment.⁷⁷

- **Be patient...**

Set the beginning date and do not be afraid to push back the start if "All Ducks are Not in a Row". Waiting another year or two may be just what is needed for the congregation to get the facilities that are needed to conduct the ministry efforts in the given location.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ -----, Email interview by author, 29 September 2005.

⁷⁵ -----, Email interview by author, 7 October 2005

⁷⁶ -----, Email interview by author, 2 November 2005

⁷⁷ -----, Email interview by author, 14 September 2005.

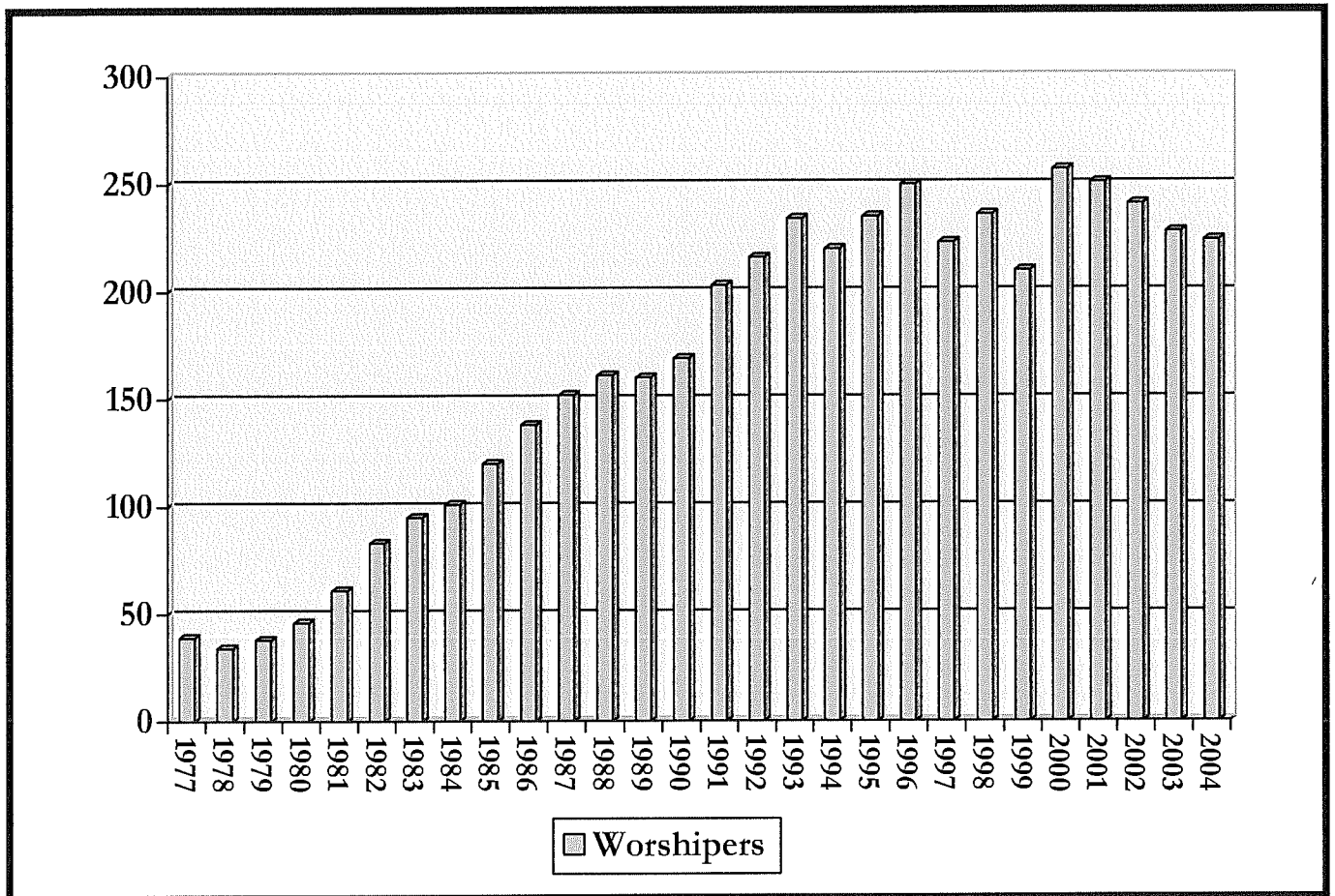
⁷⁸ -----, Email interview by author, 2 November 2005.

Conclusion

Relocation is not a quick or easy decision to make. Sola Fide's relocation supports this truth. Other congregations who are facing the decision whether or not to relocate may or may not choose this option. No matter what decision congregations make they can confidently move forward with the assurance that the Lord will bless their ministry efforts. God's blessings will continue to extend from his gracious hand. With thankful hearts may God's people pray as Solomon at the dedication of the temple, "May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us" (1 Kings 8:57). God grant to all congregations his saving grace that unites them, focuses them, and motivates them in their mission.

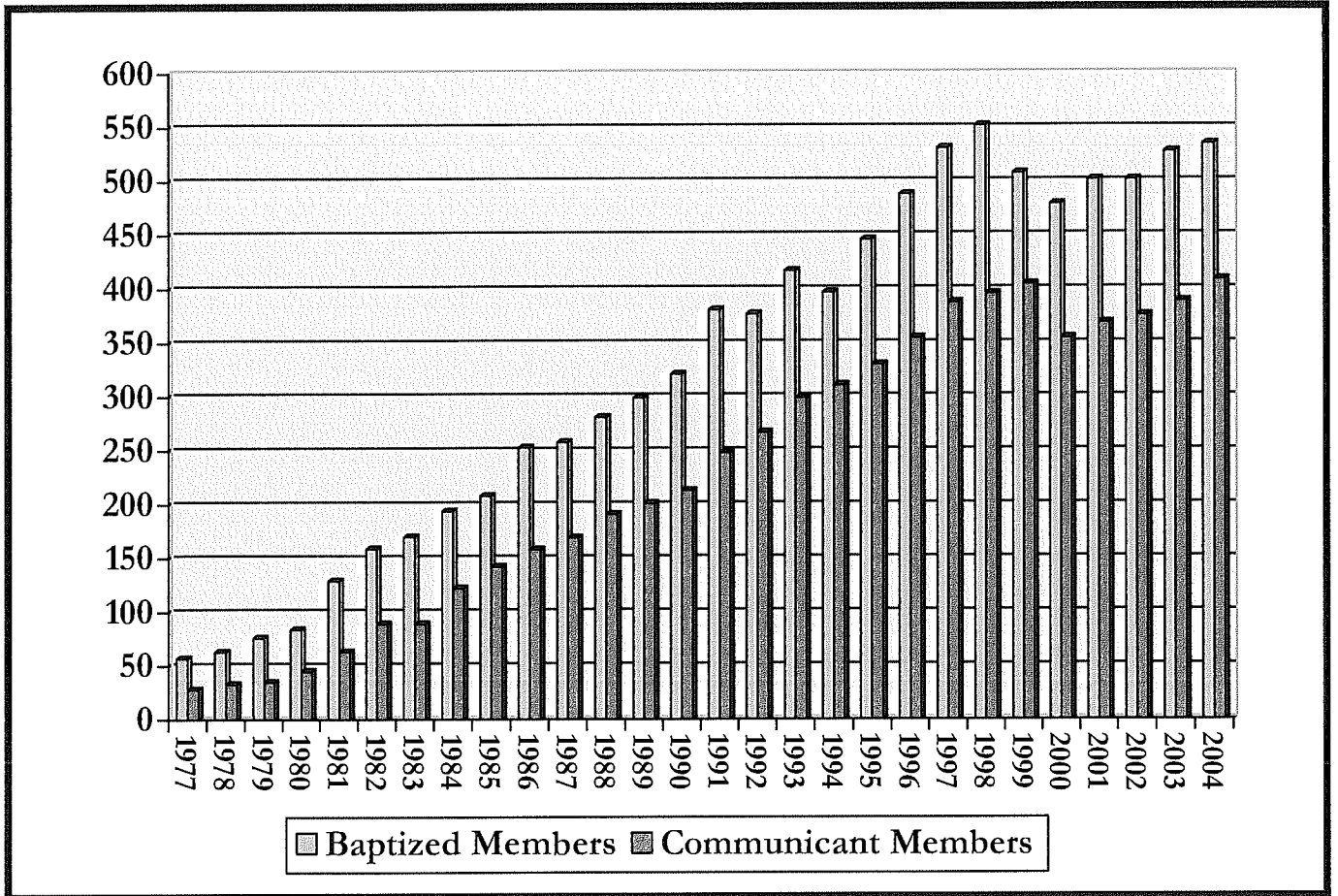
Soli Deo Gloria!

**Sola Fide Lutheran Church
Average Sunday Worship Attendance
1977-2004**



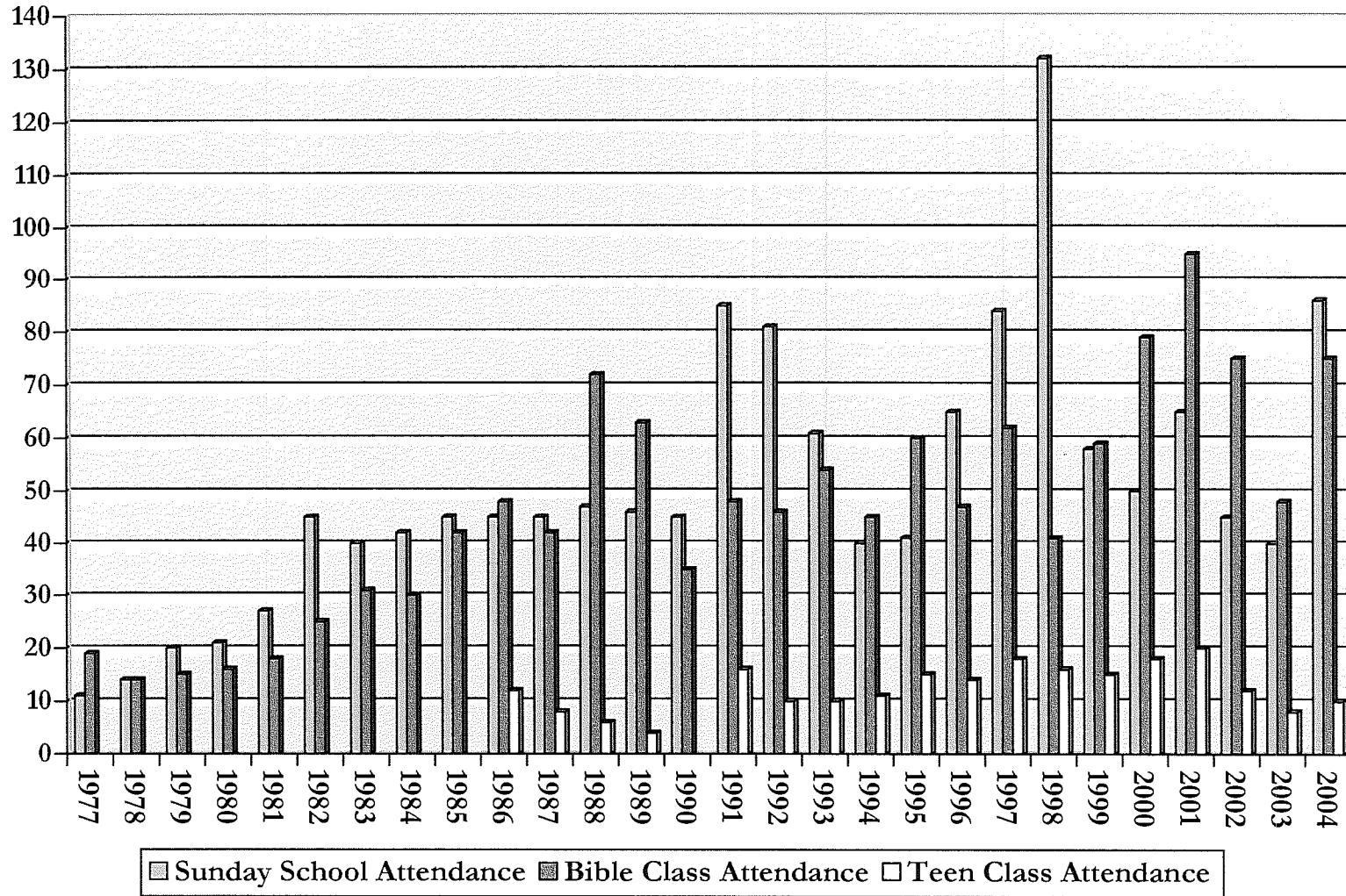
Statistics taken from the "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod" for the years from 1977-2004.

Sola Fide Lutheran Church Baptized and Communicant Membership 1977-2004



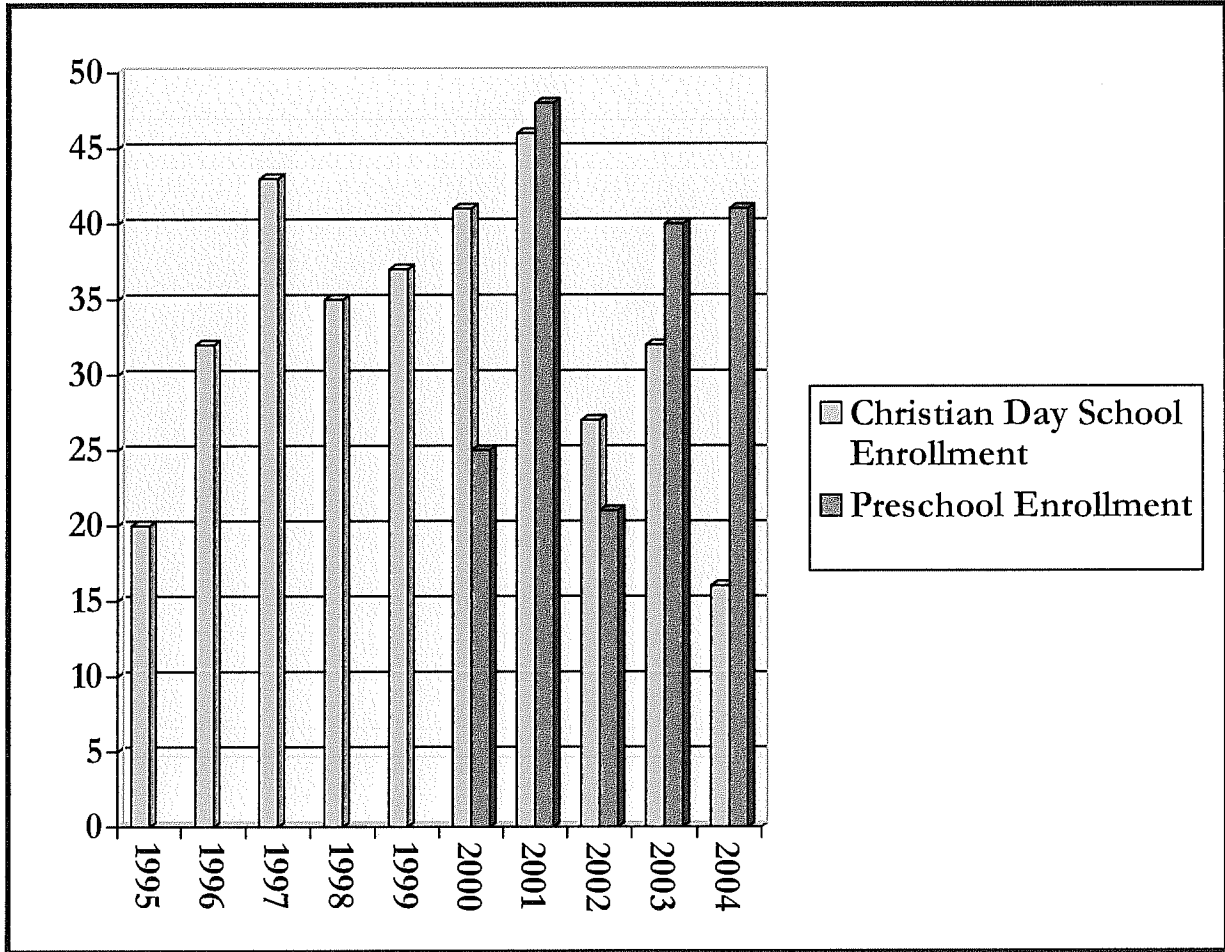
Statistics taken from the "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod" for the years from 1977-2004.

Sola Fide Lutheran Church Bible Class and Sunday School Statistics 1977-2004



Statistics taken from the "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod" for the years from 1977-2004.

Sola Fide Lutheran School and Preschool
1995-2004



Statistics taken from the "Statistical Yearbook for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod" for the years from 1977-2004.

**Aerial View of Sola Fide Lutheran Church
875 Scenic Highway**

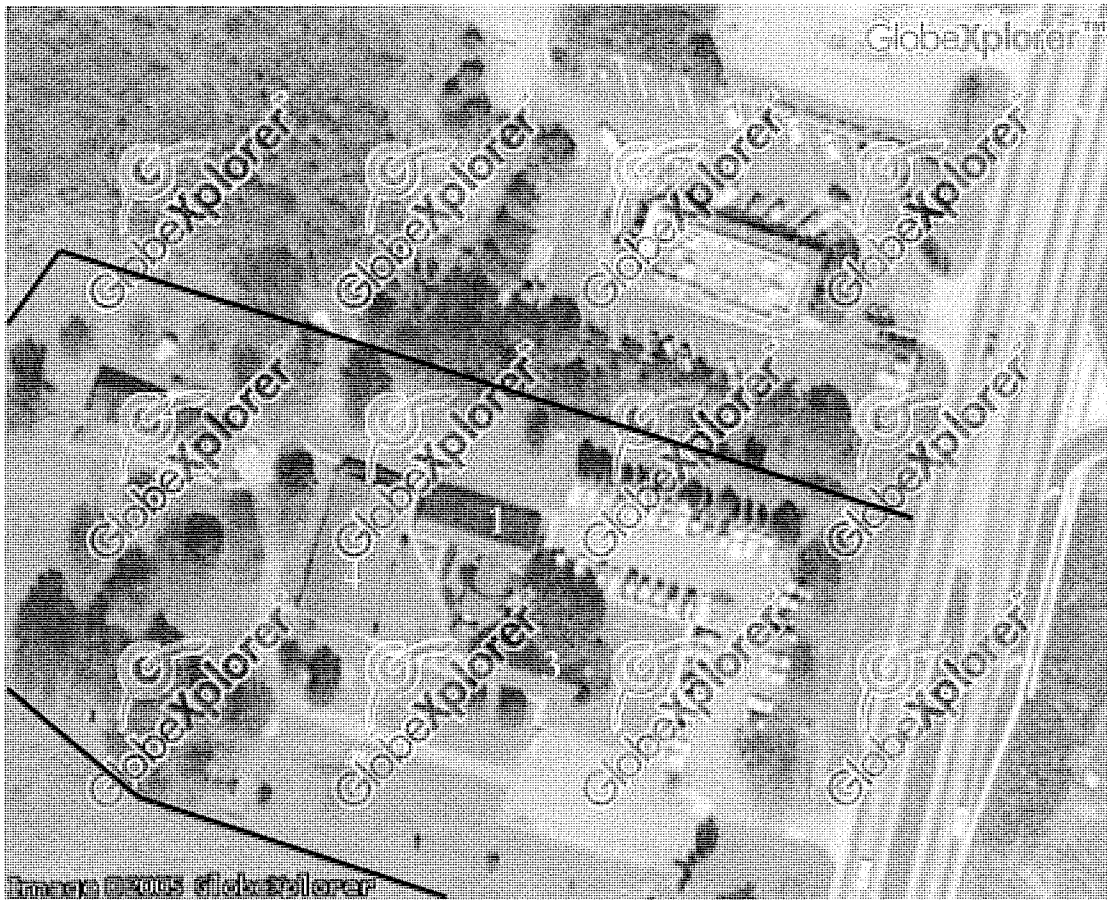


Image take from www.imageatlas.globexplorer.com

The black lines show approximately the four acres of property that belonged to Sola Fide. The buildings are labeled according to number and are in the order in which they were built.

1. WEF Unit – Worship, Education, Fellowship Building. (Dedicated in 1981)
2. Parsonage (Constructed in 1984)
3. Sanctuary (Dedicated in 1986)
4. Family Life Center (Dedicated in 1990)

**Aerial View of Sola Fide Lutheran Church and Surrounding Land
875 Scenic Highway**



Image take from www.imageatlas.globexplorer.com

The numbered areas represent the property surrounding Sola Fide Lutheran Church.

1. Sola Fide Lutheran Church
2. McDonalds
3. Field to the west of Sola Fide property
4. Pastureland to the south of Sola Fide Property
5. Sunrise Baptist Church

**Aerial View of Sola Fide Lutheran Church
1307 Webb Gin House Road**



Image take from www.imageatlas.globexplorer.com

The building in the center is Sola Fide's facility that was constructed in 2000. It is divided into two sections.

1. Multipurpose room used for worship services and fellowship events
2. School portion of the building
3. Modular unit

Aerial View of Sola Fide Lutheran Church's New Property and the Surrounding Land

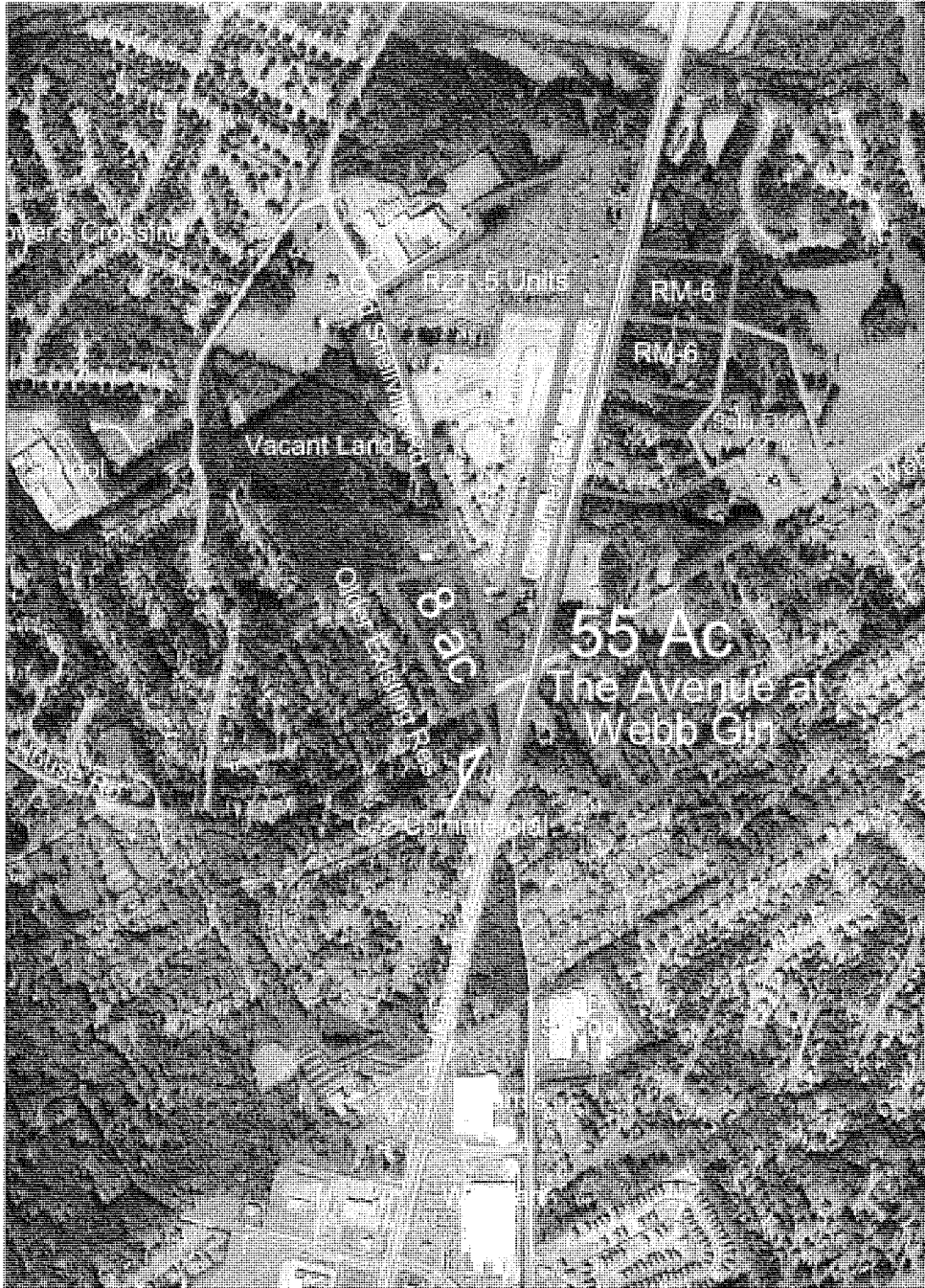


Photo Courtesy of Sola Fide Lutheran Church. Provided to them by Developer Jay Clower.

Interior Pictures of the Worship Area and School



Figure 1: View from the balcony looking down into the worship area



Figure 3: View from the back of the worship area looking toward the front

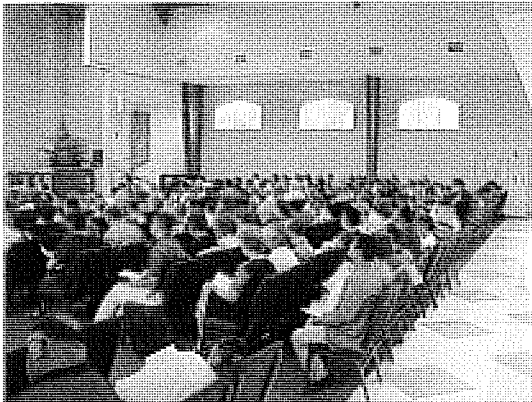


Figure 2: View of the worship area as you enter from the side door of the building.



Figure 4: Fellowship in the worship area

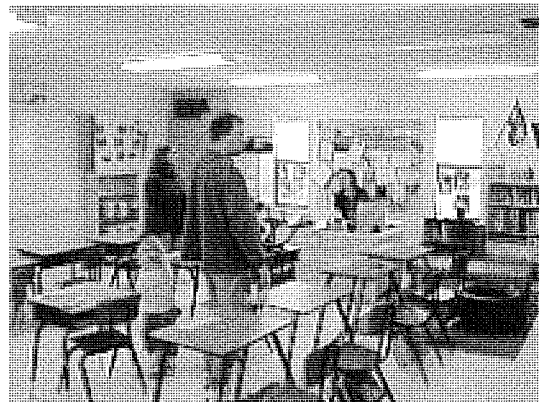


Figure 5: View of one of the classrooms

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