

GRACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH:
A Congregation's Response to a Changing Community

Milwaukee, WI.

Church History - Prof. Frederick
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Exactly One-hundred forty-two years ago today, on May 13, 1849 the congregation of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church, Milwaukee was first organized under the leadership of Pastor Johannes Muehlhauser (1849 - 1867). It is interesting to trace the history of one of the founding congregations of the Wisconsin Synod. It is of particular interest to see how this congregation has reached out to the community as it has changed over the years. One would tend to think that for one of the oldest congregations, one which was founded by German-speaking immigrants, the tendency to stay to themselves would have been greater and outreach to the community would have been minimal. For one who knows the current pastor, James Huebner, and the congregation's present views on evangelism and outreach, one wonders what kind of changes in philosophy and practice occurred at Grace and when.

First of all, it should be noted that there were efforts on the part of Pastor Muehlhauser to reach out to the community, although admittedly they were few. The early years at Grace were years of relative poverty for it's members. Even so, they demonstrated a great zeal for maintaining a Christian school. It was this school that served as the congregation's foremost mission tool. The Muehlhauser home was even used to expand the school when Muehlhauser moved. Muehlhauser was also instrumental in founding Lutheran Hospital in Milwaukee as a result of his desire to reach out to the community on the medical level. So it is not that the early congregation was opposed to reaching out to those

around them with the gospel as many stereotype the "Old German Lutherans." There were not, however, evangelism committees, canvassing of the neighborhoods and many of the outreach tools that we employ today.

From 1868 - 1906 Pastor Theodore Jaekel was the shepherd of the Grace flock. Under pastor Jaekel Grace grew, but not because of community efforts. There was a great influx of German immigrants which brought many souls to the congregation. Because the congregation was full of strong Christian families from the area there were no real efforts to evangelize. Under pastor Jaekel the present church building was constructed as well as a three story school for the congregation. This school was evidently still the only mission tool of the congregation.

A change in the community occurred in the years immediately following the turn of the century. In the years when Pastor Carl Gausewitz served at Grace (1906-1927) the neighborhood underwent wholesale changes. The past had seen many large homes to the east of the church. These were turned into tenements and rooming houses. Many of the single family homes where members lived diminished. Membership at Grace began to scatter as the population became more transient. As these changes occurred a financial strain was put upon the congregation. The people, however, didn't allow the lack of money hinder their love for their church as they found the resources to redecorate the church and improve the organ and choir loft for the 75th anniversary in 1924. One positive

change which may have helped the proclamation of the Word in that community was the change in worship language from German to English in 1910.

The fourth pastor, William Sauer, served from 1928 - 1952. The same changes in the area continued and the neighborhood declined. As a result, many families of the congregation moved to other areas of the city. The depression of the early 1930's also affected the congregation as the school was forced to close even though there were still many children at Grace. The church's main instrument of outreach was now closed.

The 1940's and 1950's saw the development of the suburbs, like Brown Deer, West Allis and others, which began to draw members away from the area. The suburban magnet was so strong that several downtown and inner city churches abandoned their property and relocated in these suburbs. The time had come for Grace to decide what they would do. Would it be in their best interest to relocate as so many others had? If they would elect to stay it must be a total commitment because the church building was now fifty years old and in need of repairs. Pastor Elton Huebner (1952 - 1961) and his congregation opted to remain downtown through these turbulent times and again Grace found the resources to redecorate and reconstruct their place of worship.

During this time the downtown area was primarily composed of blue collar workers. The wealthy families were now gone. This "Rust Belt Magnet" (named for the great number of

factories in the Milwaukee area) attracted many people from the South including a significant number of black families. Milwaukee soon became a segregated city. White families would attend church in the outlying areas and black families would comprise the downtown congregations. If Grace was to remain and thrive as a congregation it would have to take some long strides by way of outreach to this new community. For the first time in its history some real efforts were made along these lines. Never before had this congregation done any sort of canvassing of the neighborhood but it began during this time. This commitment on the part of the members and their willingness to change to meet the changing community is to be admired.

The congregation continued along this path into the 1960's. During these years the Lord blessed the work of his people tremendously as they made attempts to reach this new community's needs. As was mentioned earlier, very few people lived in the immediate area, but those who did needed to be reached. Pastor Elmer Mahnke served Grace at this time (1962 - 1975). Pastor Mahnke brought in students from the Seminary to help out with canvassing the area and attended seminars on cross-cultural ministry. At this time this section of downtown Milwaukee was anticipated to be a transcultural area. It was hoped that the black segment of the population would be ripe for the harvest and that Grace would be the congregation to serve these people. This never came to fruition, however, as black families looked to join churches closer to the core of the city.

During Pastor Mahnke's years at Grace the school building was torn down (1969) and a two level parish center was created on the site. This parish center would become instrumental in the outreach of Grace in the coming years.

Another effort in outreach was carried on in the area which formerly held tenement housing. New apartments, condominiums and campus space invaded this territory. With these changes came a different people. Soon the area around Broadway and Juneau was filled with students from the universities and business people joined the elderly population. Suddenly there was a great number of people within walking distance of the church. Into this atmosphere stepped Pastor Peter Kruschel (1976 - 1982). The young Pastor began to tap the campuses for prospective members. A good number of students from the Milwaukee School of Engineering, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee and Marquette University soon made Grace their church. This appeared to be a big step in the right congregation. Although the work of Pastor Kruschel in bringing the Word to these young people was a great blessing for those people and for God's family, it had a downside for Grace congregation. The problem was that many of these college students would marry, have children and then move away to the outlying areas of Milwaukee. Although some continued to make Grace their church home many elected not to make the journey downtown on Sunday mornings.

As the congregation noticed this trend they began to look for ways to retain these members. One of the major factors for many of these young couples in deciding to move away was that there was no school for their children to attend. Grace began to look into building a school in 1979 - 1980 as a way to meet the needs of those in the immediate area. Unfortunately efforts were stalled for three primary reasons: (1) There was no property to build on, (2) there were not yet enough children to begin a school, and (3) the families with small children lived too far away and busing would have been another problem altogether.

With all the emphasis on researching the school and retaining members who were moving away there was little community response to the few efforts that were made by Grace.

In July of 1982 the present pastor, James Huebner, came to serve the congregation. As Huebner described his first three years at Grace he says that he spent his time "getting to know the people" so outreach again was at a minimum. There were more changes in the neighborhood also. In August 1982 the Grand Avenue Mall opened up just blocks away bringing in a whole new group of consumers and many more business people. The years 1982 - 1986 were the beginnings of the development stages in downtown living. As the downtown area was seeing incredible growth, Grace was experiencing a decline in membership year after year. The young people were still moving on, the elderly were dying and there was no real evangelism practiced by the congregation.

Huebner recalls that in March 1985 he began to concentrate his thoughts on where this congregation's future might lie. Just over a year later, in June of 1986, he was elected to the position of District Coordinator of the Synod's Evangelism Committee. As Pastor Huebner tells it, he never knew much about evangelism before this time so, for the most part, this was all new to him. This election seemed to be the springboard for the congregation. Huebner started by talking to the leaders of the congregation in order to plant seeds of an evangelism mind-set in as many people as possible. All the while he was spending time with those whom he knew were knowledgeable and gifted in the way of outreach.

One of the most important things for Grace was the development of a "Mission Statement" for the congregation. This came as a result of a bible study on outreach in the spring of 1987.

There were some major decisions to be made by the congregation in regard to the church's mission. It would have been feasible to reach out to a particular part of the community, that is the "street people." This idea was rejected for a number of reasons. First of all, Grace did not have the financial resources or the personnel to staff a clothing and food pantry for the downtown area's needy people. Secondly, many of these people came from across the river seeking handouts and so really weren't part of the immediate community. Finally, there were other agencies in the area to provide that type of assistance.

Where would the main thrust of the congregation's outreach be directed then? It was decided to concentrate evangelism efforts on one of the largest groups in the area, those aged 20 - 40 years. This age group made up a good share of those involved in the community. Some made their homes there, others worked there or were regular patrons of the area's businesses. Because the neighborhood had become saturated with "Young Urban Professionals" or "Yuppies", and it is these people who have been drawn to Grace, it has become known to some as the "Yuppie" church. It should be noted that other age groups and those of various professional levels have not been ignored. Grace was, and still is, seeking to meet the needs of all it's neighbors.

To provide a better picture of how a congregation serves the people in their community I would like to detail a few of the specific elements used by Grace to do just that. Huebner speaks of four elements which have contributed to the stabilization and growth of the congregation: (1) worship, (2) adult education, (3) fellowship and (4) service.

Worship at Grace is seen as being vitally important. This seemed to me to be overly obvious but pastor Huebner shed some light on why that is so important for this particular congregation. Because Grace has an older building which is spacious and extremely beautiful people walk in and immediately expect big things. From the massive stained glass windows to the ornately carved altar and *schalldeckel* over the pulpit, the high ceiling and beautiful mauve and blue

tones which cover the entire church, the atmosphere is one which reminds the viewer that this is God's house, a place for worship. When people come for the first time, and Grace does have more than a few new visitors every Sunday, expectations are high. With this in mind Grace's worship service intends to make Sunday the highlight of the week. A historical liturgy is used but with vitality and life. The congregation has become accustomed to using different types of services and hymns also. But all services are designed to be "user-friendly" so that the visitors, potential members, have no problem participating and enjoying worship.

Adult education is one of the biggest changes over the last five years. Mid-week adult education classes have become the norm at Grace but only through the persistent effort on behalf of the pastor and the congregation. Attendance at classes has increased steadily over the last few years. In the fall of 1988 classes had become large enough to move downstairs in the parish center and new tables were purchased for this very purpose.

The third element which has helped Grace both to strengthen those who are members and also to let prospects become better acquainted with Grace's members is fellowship. In 1988 Grace assembled a group which plans a monthly activity which might be golfing, bowling, talent shows, attending sporting events, etc.. Huebner noted that this does not conflict with Scripture of the purpose of the church. It is just these types of activities which promote a true "family" feeling among believers.

Finally, the fourth element is service. Grace's concept of service looks to involve as many members as possible in some church activity, committee, board or group. The emphasis on service was begun in the spring of 1986 but really grew in the Fall of 1989. Sixty-eight people were involved in committees and other areas of service in 1986. By the winter of 1989 that number had ballooned up to one-hundred fifty. Grace's objective is to see at least half of it's members involved in these areas of service.

One of the points pastor Huebner made was that sixty-one percent of Grace's membership is made up of women. There has not been, however, a focus on "women's groups" but groups, clubs, etc. are put together based on "common needs interests."

These four things; worship, adult education, fellowship activities and service finally stopped the hemorrhage of people leaving as God worked through them to build up the congregation. The things which showed that Grace was finally adequately meeting the needs of those in the community have been evidenced in that total membership has grown, Sunday attendance has risen steadily and more and more people are actively involved in church activities and positions.

One of the big factors in reaching out to the community is creating awareness in the neighborhood. Grace was able to implement of few changes in the last seven years to aid community awareness. Grace has made use of advertising since 1982 which sometimes involves posters around the community

announcing such things as Lenten services especially tailored to the schedules of business people. A newsletter was begun in 1983 and then in 1988 a newsletter for prospects was undertaken by the Evangelism Committee. A second mailing to visitors was implemented to encourage further attendance. Brochures for visitors have also been available through the efforts of the Evangelism Committee.

Meeting the needs of the community is often a challenging effort. What should always be, and certainly has been at Grace, is that the proclamation of the Gospel is the motivation for all we do. Simply looking at numbers, especially membership numbers, is not where the emphasis should be. For that reason Huebner pointed out the number of "active" members as a way of measuring a church's *spiritual* growth. Providing new members and prospective members, as well as long-time members, with opportunities to express their love for God, to enjoy their brothers and sisters in the faith and to serve the mission of the church is absolutely imperative. That is the purpose for looking at some of the unique ways Grace has used to draw in people from their community. Other congregations would do well to learn from the example Grace has set forth in their ever-increasing drive to reach out to the community, even if that means change.

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I. A HISTORY OF CHANGE

- A. The founding of Grace
 - 1. The Christian school - a mission tool
 - 2. Muehlhauser and the Lutheran Hospital
- B. 1869-1906 - A lack of outreach
 - 1. German immigrants
 - 2. Building of the church
- C. Neighborhood changes
 - 1. A transient population
 - 2. The closing of the school
- D. The Magnet of the Suburbs
 - 1. Relocation?
 - 2. The decision to stay prompts evangelism

II. RECENT CHANGES

- A. Community changes affect the congregation
 - 1. Universities
 - 2. Businesses
 - 3. Young members
- B. 1982-1991: Community growth
 - 1. Grand Avenue Mall
 - 2. Downtown living developments

III. INCREASED OUTREACH EFFORTS

- A. Huebner elected to Synod Evangelism Committee
 - 1. Grace's "Mission Statement"
 - 2. Four areas of concentration
- B. Community Awareness
 - 1. Advertising
 - 2. Literature

I wish to thank Pastor James Huebner for his time and knowledge which he so graciously extended to me for this paper. To have the privilege to study the history of a congregation with such rich tradition is truly insightful especially when learning from one so well-versed in it as Pastor Huebner is.