

The WELS goes deep into the Heart of Texas: Beginnings in the

Houston Area

Senior Church History 3031

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Not many people will argue that there is a different spirit in congregations in Texas. This is a spirit that I grew up knowing and did not realize its difference until I attended high school in Watertown, Wisconsin. Interest in writing a Senior Church History Project on Texas remained throughout my Seminary career. This increased when I served as a Vicar at Immanuel Lutheran in Fort Worth, Texas. During that year I ran into many long known acquaintances from the Houston area. Some people I remembered, others recognized me by my last name. Since then many fond memories of five churches in the Houston area in particular have been running through my mind. It was in these churches that I grew up, followed my father during the Lenten rotation, visited for pastor installments, or attended called worker picnics. All the specific memories I have cannot be adequately written, or would at least take too much space and time to write. (The memories of the members of these congregations about me would be scandalous, showing me to have misbehaved during a few Lenten services at the least.) These congregations have a special place in my heart, as does much of Texas. The focus of this paper is on earliest years of the first five churches in the Houston area. This paper is entitled, "The WELS goes deep into the Heart of Texas: Beginnings in the Houston Area."

A first attempt by the WELS to do mission activity in Texas was actually around 1953, under Missionary Dorn just outside of Dallas, in Irving, Texas. This first attempt was unsuccessful and was aborted after a short time.¹ During the doctrinal struggles within the Missouri Synod, several people in the Dallas area came forward and wrote a letter to the WELS asking for help in 1962. In February of 1964, the first WELS pastor was sent to Texas, Pastor Robert Neumann. Calvary Lutheran Church was formed and established in Dallas that same

¹ Diehl, Walter, "The Coming of the WELS to the South, a story of God's Grace" pg. 1.

year. Soon after that, work began in Duncanville on the south side of Dallas with the aid of a summer vicar, Myrl Wagenknecht.

Meanwhile Missouri Synod congregations in the Houston area were questioning the teaching of their Synod. Pastor G. B. Seagar was serving St. Paul's (LCMS) in Edna Texas, southwest of Houston, when he began to speak out against the false doctrine being spread in the LCMS. He encouraged the members of St. Paul's to enter into a formal "State of Protest," and he resigned his ministry there and accepted a call into the Wisconsin Synod.² This group in Edna made contact with the Pastor Neumann in Dallas, and on May 9, 1965 they held their first service in the Parish Hall of Trinity Episcopal Church with 93 present.³ Pastor Neumann led services until July 18 of that year.

Through correspondence with Wisconsin Synod officials in April, Pastor Walter Diehl and Pastor E. Arnold Sitz of the Arizona California District met with the nucleus in Edna on May 12. During that same month pastoral candidate Vilas Glaeske of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin was assigned to serve the people in Edna. On May 24, 1965, the constitution of Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church of Edna, Texas was adopted. Later that month Redeemer began worshiping at the Jackson County Funeral Home. Sunday School, Bible classes and meetings were held at the Koop Settlement which was donated for congregational use by Eleanor Meador.

Soon after the adoption of the constitution, organizations quickly formed within the congregation. These included the Wisconsin Lutheran Ladies Guild and the Young Wisconsin Lutheran League (YWLL). The formation of the youth league led to the first YWLL Bay

² "Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church Dedication Booklet" pg. 1.

³ *ibid.* pg.2.

Retreat which took place on June 14, 1965.⁴ This retreat has turned into a District wide Teen Retreat that has been a timed honored tradition for the youth in Texas every summer.

Pastor Glaeske was installed on July 18. When Glaeske was assigned to Edna his task included starting mission work in San Antonio and Houston. He and a group of ladies from Edna did canvassing work in the Houston area in the summer of 1965. This and articles in the Northwestern Lutheran produced many contacts in Houston.⁵ Pastor Glaeske also received letters from various Lutheran pastors concerning families in the Houston area that were interested in the Wisconsin Synod's sound doctrine.

Through these contacts a first worship service was held in Houston after being announced in the Houston papers. This first service was held on July 24, 1966 at the Ramada Inn on the Gulf Freeway. "Expecting nine souls, Pastor Glaeske was overwhelmed by the 29 in attendance. Not until he saw the Platzers did he believe that he was in the right place."⁶ Pastor Glaeske continued holding services in Houston and beginning in September of 1966, after Vicar Gerald Ditter arrived to assist work in South Texas, the Houston group worshiped twice a month.

The Houston group began worshiping in a more permanent place in December, holding services in a Knights of Columbus Hall. This served as a worship facility for three years. On Christmas Day, Christ the Lord Evangelical Lutheran Church formed with eleven charter members.

In February of 1967, the District Mission Board decided to move Pastor Glaeske to Houston to serve there full time. Redeemer was assigned James Neffendorf in May. He was installed at Redeemer on June 25, 1967. Pastor Glaeske then began serving in Houston full time.

⁴ "Redeemer Lutheran Church 35th Anniversary 'thumbnail history'"pg. 1.

⁵ Gaertner, Joel, "The Cry from the Mid-South: The Beginnings and History of the South Central District" pg. 5

⁶ Platzer, Neal "A History of Christ the Lord Evangelical Lutheran Church." Pg.1

After receiving permission to purchase land from the Synod, Redeemer made the final completion of a land purchase on July 17, 1967. Nearly a year later ground breaking began. The Building Committee served as the general contractor. After framing, the congregational members finished the building on their own. Pastor Neffendorf assisted a great deal with his carpentry skills. The church was then dedicated on April 13, 1969.

In May of 1969, Pastor Neffendorf resigned his call. He continued to hold services until a graduate assigned from the seminary, Frederick Grunewald, was installed there on July 20, 1969. Pastor Grunewald would only serve there for a few years. After becoming ill, his doctor advised him, in January of 1971, to limit his duties. During the Lenten season pastors from the Houston area assisted. After being hospitalized in June, he resigned his call three months later.

In November, the congregation called Pastor Arthur Clement, who accepted the call and was installed on January 9, 1972. Foundation for a new parsonage was poured that same month, and the project was finished in June. After serving at Redeemer for less than two years Pastor Clement resigned his call in November of 1973. Soon after he received and accepted a call to Alpine, California.

Another call was extended, this time to Pastor Herbert Filter of Adrian, Michigan. He was installed on January 13, 1974. During the last six months of 1974 the congregation made the effort to be self-supporting on a trial basis. They still received subsidy from the Synod, but did not use it. In January of 1975, Redeemer declared themselves self-supporting and notified the Synod and District Mission Board.⁷

In December of 1975, the congregation had a scare when the Christmas Candle which was resting on the baptismal font, continued to smolder after being extinguished on Christmas

⁷ "Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church 10th Anniversary Booklet" pg. 10.

Day. The interior of the church was damaged by smoke, and was cleaned before Sunday services two days later.

Already in April of 1981, plans were discussed to start a Christian Day School. Plans were put on hold in October of that year. In November the congregation faced another resignation. After being urged by the circuit pastor, James Radloff from Austin, Pastor Filter resigned because of needed medical treatment.

On May 9, 1982 Pastor Philip Schwerin was installed. During his ministry at Redeemer the Christian Day School started. Their first teacher was Miss Jeri Mohr (now Browning), assigned from Doctor Martin Luther College to teach Kindergarten –6th grade.

During these years, the WELS was growing in the Houston area. Christ the Lord selected land at its present location, on the west side of Houston, and after approval by the mission board purchased it for \$30,000. Groundbreaking for the chapel began in March of 1969. Cross Country Contractors was hired to build the chapel, but members of Christ the Lord doing the finish work here as well.

In April, the congregation purchased a permanent home to serve as the parsonage for the Glaeske family. In August of that year, the chapel was completed. A new Baldwin organ was purchased for use during the services. The chapel was dedicated on September 7, 1967.

In August a group from Angleton, southwest of Houston, began hold services being led by Pastor Glaeske as well. This group was formed with members from St. Marks, an LCMS church in Freeport and a nucleus from another LCMS church in Angleton.

Work also began on the north side of Houston. After much planning the first service was held on September 14, 1969, at the Bammel Elementary School.

Everyone was so excited! We gathered all the family members and friends we could so that the service wouldn't be so small. We each

knew what we were supposed to bring for our make-shift church. Somehow we didn't have an offering basket or plate to pass around so we had to use a hat. We can laugh about it now, but at the time we thought of it as monumental.⁸

Serving these three groups in all different parts of the Houston area kept Pastor Glaeske very busy. The group in Angleton was granted mission status in 1969 and formed Christ our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church. They called Pastor Wagne Vogt to serve them in 1970. At the same time another group sprouting from Christ the Lord began holding services in the Clear Lake/Friendswood area near the N.A.S.A. Space Center. The first service was held on September 13, 1970 at the Almeda Mall Community Center. Lord of Life Lutheran was formed the next Sunday and was served by Pastor Glaeske during its first year.

In October of 1970, Mission Status was granted for Abiding Word, the congregation formed by the group on the North side of Houston. They sent out several calls before Pastor William Gabb, from Columbus, Nebraska, accepted the call and was installed in the summer of 1971. Pastor Vogt began serving Lord of Life in January of 1971. "This marked the beginning of what has become a lasting relationship between Lord of Life and Christ our Savior."⁹

This freed up Pastor Glaeske to put more time into serving Christ the Lord. The congregation grew and sought to educate the youth of Christ the Lord through a Christian Day School. An education facility was built and was dedicated on April 23, 1972. The building had three classrooms, a study, storage rooms and rest rooms. Miss Ruth Klement (now Izzat) was assigned to be the first teacher. The school grew and in 1977 began teaching grades K-8. During the 1986-87 school year, the church and school had a setback when an electrical fire burned much of the school building. Fortunately, no one was injured. When rummaging

⁸ Hildebrandt, Dorothy, "Twentieth Anniversary written history" pg. 3.

⁹ "Lord of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church History" pg. 2.

through the mess one of the desks was found untouched by the fire, while everything around it was burned. On top on the desk was a Bible a student had left there.

Christ our Savior numbered over 100 members for a time with the group from Freeport and the group from Angleton. Unfortunately, the group from the LCMS congregation in Freeport and the group from Angleton had different ideas on where to build a facility. Pastor Norm Berg, the Mission Board Chairman for the Synod selected a site (that he checked out in the dark of night), just outside of Angleton. Perhaps he was trying to please both groups by selecting something in between the two cities. The site was not visible from any major road, located off in the woods, and far away from development. Members call themselves the “Church in the Dell,” at times.¹⁰

Many of the members were upset, the group from Freeport mainly because the site was not chosen where they wanted it. Some of the members left at this time already. Just a week after the new chapel was dedicated more members began leaving. Many of these people had left their LCMS congregations for the wrong reasons, some just because they didn’t like their pastors there. After joining Christ our Savior they realized they were not actually in doctrinal agreement with the WELS. This proved to be a difficult period at Christ our Savior for the congregation and for Pastor Vogt serving there.

Pastor Vogt remained there for a number of years and was followed by Pastor Wallace Morris, a second career pastor who had attended the LCMS Seminary in Springfield, Illinois. The congregation lost its mission status in 1981, and had trouble supporting itself and was soon without a pastor. After that, various Pastors served Christ our Savior for many years from the area including Pastor Charles Learman from Lord of Life and Pastor Mark Barenz from a preaching station in Sugarland. During this time a member of Christ our Savior, Oscar Hahn,

¹⁰ Hauck, Dennis, phone interview on 12-8-2004.

pleaded with the mission board for a full time pastor for one year. The nearby D.O.W. Company was expanding rapidly and the Angleton area was growing quickly. Oscar Hahn felt that enough growth could take place in one year for the congregation to support their own full-time pastor without Synod subsidy. When work in the Sugarland area began with Pastor Mark Barenz serving there full time, he served Christ our Savior as a preaching station. He felt it should have been the other way around.¹¹

Christ our Savior has had its difficulties. The congregation still exists and is served today by their own pastor. At times the pastor serving there has had to get a second job. The families that remain there today, including the Hauck and Bessler families, are some of the finest examples of faithfulness to their Lord and endurance there is.

While work on the southwest side struggled, Abiding Word on the opposite end of town was taking off. The congregation had cleaned up and purchased an old farmhouse for the Gabb family to move into. They enjoyed the new house and the big yard. However, Pastor's wife Beth didn't enjoy the noise the owls and coyotes made at night while her husband was gone. Pastor Gabb worked hard getting out into the subdivisions in the area. Attendance picked up every Sunday. Bible instruction classes were given to many people interested in membership.

On some occasions, services were held in the parsonage. It was evident that a more permanent home for the congregation was needed. Four acres of land were purchased on Red Oak Drive.

The very first job was getting the cattle pens removed from the property. In February 1971, the congregation received its "first church" in the form of a relocatable chapel. The members had poured the slab, drilled the water well and connected the electricity. We also had our own sign freshly painted with the name Abiding Word Evangelical Lutheran Church.¹²

¹¹ Learman, Charles, interview on 10-10-04.

¹² Hildebrandt, pg. 4.

A new parsonage was built and completed in April of 1972. Ground breaking for a permanent worship and education facility took place on December 31, 1972. The building was finished and was dedicated on June 24, 1973. In the fall of that year, Abiding Word started their first school year with nineteen children in graded K-5. In 1978, the congregation became fully self-supporting.

In the fall of 1977, Pastor Gabb took a call to serve as Dean of Students at Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown, Wisconsin. Pastor Learman served the congregation during the ten month vacancy. On July 30, 1978, Roger Plath, a seminary graduate was installed as the new pastor.

A new two story education facility was finished to house the growing school. The school at Abiding Word has always been an important part of the spiritual growth at this congregation. In the fall of 1981, Pastor Plath received and accepted a call to serve as a missionary in Hong Kong.

Stephen Valleskey, then serving in Michigan, accepted a call to Abiding Word. He was installed on January 17, 1982. During his service to Abiding Word the congregation has thrived. A Summer V.B.S. program has been very successful, one year with an attendance of 205 children. Staff members at the school in the early years included Chris Gallipeau, Shirley Bailey, Sally Vallesky and principals Jim Moeller and later John Lange. One of Pastor Valleskey's many gifts has been a talent to help members and staff get along and work together well for the benefit of Christ's Kingdom.

Back on the south side of Houston, Lord of Life was being served by Pastor Vogt from Angleton. In September of 1971, Vicar Philip Schwerin, who later was pastor at Redeemer in

Edna, was assigned to serve Lord of Life. Services were moved to the Junior Achievement Building in Clear Lake in January of 1972.

Plans for a permanent facility and location were soon on the way. Land was purchased in June of 1972. This location on F. M. 2351 included 10 acres, 5 of which were to be sold later and the money returned to the Mission Board.

Lord of Life received their first full-time pastor when candidate Robert Van Norstrand was assigned there. He was installed on August 13, 1972. The Mission Board approved plans for a church building and parsonage. The buildings were completed, and on September 21, 1975 they were dedicated. At this time the congregation numbered 103 baptized souls and 76 communicants.¹³

After serving at Lord of Life for four and one-half years, Pastor Van Norstrand accepted a call to Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Yucaipa, California. During the vacancy the congregation was served again by the Angleton pastor, this time Pastor Morris.

After several calls were extended and returned, Pastor Charles Learman, then serving as assistant pastor at St. John's in Jefferson, Wisconsin, accepted and was installed on September 19, 1977. Two years later the congregation decided to open a Lutheran elementary school. Miss Judy Lohr, a graduate of DMLC, was assigned to teach grades 1-8. Mrs. Sue Vecchio taught kindergarten. The school opened in the fall of 1979 with an enrollment of 18 children. Pastor Learman served as the first principal.

The first facility used for the school was a temporary aluminum structure measuring twenty-four x thirty feet. It was divided into two classrooms. By 1980, more room was needed for the church and school activities. A committee was formed in January of that year to begin plans for a new facility for classrooms, offices and fellowship. Ground breaking was finally held

¹³ Lord of Life Evangelical Lutheran Church History, pg. 3.

on February 10, 1985. The congregation served as the general contractor for the project. Contractors were hired to do the foundation, slab and brickwork. Vic Bailey, a member at Abiding Word, was hired to do the framing and siding. Many gifted men and women in the congregation pitched in to do the remaining work. Bowen Loftin and Robert Ybarra coordinated much of this task. The entire cost of this project was held to \$89,000. The building was dedicated on January 18, 1987. The old aluminum building was sent to Christ the Lord for temporary use after fire damaged their school.

The Friendswood area has seen much growth since Lord of Life was founded. Many subdivisions near the church have offered outreach opportunities. Vacation Bible School has been an important tool for outreach here as well.

The Lord has truly blessed the work in the Houston area. The early years of these congregations were trying times. These congregations have helped and supported each other through these hard times. Many of the first and earliest members remain at these congregations today. Through Word and Sacrament being offered by faithful pastors, and the dedication of lay members, the Lord has seen His work being accomplished.

One of the most emotional times of my life took place during my year of vicar service at Immanuel in Fort Worth. I had the opportunity on May 9, 2004, to preach for the first time at Lord of Life where I had been baptized and been a member at for over nineteen years until my father took a call to serve in northern Wisconsin. We celebrated Good Shepherd Sunday that day, a week late, which also happened to be Mother's Day. I preached on Psalm 23. As thoughts of growing up in the Houston area both physically and spiritually came to mind, I was able to share a message of thankfulness to the members there who as a congregation have been a

“mother” to all those under their spiritual care. (Someone can testify to the fact that I had a harder time speaking these words than when I proposed to my future wife the Sunday after, back in Fort Worth.)

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