

**A Brief History of the Holy Spirit's Work at
Mountain of the Lord Ev. Lutheran Church in
Rib Mountain, WI
(1993-2005)**

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From its earliest beginnings in 1993 as an exploratory mission to the present, Mountain of the Lord Ev. Lutheran Church has enjoyed the Lord's richest blessings as its pastor and members carry out the Great Commission. The Holy Spirit has worked to grow this church into a wonderful Christian family made up of many people who had previously not known Jesus as Savior. The results of his work are obvious.

Yet there were times when the effectiveness of the work was *not* immediately obvious. On a Sunday morning early in the church's history eleven people showed up for worship. Four of these were visitors who never returned. "Blessings" such as these gave the pastor serious doubts.

Of course we know that God always works through his Word to accomplish his saving purposes. Sometimes positive results were *very* obvious. I was privileged to serve this church as a vicar in 2004-2005. In that year I saw thirty new families join and a baptism (sometimes multiple baptisms) every Sunday throughout the summer of '05. How does a mission go from faltering to thriving? When a church like this is planted how does it grow?

I recently interviewed Pastor Dan Solofra who has served this church since its birth. He shared with me the congregation's history and also his experiences of the past thirteen years. Listening to him describe what he has learned through his experiences, it became very clear to me that as the Lord grows his Church he does it through people who know they have a role in sharing the Gospel. We don't know the specifics of how God will bless our work, but we know that he will. And he will do it through people who love their Lord and want to share him. Every member *is* a missionary!

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Pastor Dan Solofra graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in May, 1993. His assignment was an exploratory mission in Rib Mountain, WI, (just outside of Wausau) in the Western Wisconsin District. He remembers vividly the call situation that year and his great anticipation as the time of his assignment grew closer. He had served a congregation in Florida as a vicar in 1991-1992 under Pastor Larry Zahn the District Mission Board chairman of the South Atlantic District. As a vicar, Solofra was asked to read monthly mission reports and discussed them with Zahn. As he tried to learn "what missions were all about," he hoped he would be able to use this experience in the mission

field. In 1993 there were calls to exploratory missions in Florida, Washington, Colorado, British Columbia, and Wisconsin. Solofra was aware of most of these before Call Day but did not know that Rib Mountain had an exploratory. His attitude going into Call Day was positive. He was eager to go wherever called. “Wherever the Lord wants us,” is what he told his wife Taunya. However, when he was assigned to Rib Mountain he was hugely disappointed. He had been looking forward to Florida, Washington, Colorado, or even Canada. He really thought he would be getting a ticket out of the Midwest. He admits his attitude became very negative. Taunya had to remind him: “Remember Dan, ‘wherever the Lord wants us,’ right?”

A short while after Call Day the men who were assigned to exploratory missions were brought together for an orientation day put on by the Board for Home Missions. They were provided with three-ring binders packed with information and spent the day listening to pastors brought back from the field to share their experiences. Solofra was encouraged and started to feel “pumped up” about the opportunity to share the Gospel in Wausau. As for preparation for the assignment, he says that it was his basic training received throughout the years in synod schools, this one orientation day, and his vicar year in Florida where he read those monthly mission reports.

Dan and Taunya Solofra arrived in Rib Mountain with their two-year old son Nathaniel in June of 1993—just a couple of weeks after Call Day. Taunya was pregnant with their second son Caleb who would be born on August 18. (Dan and Taunya have five children: Nathaniel, Caleb, Jared, Kaitlyn, and Greta.) Not wanting to buy anything to live in at first until they were sure they were in the right area, they rented a duplex about a mile from where the church would be built years later. The duplexes in that location were owned by John Tappe, a prominent member at St. Peter’s in nearby Schofield. Tappe was doing a lot of building in the Rib Mountain area. As this was a bedroom community outside of Wausau, growing quickly due to Tappe’s work, it was an ideal choice for exploring the possibility of establishing a mission congregation there.

The Solofras were financially supported by the Board for Home Missions, which approved a salary for the first two years. So they were paid directly from the Synod office. Financial support was one thing, but support of a different kind was more difficult to find at first. After Solofra’s ordination on July 18, 1993 at Our Savior, Wausau,

getting practical help from the brothers in the ministry was something he found to be somewhat elusive in the beginning. While he was able to talk to his classmates often over the phone and get advice and prayer support from them, they all seemed to agree that the mission boards sometimes exaggerated the truth regarding the amount of local help that was to be expected. Supposedly, there were forty individuals interested in the plan to canvass in the first month (August of '93). Solofra sent invitations to local pastors and to the evangelism committee chairmen. A planning meeting was scheduled to take place at one of the Wausau churches. When Solofra arrived he found a note on the door from the pastor indicating that he could not make it, but left the church open for the meeting. By 7:30 no one had shown up and no one would. The pastors in the area that had gone to his ordination would never offer much help in the outreach efforts nor would they offer any mentoring. At least he knew their prayers were with him. Solofra figured he was on his own and that this was going to be a "one-man show." Nevertheless, he knew that the Holy Spirit *would* work.

He had some good relationships in those days though. The help that he did receive he valued greatly. The chairmen on the Board for Home Missions, Harry Haggdorn and Peter Kruschel, were both very supportive and always willing to talk. Solofra had a strong connection with them and still considers them good friends. His relationship with the District Mission Board was good as well. At first, it was not quite as strong as it is now because the chairman had never served in a mission and had only theories—not always practical help. But over time Solofra has found the board to be very supportive and helpful to ministry and has good relations with it now. While practical help in the mission wasn't immediately obvious to him, it *was* there. It just took some time for him to develop beneficial relationships.

A great helper was (and still is) Pastor Wayne Schultz the District Mission Counselor. He met with Solofra often to discuss the work and became his mentor. Schultz went through the thought-process of planning a mission and helped him see what he should be working towards. Schultz's guidance was the most useful to him.

The initial plan was to canvass the Rib Mountain area door-to-door. On August 28, 1993, the canvass began. The Solofras worked out of their duplex in preparing materials. In the "parsonage" garage they made fliers to describe who they were and

what they were about. In order to do this they felt they needed a different name than “the WELS Rib Mountain Exploratory Mission.” In talking with Wayne Schultz earlier, Solofra learned that it was good to wait awhile before naming a church in order to “get a feel for the area.” When it appeared that a name would soon be needed, Pastor Solofra asked family and friends for suggestions. It was his sister who offered the name “Mountain of the Lord” (MOTL)—a reference from Micah and Isaiah. This name would prove to be very fitting when the building site was chosen.

As might be expected, the canvasses did not generate much excitement or interest at first. So it was around this time that Solofra sat down to dinner with some people at the local newspaper. The paper did an article on the mission and it served to give the mission some public exposure.

From the start, Pastor Solofra has seen great value in getting involved in the community. Being involved really creates opportunities to connect with people and to share the Gospel. He has said that he believes door-to-door is definitely not the best method to do outreach. He thought he had to get involved on a different level. He did this in small ways—using a local bank instead of a national bank, using a smaller independently owned hardware store instead of going to Home Depot, coaching little league teams and soccer teams, and officiating at high school soccer games. He would visit members at work and get to know co-workers. He would visit members in the hospital and get to know the staff. In doing this, Solofra was able to make contact in a way that was much more meaningful to these people than by canvassing.

One event in particular that provided a great opportunity to make contacts was the Rib Mountain garage sales. It was so popular that it has since become an annual event. About sixty families in Rib Mountain decided to have a weekend of garage sales in July. At the first garage sale weekend in '93 the Solofras didn't have anything to sell but they wanted to become involved somehow. So they set up a hot dog stand and sold food and beverages all weekend long to the tired shoppers. It proved a very effective way to meet people and also advertise the mission a little.

While the early efforts of door-to-door canvassing were necessary, Solofra has since become convinced that the most effective means of outreach is friendship evangelism. Church members, who want to share Christ, bring co-workers and friends to

church and fellowship events. They give personal invitations and, in doing so, outreach is done in a more natural way than canvassing. When the church really began to grow, this is how it was accomplished. Even in the first couple of years when canvassing was the only option (there were no members to do friendship evangelism) the Solofras tried to “put as many lines in the water as possible.”

In the late summer and fall of 1993, Pastor Solofra describes his daily routine as being in a very bad state. Having his office at home was “awful,” and his day-to-day work was a struggle. The phone was not ringing and people were not responding to the canvasses. He remembered what a seminary professor told him about a young pastor who complained that no one ever came to him. The professor’s advice was “to study more so that you have something to say when they do come.” Solofra spent his days reading. He says that he read a lot of good WELS Lutheran literature and just about anything he could get his hands on that addressed the topic of evangelism. Otherwise, he had no routine. “It was a real struggle the first couple years.” He found himself asking, “What should ministry be like?” “What do I want it to be?” He decided then that “right now, it’s about looking for opportunities.”

The Lord surely provided opportunities. Solofra started meeting people who were interested in Mountain of the Lord. Marlene Klemm and her three grown sons who had been LCMS members, and Roger and Virginia Peterson, who lived too far away from their home church, were some of the earliest to express interest. They met with the Solofras each week for Bible study. After some time, these members decided that what was going on at the duplex wasn’t enough. They needed something to invite people to. They needed a church event.

First, they needed to find a better location. They considered a municipal center or a school as options. These turned out to be impractical. They settled on the Rib Mountain Travel Center (now the Rib Mountain Days Inn), which was near the duplex and only about a mile from the foot of Rib Mountain itself.

From November 1993 to February 1994, monthly services were held there. The services were advertised as “events” with each monthly service having a special emphasis—i.e., the November service was a Thanksgiving service and the December service was a Christmas one. On March 20, 1994, these services became weekly.

Now Pastor Solofra was developing more of a daily routine. His work was multiplied having to prepare for a weekly service. There were many considerations: what to do about the piano, altar, decorations, paraments, banners, nursery, and so on. Once all of these things were in place there was the matter of moving them in and out of the Travel Center every Sunday. Solofra has no fond memories of having to move a very heavy electric piano every week. Despite all the work involved in getting things moving, there was great reason to rejoice over the new opportunities for Christian friends to gather around the Word.

They gathered for worship services that were taken from the newly released *Christian Worship* that Solofra found to be solid and clear in meaning—a great tool for educating guests or new members who were young in the faith. These types of members were not to be found in great numbers early on but they would eventually become the majority.

On March 20, 1994, fifty people, who were mostly from other area congregations met at the Travel Center. Solofra says that most of his visitors in those days were probably disgruntled church people. This made him a little uneasy and caused him to think that “if they weren’t happy there then why would they be happy here?” As a matter of fact, it proved true that many were just that—church-hoppers. Attendance throughout the rest of the year could be as high as fifty on a given Sunday or as low as ten.

Yet, soon the church would grow to a point that many new converts were being added to the family of believers through friendship evangelism. Pastor Solofra also found that counseling troubled friends of members became an outreach tool. People who had neither church family nor even a Christian background were being brought to him for marriage counseling. What better opportunity to introduce them to God’s Great Exchange? The Holy Spirit guided those people to him at just the right time in their lives.

A major turning point came on August 1, 1994. This was the date of the first Mountain of the Lord Vacation Bible School. It almost never happened. It was not yet on Solofra’s list of plans for ministry. He says he was still really struggling at this time and there weren’t even that many children in the congregation. Then he received a call from Lakeside Lutheran High School. They offered to send twenty high school students

up to Wausau to run a VBS program for MOTL. Solofra said, “We have no kids!” Lakeside assured him that they would make it happen as long as MOTL set up a place to do it. The Solofras set up tents in their yard and canvassed the neighborhood. The Lakeside students taught VBS in the morning and recruited more children in the evening during the course of that week in August. The neighborhood kids were very attracted to the tents and the action going on around the Solofras’ place. Thirty-five children attended that week and many more contacts were made.

This event led to the very first major purchase that MOTL would make. The congregation decided that the duplex just was not big enough for the growing ministry and that it was time to buy something more permanent. In October of 1994, they purchased a parsonage that would also largely serve as a ministry center. Solofra describes the home as “big and beautiful and useful to ministry.” Over the course of the next year, the core group of MOTL became a very tight-knit little family. They spent a great deal of time at the new “ministry center.” Special Lenten and Easter services were held in the basement and many different fellowship events were hosted there. It was a place both to gather around the Word and also to have fun. The location of the new parsonage was also ideal. Practically next door is Blue Gill Park, where MOTL had its church picnics and VBS starting in June of 1995.

October '95 marked MOTL’s very first worship service on Rib Mountain. The manager at the Travel Center was on maternity leave and the assistant manager booked a Sunday morning that the MOTL congregation had planned to use for worship. Pastor Solofra received a call two weeks in advance telling him that they could not have their usual room that day. Because it was the fall season and the colors were peaking—bright and beautiful—they thought of having church at the amphitheater on the mountain. It was such a wonderful service that they’ve had a fall worship service there ever since. It now serves as one of many “friendship evangelism” Sundays. In 1995, fifty-five people attended, including ten guests. In 2005, three hundred people were in attendance, with fifteen visitors.

Indeed, the Lord was working to grow his Church. There was great cause for celebration on January 1, 1996. Pastor Wayne Schultz came with the news that Mountain of the Lord was granted mission status. The congregation now officially had sixty

members. The first Voter's Meeting Agenda was drawn up and a small church council was organized.

The church had come a long way in just a few short years. There had been difficult challenges but the Lord was pulling this baby church through them. Pastor Solofra recalls that on July 4, 1994, there had been only eleven people at worship. Four of these were visitors who never returned because they were scared off by the small numbers. He recalls pacing through the house on a Saturday night, Labor Day weekend of '04, thinking about how no one was going to be in church the next day. He was very troubled. He wandered into his sons' room and saw them sprawled out in a deep sleep. He said, "Lord, I want to sleep like that on a Saturday night." He knew that the only way he could was if he left everything in the Lord's hands. At graduation a year earlier his attitude had been arrogant. "Who wouldn't want to join my church?" In retrospect, Solofra now sees that the Lord had to humble him in those early years to prepare him for ministry. He was being trained to do the Lord's work and not his own. So the question was no longer "What do I want the ministry to be?" But it was now "What does the Lord ask of me? How can I serve him?"

Now, having been granted mission status, the time had come to prepare for the first building project. Land search authority was given for the target area in Rib Mountain. For four months they looked for a proper site. The Board for Home Missions gave three options with positives and negatives for each. After the first choice fell through, the second was taken and made final. It proved to be the right choice.

On August 28, 1996, land was purchased at 5506 Bittersweet Rd., at the foot of Rib Mountain. From here can be seen a breathtaking view of the mountain that boasts the second highest elevation in Wisconsin. (The church would be built to face the mountain so that it could be seen through the stained glass cross in the front). The plot was a forty acre parcel, thirty-five of which were sold to the Wausau school district for the purpose of building an elementary school. MOTL bought the remaining five acres.

No one else had wanted those five acres because there were existing buildings there that needed to be cleared—an old dilapidated farm house, a barn, and a silo. The buildings were demolished and the land was completely cleared and leveled in the fall of 1997. A prospective member with land-moving equipment did the work at no cost.

The congregation was advised not to build too soon. They needed some time to raise funds for the project. Through the Church Extension Fund they would be able to save quite a bit of money as CEF would match whatever MOTL was able to raise and put down—both on the land purchase and on the building project itself. The fund-raising campaign was based on an estimate for a 5,000 square foot facility at \$100 per square foot. At each step of the planning and building process they did not go forward too quickly. Whatever amount of money they could save would be a gain since CEF would match funds raised based on original estimates *before* any savings.

An architect from the area was asked to draw up some church models. An engineering firm in Fond du Lac was contacted. The members of MOTL filled out “needs sheets”—allowing them to give input concerning what they thought a worship space needed to have. Everyone carefully considered the question: “What do we need, practically speaking, for ministry? Pastor Solofra was not closely involved in the design though he did shoot down some impractical ideas (i.e. a design for a round church—“how would you add on?”). On finding an architect he offers the advice that “you probably wouldn’t even need one for a building this small. It could have been done by anyone.” He adds that if he would become involved in another building project he would use a Lutheran architect who could incorporate more theology into the work.

The Groundbreaking Service took place on March 21, 1999—five years after weekly services had begun at the Rib Mountain Travel Center. Builders for Christ headed the project and were greatly assisted by volunteers from the Mountain of the Lord congregation. The members were very involved with the project. They did framing work, electrical work, hung dry wall, and did the roofing. Pastor Solofra and his brothers worked on the plumbing. Members who weren’t directly involved in building volunteered in other ways. The Klemm campground was reserved for the Builders for Christ campers. After the garage was built on the church lot (the first building to go up) it was turned into a mess hall for the workers and MOTL provided daily meals for the Builders for Christ crew.

On September 12, 1999, after a long summer of work, Mountain of the Lord Ev. Lutheran Church was dedicated with a special worship service followed by a pig roast. Pastor Solofra recalls that time as being very emotional. He admits it sounds funny, but

when he left the Travel Center for the last time and “went up to the Mountain of the Lord” to worship he cried. “It was like crossing the Jordan River to inherit the Promised Land. It was like moving from the Tabernacle to the Temple. Of course, *all* that the Lord has done and continues to do is overwhelming. Through all this the members were like family—united in ministry and in purpose. It was an unbelievable blessing. The Holy Spirit has truly united us in Christ.”

As Mountain of the Lord grew into the twenty-first century, the new church building served well as a tool for ministry. Pastor Solofra is quick to point out that the building is “only” a tool and that the ministry is really found among all who gather in it and go out from it. By now he knew that this was the farthest thing from being the “one-man show” it was in the beginning. As partners in the ministry, Solofra and the MOTL congregation put the building to good use. New programs and events were quickly being added to the calendar. There was room for a growing confirmation class, Christmas for Kids and Easter for Kids outreach programs, a youth group, and more Sunday classes.

Just as many events were taking place outside of the church building too. Most of them had outreach and friendship evangelism as their focus. There were many different ways to enjoy fellowship together as well as making contacts with friends, relatives, and co-workers who did not yet know Jesus as Savior. MOTL became involved in a community event at the Cedar Creek Mall in Mosinee—Santa Fest. It was a secular celebration geared towards families put on by a local radio station. MOTL were welcomed to come in and set up games and give out food, balloons that said “Jesus Loves You,” and brochures advertising MOTL events. Sleigh rides, hay rides, cook outs, and camping trips were regular events throughout the year for members and friends. All the while the Gospel was being shared and proclaimed in the community.

Already by December, 1999, Solofra recognized the need for *more* room at MOTL. The church council brought before the voters a plan for a “Christian Life Center” addition to the church. This would consist of a kitchen, a large hall, more bathrooms, an office, a couple classrooms, and a large basement (now being converted into more classrooms and a youth center). In 2002, plans were drawn up. This time no architect was involved. Members designed the addition and did most of the building independently. Work began in the spring of 2003 and was completed by fall. The

Christian Life Center can seat over 200 people and is used for many different programs and events. In addition, eight pews were added to the church, which can now seat 280 people per service.

The past several years have been eventful ones at Mountain of the Lord. The summer garage sale tradition that began back in 1993 continues. Now the church is used by shoppers for bathrooms and food breaks. Last year 400 burgers, 400 brats, and 400 hot dogs were cooked and sold along with sodas and other refreshments. The service on Rib Mountain is still held every fall. VBS now attracts up to 80 kids a summer. MOTL joined the Northland High School Association in the fall of '02, and the LWMS in the spring of '03. In 2001, the Vicar in a Mission Setting program was taken on. This was discontinued in 2005 as MOTL was becoming less a mission church—pastor and congregation came to realize they needed to start balancing outreach *and* “inreach.”

In 1999 membership was at 95. In 2005 it is up to 350 with many prospects. Pastor Solofra says the reason for growth is simple: “Members are witnessing to people they know and people they meet. B.I.C. is always filling up and I just happen to be here to teach it.” Early on, most of the members were transfers in. Now, the Holy Spirit is working faith in the hearts of new members through the Gospel.

With the current rate of growth Pastor Solofra, regrettably, is not able to have the kind of contact he once had with his members. But he and the “core” members know that they are entering a new phase of ministry. The many ministers in the congregation understand that they are all part of the outreach committee and now, just as important, of the inreach committee to serve the many members who are brand new to the faith.

As programs are continually started up to include and welcome new members and to “grow them up” in the faith through “Faith Stepping Stones,” “Strong-Roots for Tender Shoots,” and “First Friends,” there is an exciting new outreach opportunity as well. Members of MOTL wanted to reach out to the area south of Rib Mountain in Kronenwetter where a lot of building and growth is being experienced—of the same type that Rib Mountain experienced a decade ago. The Kronenwetter area is about seven miles from Rib Mountain and may become a sort of second campus for MOTL. On Sunday nights at Northland Lutheran High School members of MOTL who live near Kronenwetter bring friends and neighbors who are unchurched to a Bible study and

worship service. The gospel is going out again into a growing area where many do not know the hope we have in Christ. So things have started to come full circle for Solofra and for the original members of Mountain of the Lord.

I leave the final word to Pastor Dan Solofra: “Every individual in a congregation needs to understand (his or her) role in sharing Christ. And that, as a pastor, the number of people I’m able to touch and come into contact with is limited. But when we start doing it as a congregation it becomes exponentially (greater)...it doesn’t have any boundaries! What we’re able to do is grow and grow and grow and to look back and see that was Christ’s point to begin with. That’s why he didn’t stay but he sent his Holy Spirit to work through each and every one of us. His work was done and our sins are paid for and now our work has just begun. And I don’t think that’s something that can be shared too often in a congregation—as they remember to keep the purpose in front of them. We are here to share Christ until he calls us home. And as long as they continue to do that I expect tremendous things to continue to happen with the gospel and with the Wisconsin Synod that carries it out.”

When did you graduate WLS?

And what was the assignment given to you on call day?

Do you remember what the call situation was at that time? Was there any speculation as to who might be getting the mission calls that year?

What was your initial reaction to the call?

What was it about this area that made it a strong candidate for a mission church?

How were you prepped for this assignment before you left for Wausau?

When did you arrive here?

How was settling in? What was your family situation? What were your living arrangements?

How were you financially supported in those early days?

What kind of help did you receive in starting out? Did you work closely with anyone in particular whom you went to for advice or ideas?

What was your relationship with the District Mission Board and the Board for Home Missions? What is it now?

What kind of pastoral help did you receive in starting out?

What was your connection to the community? How did you get yourself out there and involved?

What was the plan for making early contacts?

What outreach tools or methods did you find most effective?

When was the church named?

What did you do for publicity to kind of "get the word out"?

Can you remember what your daily routine was like in the first couple of years?

When was it that you first saw the church really "get going"? Or was it very gradual?

When and where was your first worship service?

Before the church was built where were the different locations used for worship?

What were those early worship services like?

Were there opportunities to just get all the members together for something social?

What were the backgrounds of your earliest members? Were they new to the faith? Or like transfers?

What do you consider to be the most difficult challenges in the first four or five years of your ministry?

When membership began to grow, what did the organization of the church look like? When were boards and committees started up? Things like that...

How and when did the first building project begin?

Why was this site chosen? Had others been considered?

How were you personally involved in the building project? Were you involved in its design?

How did you find the right architect?

Regarding the finances of the project—how was it supported?

When was groundbreaking?

What kind of involvement did MOTL members have in the building?

When was the building completed and when was it dedicated?

I understand that there were some issues with the plumbing early on. Care to elaborate on that?

How would you describe your relationship with the members of MOTL at this time?

How did they support you in your work, in life, in general?

What opportunities were they given to serve their Savior?

As the church grew into the 21st century what kinds of programs were added to the workings of the church?

As far as the relationship between fellowship and outreach goes, what kinds of events are an annual thing around here that get members together and also provide opportunities for the unchurched to come and see?

What have been the other building projects at MOTL in the last few years?

What is membership at now?

What kinds of people have been joining the church? Are they similar to when it was getting started? Are they new converts? Transfers? Coming in from other denominations?

How have you seen longtime members, or maybe just the church family as a whole, grow and mature in the faith together?

What classes are now being offered to members, new and old?

The Lord has obviously blessed the work of this church. Describe the rapid growth that's happened here over the last few years. And to what factors do you attribute it?

Could you describe what the congregation has now become involved in with the "God's Great Exchange" program in Kronenwetter?

If you could nail down one major lesson you've learned or one special insight you've gained over the last ten-plus years...what would it be?