

A HISTORY OF GOD'S GRACE AT WOODLAWN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH, (MILW, WI)

by

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"This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; We will rejoice and be glad in it."

Psalm 118:23-24

With these words Woodlawn Evangelical Lutheran Church in West Allis, Wisconsin has set her mind to doing the Lord's work. It is work which the Lord has blessed for over sixty years. Woodlawn is an average Wisconsin Synod church with average Wisconsin Synod members. Her story is an average story which could be told in similar strains by many other average Wisconsin Synod members. Yet just because the story of Woodlawn is an "average" one, it does not mean the work her members carried on was less than anything other than spectacular and life-changing. The work Woodlawn carries out is the work of saving souls. It was through the "average" members of Woodlawn that the Lord blessed many people with the saving message of Jesus Christ crucified. The following is a brief reminiscence of God's saving work through God's average people.

The history of Woodlawn began in 1924. A group of pastors returning from a conference at Waukesha, Wisconsin were driving along Greenfield Avenue. The Holy Spirit works whenever he wishes and it was at this time that he decided to move these pastors to consider the area around Greenfield Avenue as a potential spiritual harvest field. In the fall of that year Pastor Luther Voss was called by the District Mission Board to work the two areas north and south of Greenfield Avenue. From his efforts and with the blessing of the Holy Spirit two congregations emerged. To the north Good Shepherd Lutheran Mission was established.

It was to the south of Greenfield Avenue that Woodlawn conducted her sphere of activity. Back in those days it seemed to be the policy of the Mission Board to buy land and put up a chapel before gathering people together for worship. In 1927 the Board did just that when in the spring it bought lots on the corner of National and Woodlawn (now 92nd Street) Avenues. In the fall of that year Pastor Edward Blakewell accepted the call as missionary to this area. He didn't last long, however. In December he was called to an emergency situation at a mission in Racine. Unfortunately, work on the chapel and school slowed down until finally the contractor gave up his work. No one is sure why this happened. Some members felt it was because of a disagreement and tension between the contractor and the Synod.

After repeatedly calling for another pastor in vain, the Mission Board decided to call a Seminary graduate. In May, 1928, Candidate Harry Shiley received the call through the assignment committee. During his first few months serving Woodlawn no men ever attended services. Because of this situation, it was necessary to wait one year in order to organize as a congregation. On February 3, 1929, the Lord's Supper was celebrated for the first time. On July 13, 1929, the mission was formally organized. It seems strange that in those days a church was built before there were any worshippers to fill the pews. In fact Woodlawn operated a school before the church could formally organize. These "church growth" methods must have met the needs of the community, however, because Woodlawn kept on growing at a steady rate. It shows

that the Lord can work through any possible method so long as the his means, the Word and Sacrament, are used.

By the time Pastor Harold Schwertfeger was installed as pastor on June 9, 1940, to replace Pastor Shiley who had taken a call elsewhere, Woodlawn was a steady congregation with a willing workforce to get God's work done. Clean-up of the facilities was a volunteer operation. If something needed fixing, there was always a more than capable candidate to do the job. Outreach to the community was a missionary's dream come true. The members often came out in adequate force to canvass the neighborhood and to evangelize the lost.

The school grew right along with the church. In fact the school was and is to this day a major resource for reaching out to the community. Because of its reputation many people have come into contact with Woodlawn and many have joined the ranks of the faithful. In 1941 Woodlawn purchased a barracks for \$75 from the city of West Allis as classroom space for the lower grades. I marvel at the Spartan conditions under which the kids learned about the Savior. One day in February the kids who had class in these "barracks-turned-classrooms" were given the day off from school because the one space heater which heated the entire barracks blew up. It spewed soot all over the room, ruining the kids' valentines.

The school was ably headed by principal Robert Kolander for 36 years. He comments, "It was only natural that I should be a teacher. I saw how happy it made my father, it was something I thought I should be. I've always loved children, and it's a wonderful thing to teach them

about their Savior. That's the most important thing in the world." Although he retired just recently, he still continues to serve very actively teaching part-time at the school and serving on many committees in the church (now located on the corner of 99th and Lincoln Avenue).

Back to Woodlawn in the year 1949. Pastor Richard Schoeneck began service in that year as Pastor Schwertfeger took another call. During his tenure improvements were made from time to time to the facilities. School bus service also began in that year for the children. The pastor was in charge of driving the bus. By 1954, the silver anniversary year, Woodlawn was a self-supporting congregation. In 1955 Woodlawn purchased 3 acres of land on the corner of 99th Street and Lincoln Avenue which would become the present site of the congregation's facilities. In 1958, Pastor Schoeneck accepted a call to serve in Coleman, Wisconsin.

Pastor Adalbert Schultz reaped what his predecessor's sowed when during his tenure as pastor from 1958 through 1961 many changes took place. In 1960 ground was broken for a new school and temporary worship facilities on the corner of 99th and Lincoln. Cost: \$120,000.

In 1962 Pastor Reuel Schulz accepted the call to be Woodlawn's next pastor and continues to serve there to this day. Worship continued in the school building until 1971 when the cornerstone for Woodlawn's new sanctuary was set in place. Throughout the years of Pastor Schulz's service the church has grown numerically, physically and spiritually. In the late 80's a gymnasium was added to the north end of the school building. During these years several seminarians received practical training for their preparation to serve as a pastor in the Wisconsin

Synod by taking on day-to-day pastoral duties at Woodlawn for one year under Schulz's tutelage. The vicar program came to a close in 1990 when the congregation decided to call a second full-time pastor. Pastor Thomas Kneser accepted the call to be the associate pastor at Woodlawn in the fall of that year.

For 62 years the Lord has blessed Woodlawn Evangelical Lutheran Church. She has seen growth numerically and physically. Most importantly she has grown spiritually. It is with special joy that members of Woodlawn point to the source of her success. Many realize that it is the Word of our Lord taught in it's truth and purity that has brought such success. The Lord was behind it, all, working through the Word and Sacrament. In the high points and the low, the Word and Sacraments brought joy, hope and a sense of accomplishment to the people of Woodlawn. The Lord worked and strengthened faith in the hearts of the average people of Woodlawn. They responded by doing his work faithfully.

As Woodlawn looks forward to further decades of God's grace, the prayer and motto of her people is "Soli Deo Gloria". From the testimony of her past she prays that his Word bring success not only among them and in their neighborhood, but among the people of the whole world.