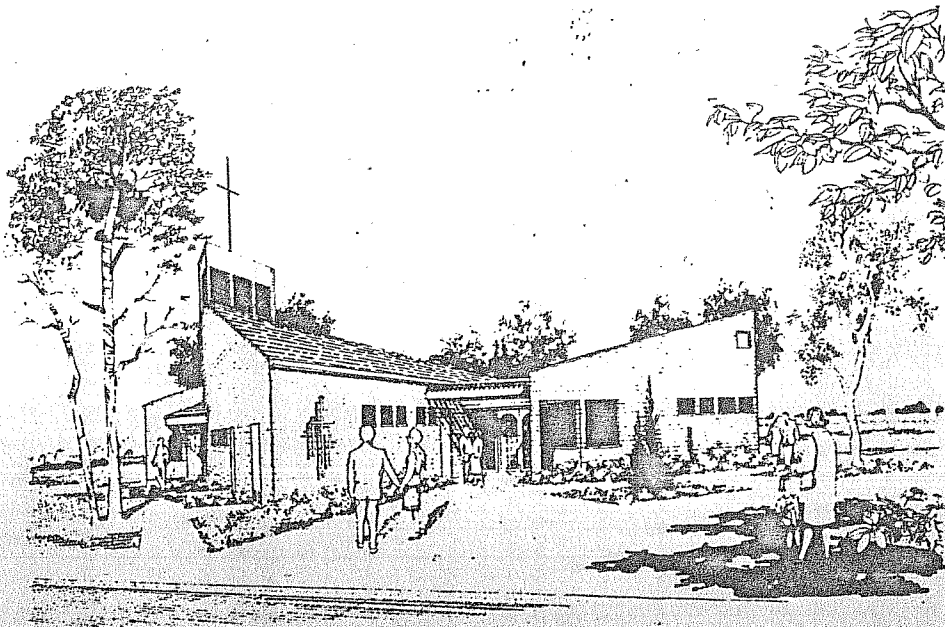


THE HISTORY OF
LIVING WORD EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
OF
PETALUMA CALIFORNIA



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Kitty Hawk, North Carolina -- December 17, 1903. Orville Wright climbs into his bi-plane, "*The Flyer*," and if the words are not actually spoken, a few spectators are no doubt thinking, "It will never get off the ground." Despite the skepticism "*The Flyer*" lived up to its name and the rest is history.

During the early history of what is now Living Word Evangelical Lutheran Church there were those of us who thought to ourselves, and a few who actually stated, that our little mission in the Marin/Sonoma counties of northern California would never "get off the ground." And for good reason. For several years the growth of the mission was minimal while the set backs were plentiful. But our Lord, "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine," did indeed have plans for his Gospel in the Marin/Sonoma area. Our Old Adams may not have always agreed with our Lord's "when" and "how," but our New Man never doubted his promise: "My word that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." The following is the history of how our Lord fulfilled that promise to a group of Christians in northern California.

For the sake of convenience let's divide the history into three segments. I. THE BEGINNING; we will cover the time period between August 1969 to October 1970 during which Living Word operated as an "arm" of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church of Belmont, California.

II. THE YEARS OF STRUGGLE; we will cover the time period between November of 1970 to March of 1975, during which Living Word operated as a ward of the California Mission Board in an exploratory status. And finally, III. FORMAL ORGANIZATION AND SUBSEQUENT HISTORY; we will cover the time period between March 1975 to October of 1981, during which Living Word was granted mission status, called her first pastor and built her chapel.

I. THE BEGINNING: August, 1969 - October, 1970

In August of 1969 there were 32 WELS churches operating in the state of California. None, however, were operating in Marin County, an area along the coast of California just north of San Francisco (see map). When WELS members moved into Marin County and wanted to attend church, they were faced with a few options. There was a WELS church in Belmont, approximately 50 miles to the south of Marin. But that meant at least a one hour trip one way, much of it through the city of San Francisco. There was also a WELS "preaching station" east of Marin County in the city of Concord. Attending there would mean a 70 mile drive one way. The other option for the displaced WELS member, of course, would be to attend a non-WELS church,

In 1964 a WELS family from Salt Lake City, Utah, the Bruce Marggrafs, moved to Marin County and found itself in such a situation. Instead of driving the many miles each Sunday, they chose to attend a LC-MS church in Marin County whose pastor was conservative and identified himself with "the old Missouri." A few times during the years 1964-1968 the Rev. R. Waldschmidt from the WELS church in Belmont contacted this WELS family of Marin and asked them if they were interested in coming to his church or possibly beginning

a WELS mission in Marin. The Marggrafs told Rev. Waldschmidt that they were comfortable attending a Missouri Synod church for the time being and thanked him for his concern.

The 1969 Missouri Synod Convention in Denver left the Marggrafs feeling less than comfortable attending a Missouri Synod church. The reader will remember that at that convention Jacob A. O. Preus, Jr. was elected president of the Missouri Synod. This was an apparent victory for the conservatives of the LC-MS, for Preus was supposedly the man who would return Missouri to its traditional moorings. The convention then turned about-face and, despite the objections of the new president, voted to declare fellowship with the American Lutheran Church.

Our family from Marin felt that it was now time to get out of the Missouri Synod and into a WELS church despite any inconveniences there might be. On August 14, 1969, they and another couple, Maj. and Mrs. Irwin Swett, who were also dissatisfied with the Missouri Synod, traveled to Belmont to ask Rev. Waldschmidt what would all be involved in beginning a WELS mission in Marin County. On August 21 the California Mission Board resolved to authorize Rev. Waldschmidt to proceed with plans for exploratory work there. In September Waldschmidt met with the Marin families, now three, for Bible study and informal worship services and on September 21 the small group held their first formal Sunday worship service at the Novato Community Center in north Marin County. There were eleven in attendance and Pastor Waldschmidt preached on I Corinthians 3: 1-11, "A Carnal Church or a Spiritual Church -- Which?" The writer remembers very little about that first service except for one incident. Sometime during the middle of the service a man came in from

off the street and began yelling at the worshippers and Pastor Waldschmidt. If we would have believed in such a thing, we would have called it an omen of things to come.

For the next three Sundays the Marin group continued meeting at the Novato Community House. At this time they also began doing things every mission does when it organizes. The group began advertising in the newspaper, it elected officers, it made plans for Sunday School and bible class, and it chose a name for itself-- "The Church of the Living Word (Lutheran)." Perhaps the one thing the group didn't give enough thought to was their own status. In the eyes of the California Mission Board and the General Board for Home Missions the Marin group was an "exploratory mission." This meant, of course, that after about six months the work in Marin would be evaluated by the CMB and then a decision would be made as to whether work should continue there. The Marin group, however, considered itself a sister congregation of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church of Belmont. I'm almost certain Waldschmidt was thinking along those same lines for in nearly all the bulletins he wrote while serving the Church of the Living Word he states, "This congregation is an arm of Gloria Dei Ev. Lutheran Church of Belmont and shares the services of the pastor, Robert Waldschmidt." This dual parish/"exploratory mission" arrangement will cause some confusion in the months ahead, as we shall see.

Besides the other aspects of organizing, the Marinites were also busy securing for themselves a more permanent place of worship. Thus on October 19, 1969, the Church of the Living Word (Lutheran) moved into the "social room" above Cloud 5 Bar and Restaurant also in Novato. While there were some obvious disadvantages to

to moving to such a place, there was one major advantage that outweighed them all--the facility was rent free.

During the spring, summer and fall months, worship services were held at 8:30 AM, allowing enough time for Pastor Waldschmidt to return for his 11:00 AM service at Belmont. The writer remembers having to arrive at Cloud 5 at 7:30 AM in order to help clean up the remains of parties from the night before so the social room would look more like a place of worship and less like a dance hall. Even at that early hour it was evident that some people were still enjoying themselves downstairs and the sound of clinking glasses and loud laughter was typical accompaniment to our worship services upstairs. On one occasion, in the middle of Pastor's sermon, country-western music started blaring from the speakers in our upstairs room at about 500 decibels. We thought Judgment Day had arrived. Apparently someone was playing the jukebox downstairs and accidentally flipped the switch for the upstairs speakers.

Needless to say, the eleven months spent above Cloud 5 were interesting for the Church of the Living Word, though humanly speaking, unproductive. Numerically, we lost one of our three families, but we picked up another and one individual. The highlight of the time spent at Cloud 5 must have been the examination and confirmation of our first confirmand on May 17, 1970.

On August 23, 1970 we met at Cloud 5 for the last time, our social room no longer being available. Three weeks later Church of the Living Word set up shop in a conference room at the Bank of Marin of Novato. Our stay there was short-lived. On or about October 10 of that same year a lady failed to negotiate a turn near the Bank of Marin and crashed her car through one of the win-

dows of the bank. The first object that was hit was a small electric organ belonging to Living Word. The organ was completely destroyed but the church was fortunate in that it only had five more payments on the organ and it was still covered by insurance. We were reimbursed for the full amount of the organ. The local paper gave several paragraphs of publicity under the heading, "BANK CRASH FORCES CHURCH INTO HOME." As a result, there were ecumenical offers for use of facilities made by the Episcopalians, the Roman Catholics and even the LC-MS church the founding members had left! The Church of the Living Word had planned to move to a more populated area and the bank crash gave them an excuse to get at it sooner. On October 18, 1970, the mission held its first church service at the Marin Community House of Marinwood.

It's been over a year since the Church of the Living Word formed and you may be wondering about the California Mission Board's evaluation and assessment of the whole situation. As far as I can tell there wasn't any. In a bulletin dated January 4, 1970 Waldschmidt states:

"As of January 1, 1970 this small group became a part of the self-supporting parish together with Gloria Dei Ev. Lutheran Church of Belmont. Until the Belmont congregation gathers more communicant membership this arrangement will prevail. When the Belmont church achieves sufficient strength, Living Word will become a mission station of the Arizona-California District of the Wisconsin Synod."

I don't understand the thinking behind abandoning Living Word when Gloria Dei got strong enough, but this paragraph from the bulletin does explain why there was no evaluation and assessment. Living Word considered herself part of a dual parish arrangement and not an "exploratory station," and therefore an assessment was not necessary.

Anyway, by October of 1970, about the same time of the bank crash, the members of Gloria Dei felt they were strong enough and wanted Pastor Waldschmidt not to devote so much of his time to the Church of the Living Word. Pastor Waldschmidt agreed that it was now time to turn Living Word over exclusively to the California Mission Board. For, as he stated in a letter to the CMB, "This field still has not been 'explored.'" True, he had conducted services, confirmation classes and Bible classes, but real exploratory work--canvassing, calling, ad campaigns, etc.,--had not been done in Marin.

The prospect of becoming shepherdless was a little upsetting to some of the members in Marin. Perhaps because their situation was not the "norm" as far as new missions were concerned. Most missions I've heard of start out without a pastor and then eventually get one. For the Church of the Living Word the opposite happened. They started out with a pastor who served them almost full time. Now they had to go back to where they should have started--as an exploratory mission without the full time use of a pastor. So on October 25, 1970 Pastor Waldschmidt preached his last sermon as "our pastor" and the Church of the Living Word officially became a mission station in exploratory status.

I wondered why the founding members hadn't begun their mission as an exploratory mission through the GBHM. The answer was obvious. Pastor Waldschmidt had started four other churches in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was the man to see about organizing a mission. Besides that, Pastor Waldschmidt offered his services and when it comes to being served full time or part time, I imagine most people will choose to be served full time. And, when I asked the founding

members why they didn't start with the help of the California Mission Board or the GBHM, they replied, "We simply didn't know that was the way to start a mission."

Despite all the confusion, mishaps, and wandering, the Church of the Living Word had made a beginning. And now, in a sense, they would be making a new beginning as an exploratory mission of the CMB, which is the subject of chapter II.

II. THE YEARS OF STRUGGLE: November, 1970 - March, 1975

Beginning in November of 1970 the Church of the Living Word became a ward of the California Mission Board in an exploratory status. For Living Word that simply meant instead of being served by one pastor alone, they were served by three pastors and a hodge-podge of vicars. The pastor roster included Rev. Waldschmidt of Belmont; Rev. Armin Keibel of Concord; and Rev. Robert Hochmuth of Santa Clara. Our vicars included Robert Koester, Paul Schmiede, Brian Terrel, John Boehringer, Marcus Birkholz and Earl Noffsinger.

The mission continued to meet at the Marinwood Community House until April of 1971. Nothing was happening at Marinwood as far as growth goes and when an Episcopal church in the town of Ignacio (also in Marin) became available for rent on Sunday evenings, we saw it as a godsend. The Church of the Living Word moved there with high hopes.

For a brief moment those hopes were realized. Though services had to be switched to the evenings, we did gain some new souls.

Almost all of them were from an LC-MS church in Petaluma that was having trouble with its new liberal pastor. Unfortunately, the stream of Missouri "dissidents" we had hoped for turned out to be no more than a trickle and the membership roster remained pretty much fixed for the next three years. A statistical report for 1972 shows that the mission had 19 souls, 12 communicants, and an average per Sunday attendance of 12.

If you're wondering why the Church of the Living Word didn't make its presence known in Petaluma as soon as trouble started brewing there in the LC-MS church, it should be remembered that the founding members of Living Word were all from Marin and if at all possible they would have liked to see the mission take root and grow there. Still, I have often wondered what would have happened to Living Word if had moved northward to Petaluma at this time instead of waiting for another three years.

Perhaps it should be mentioned that in May of 1971 Pastor Waldschmidt accepted a call to serve a WELS congregation in Mason City, Iowa. In 1974 Waldschmidt left the Wisconsin Synod and began serving a church affiliated with the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR). That didn't surprize anyone too much, for according to one member of Living Word, "He (Waldschmidt) never failed to lambaste the Missouri Synod in his sermons." Pastor Gerald Geiger took Waldschmidt's place at Belmont and in the rotation of pastors serving Living Word.

As was stated before, the two and a half years spent at Ignacio didn't bring the growth in attendance Living Word had hoped for. That doesn't mean mission activity wasn't being done. The pastors and vicars that served Living Word spent much of Sun-

day afternoon, before the evening service, canvassing, making follow-up calls, etc. The laity were involved also. On January 13, 1973, Vicar Brian Terrell of our church in Santa Clara organized a canvass with the young people from our area churches. He concentrated the canvass in the immediate vicinity of our church in Ignacio. But as far as human eyes can see, the work wrought by these servants of the Lord was in vain. Not one "good" prospect was found. What was needed was someone who could devote all of his time, not just Sunday afternoons, to seeing whether there was mission potential in Marin County.

In March of 1973 the California Mission Board decided to bring such a man to Living Word. That man was Pastor Hugo M. Warnke, formally of the LC-MS, who was called by WELS to serve as "Mission Developer" in California. Previous fields he developed in California include: Yucaipa, Lancaster, North Hollywood, Victorville, Torrance, and Fresno. When Pastor Warnke received his call to serve Living Word he was completing his work in Las Vegas. Once again Living Word had high hopes. Pastor Warnke, whose forte seemed to be mission work, was the answer to all our problems.

Pastor Warnke and his wife moved to Marin in mid July of 1973 and he didn't waste any time getting started. He had only six months to work in Marin before the CMB would ask for an evaluation and Warnke wanted to make the most of the time he had. One of the first things he did at Marin was to plan a Vacation Bible School to be held August 13-24. The church advertised as best they could in the time available and we were pleasantly surprised when 21 children showed up on the first day. As it turned

out, enrollment more than doubled from the first day to the last, with a high of 49. But again, no prospects were found for church membership. But the members of Living Word didn't view this as a failure. Each child ended those two weeks much richer than when he came the first day. And for the first time the congregation as a whole felt like it was doing something productive.

Warnke's next move was to move Living Word back to the Marin Community House of Marinwood. He felt it was imperative to have Sunday services in the morning which was impossible at Ignacio. He also felt that the Marinwood area of Marin hadn't been thoroughly "explored." Our first service there for the second time around was held on September 2, 1973.

Later that fall Warnke organized a canvass, again utilizing the young people from our churches south of Marin. Again the results of the canvass were discouraging: no prospects.

On December 30, 1973, Pastor Warnke preached his last sermon for the Church of the Living Word. On that day he told the members that he would advise the Mission Board not to grant Living Word "mission status." He also said that he felt Living Word had no future as a mission church and recommended that we disband and attend at either Belmont or an FAL church in Vallejo some 45 miles away.

I imagine the next few months were pretty dismal for the Church of the Living Word. The group continued meeting at the Marin Community House for Sunday services but no pastor served them. Either President Swett or Sec-Tres. Marggraf would conduct the Liturgy and for the sermon, the members would listen to cassette tapes from WELS churches from Oshkosh and Eagle River. Once a month

a vicar would come to conduct the service and distribute communion.

One thing stands out in the mind of the writer concerning those services at the Marin Community House. The altar in our worship area at the Community House was right against a window that overlooked the path to the Marin Community Pool. It was hard to concentrate on those taped sermons when people in bathing suits were walking behind the altar.

In the early fall of 1974, member Elaine Wilson suggested that Living Word move out of Marin County and give Petaluma a try. She and her family were from Petaluma and they apparently knew that the LC-MS church up there was still having trouble with their liberal pastor. Members were actually breaking away from the church. Since it was generally felt that any more time or effort spent in Marin would be wasted, Living Word again pulled up stakes and this time headed north. The obvious feeling was that if the people won't go to the church, you bring the church to the people.

In September of that same year, Living Word rented a Seventh-Day Adventist church in Petaluma. That same month it came to the attention of one of the members that a retired LC-MS pastor was living in the area by the name of Albert C. Young. When approached by us, Pastor Young agreed to serve Living Word for the time being. At our first service in Petaluma, at our new church, under our new pastor, there were over 60 in attendance. True, most of them were Missouri Synod at the time, but a good share of them ended up leaving their LC-MS church and joining Living Word. It was nice to see there were still people in the world who were interested in hearing the pure Word of God. Through Pastor Young's hard work and influence, the Holy Spirit built up our membership to