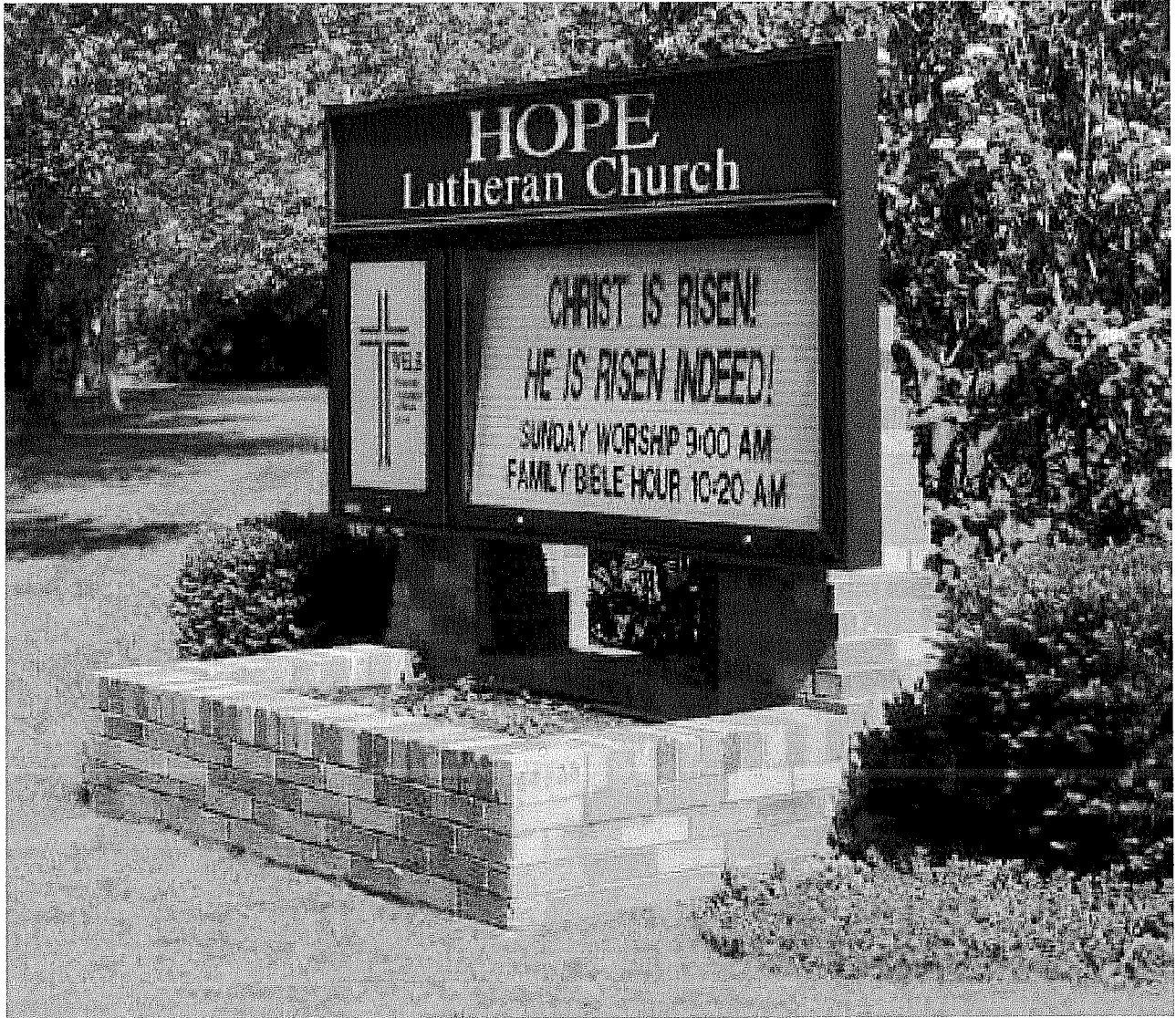


A STORY OF HOPE



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Throughout history, the Christian church has struggled to survive against seemingly insurmountable odds. First century Christians were often persecuted and killed for believing in Jesus Christ. Although the odds were certainly against the church during these times, the church survived. In fact, it thrived and grew. During the Reformation, Luther and the other Reformers once again faced the possibility of death at the hands of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor for their attempts to restore the teaching of the gospel in all of its truth and purity. Despite all of this, a new church was formed that stuck to the foundational principles of Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Sola Scriptura which God's Word teaches so clearly.

The history of Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church, located in Louisville Kentucky, closely parallels the history of the Christian church. No, none of Hope's members have faced the threat of death because of their faith. However, from a human viewpoint, the odds against the successful building of a WELS Lutheran mission in Louisville were almost as insurmountable as those faced by first century Christians and those faced by Luther and the other Reformers. The members of Hope have faced some very large obstacles as they have grown over the years.

Adherents to Roman Catholicism account for roughly 50% of Louisville residents, who claim to be Christian. The remaining 50% are made up of Southern Baptists, a large number of Pentecostals, and other Christian denominations. The number of Lutherans in Louisville is so minute that they are hardly noticed. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has a few congregations in Louisville but they are small and go quite unnoticed by most Louisville residents. The same is true for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Merely mention that you are Lutheran and you will probably be

met with the question, "Is that a Christian denomination." The other typical reaction is to lump Lutherans in with Roman Catholics. This is true among the large number of unchurched individuals as well. As Pastor Meier said, "Louisvillians could not even spell Lutheran let alone pronounce it."

Because Lutheranism is relatively unheard of in Louisville, evangelism is seriously hindered. The members of Hope have traditionally found it difficult to build bridges that allow them to share the gospel with their neighbors.

This was complicated by cultural differences. The German Lutheran culture in which most WELS members have grown up and lived is a far different culture than the culture of the south and the culture of most of the denominations so prevalent in the Louisville area. The culture in which most WELS members, indeed most Lutherans, have lived is one that is very reserved. Displays of emotions are kept in check except between the closest of family members and then are allowed to be displayed only in very private settings. In contrast, displays of affection are encouraged, indeed expected, in the southern culture. Walk into any Baptist or Pentecostal church in Louisville and you can expect an overflowing of greetings accompanied by hearty handshakes and hugs.

How has Hope survived and grown given such obstacles? The story of Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church is a story of struggle, spiritual growth of her members, and tremendous blessings from God. This little church is aptly named. Despite the obstacles, hope reigns supreme in the hearts of the believers that gather at Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church every Sunday morning.

Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church began as a vision of a very small group of believers wanting a church that taught the gospel in all of its truth and purity. It began as

a dream of Norman and Margaret Long who began to reach out to others they knew that shared their longing. Mr. and Mrs. Long began to talk to their friends, Clarence and Elsie Rogers about their dream of starting a WELS mission in Louisville. They began to seek advice from the synod and began to seek out others who shared their desire. In 1972, Pastor John Raabe, the District Mission Board Chairman, met with a small group of people led by the Longs. It was decided to investigate the possibility of starting and exploratory mission in Louisville. Actually the focus really centered on the Radcliff/Fort Knox area because many of the early prospects were military families living in that area. After some preliminary investigative efforts, it was decided by the synod that exploratory efforts should not proceed at that time. It appeared that the dream of Norman and Margaret Long was about to die.

The Longs and others who desired to see a WELS mission in the Louisville area did not give up easily. In fact, Mr. Long constantly reminded everyone, "Just because things don't look good is no reason to quit" (Rogers). The Longs met Clarence and Elsie Rogers and enlisted them in their efforts to start a new mission in Louisville. They continued to work and continued to stay in contact with the synod. The result was that in the following year the exploratory efforts on the part of the synod would resume. On June 17, 1973, the first exploratory service was held in the Jefferson County Farm Bureau building near the airport in Louisville. The congregation paid \$30 a month. The insurance company provided the chairs and tables. The Rogers and Longs would come on Sunday and set up and take down the chairs. Mr. Long obtained an old army field organ that Mrs. Long played for the services. Pastor John Raabe presided over that first

service in which there were 22 people in attendance. Mission status was formally granted on November 5, 1973.

On February 17, 1974, the members of this fledgling congregation met to choose a name for their new church. Several names were presented as options. Mrs. Elsie Rogers submitted the name Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church based on a verse of scripture that she loved, Hebrews 6:19. *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.* The members in attendance at the meeting agreed and the upstart mission congregation finally became known as Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Pastor Raabe, with help from the pastors in the Indianapolis area served Hope until their first pastor was ordained and installed July 14, 1974. Reverend James Castillo began his career in the ministry that day. A brand new congregation and a brand new pastor took steps of faith and waited to see where God would lead them.

Pastor Castillo obtained housing on Fern Valley Road in the south end of Louisville with plans to start the new congregation in that area due to its close proximity to the Radcliff/Fort Knox area a short one-hour away. The congregation continued to worship in the Jefferson County Farm Bureau Insurance building on 730 Locust Lane and even moved with them when they also moved south to Gardiner Lane. Church attendance was sporadic reaching as high as 40 some Sundays with an average of approximately 20 people per service. The lack of a permanent worship facility hindered the evangelism efforts because people viewed the congregation as a fly by night operation.

After Pastor Castillo left in 1977, the attendance dropped until Reverend Edward Meier was ordained on June 26, 1977. Once again, a new pastor was called to serve a

still infant congregation. After Pastor Meier came, attendance quickly began to average about 35 to 40 people per service. However, as it had been when Pastor Castillo was there, attendance seemed go up and down. Most of the members that came to Hope were transfers from Wisconsin and Michigan. Very few new members came from the Louisville area. Those that did generally were disgruntled Missouri Synod members who were leaving the Missouri Synod because of their dissatisfaction with the synod's introduction of a new hymnal to replace the old TLH.

Just before Pastor Meier arrived at Hope, the congregation purchased property in the Beckley Woods subdivision of Westport Road in the east end of Louisville. This was very upscale subdivision. When time came to start building, the developer would not allow the congregation to build a building suitable for a small mission congregation. He insisted that members would have to build a building that would be in keeping with the upscale neighborhood and insisted that they also have their own sewage treatment plant. The restrictions placed on the congregation by the developer forced the congregation to sell the land back to the developer, albeit at a considerable profit.

The congregation was approached by a Missouri synod church in Jeffersonville Indiana who wanted them to consider buying their facilities so that they could move to a location in a more rural setting outside of Jeffersonville. The property included a beautiful old Lannon stone church building and a school. They offered them the property for a very reasonable price. In addition, they indicated that there was a good chance that many of their older members who were not able to drive out to their new location would probably remain and become members of Hope. They expected that as much as 10% to 20% of their congregation would remain and become members of Hope. By this time,

the church was up to approximately 20 families attending every Sunday. Approximately half of these families lived in southern Indiana and were all for purchasing this church. They reasoned that they would have virtually an instant congregation and could still start a mission in Louisville. In Pastor Meier's words, "The synod didn't go for it." The synod was committed to starting the mission in Louisville.

After selling the property in Beckley Station, the congregation finally purchased two acres of land on Chamberlain lane in the Hickory Hollow subdivision that Pastor Meier admits he found by accident. Pastor Meier was driving around and saw the for sale sign and talked to the farmer who agreed to divide the land and sell them the two acres. The congregation finally broke ground for their new building on April 15, 1981. A multipurpose building was erected to serve the congregation's worship, education, and fellowship needs. In addition, a parsonage was also built. This effort came with its own set of problems and discouragements in the form of disputes over poor work on the part of the contractor.

The church purchased an altar, pulpit, and pews from a church in Michigan. Pastor Meier said that he really was against that idea wanting to use the chairs in order to keep the versatility of their building. However, he says that they had quite a few people from Wisconsin who wanted a "church atmosphere." They purchased and refurbished the furniture and the congregation had the "church atmosphere" they wanted. Pastor Meier's initial feeling would, however, prove to be correct. Down the road, this would be a cause of some dissension.

The dedication day was a happy occasion, but the congregation quickly realized that there were no longer any excuses. It was time to get down to the real work of

sharing the gospel. Council meetings became very interesting with council members clashing over what they should be doing and how to do it.

The new church building did help make inroads into the community. Immediately after the building was completed the church picked up about 3 families from the neighborhood.

Pastor Meier not only served the congregation in Louisville but also traveled to Evansville Indiana where at one time he had as many as 12 people meeting for Bible study. In addition, he served a group of people in Lexington Kentucky where, as with Evansville, he would drive down to conduct Bible study. Many of these people would drive up and attend services at Hope on the weekends when Pastor Meier did not come to them. The Evansville mission eventually died as people moved back north.

In late 1982 or early 1983, Pastor Meier accepted another call and once again, the members of Hope had to begin the search for a new pastor. In April 1983, Reverend David Meister was ordained and installed. Soon after, the congregation began to experience growth in membership. Again, most of the growth came from Wisconsin natives being transferred in and from a few local people who continued to be angry over the introduction of the new hymnal in the Missouri Synod churches.

Membership grew to approximately 70 families and attendance often reached 100 by the time Pastor Meister accepted a call to serve in Neosho Wisconsin at the end of 1987. Part of the reason for the lack of growth must be credited to the fact that there had never been any kind of organized evangelism effort on the part of the congregation. Pastor Meister said that the only work done in the area of evangelism was when he took

walks around the neighborhood. Of course, his efforts were often frustrated by the ignorance of Louisvillians regarding the Lutheran church.

For nine months, Hope was without a permanent pastor. However, God did not leave his little flock totally abandoned without a shepherd. Pastor Norman Engel graciously accepted the call to serve as vacancy pastor as the congregation searched for next shepherd. That search lasted for a full nine months. During that time some growth continued. My wife and I began attending services at Hope about 4 weeks before Pastor Meister departed. It was during the time that Pastor Engel served that we became members. Like those few Louisville natives before us, we came from the Missouri Synod although our dissatisfaction with LCMS was far deeper than the introduction of the NIV Bible or a new hymnal. Pastor Engel served Hope well during those nine months and was loved by every member of the congregation.

After many months of searching, Pastor Steven Mischke accepted the call to serve as Pastor at Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church. Prior to coming to Louisville, Pastor Mischke served a congregation in Battle Creek Michigan. Pastor Mischke was the first permanent pastor that arrived with prior experience serving a congregation. That experience would be needed to deal with the daunting tasks facing him. Many members drove from as far away as Lexington Kentucky, the Radcliff/Fort Knox area, and southern Indiana.

When Pastor Mischke arrived in the fall of 1988, he was surprised at what he found. On the one hand, the congregation was very strong doctrinally. However, there was a lack of emphasis on evangelism and some very backward thinking. Much of the time in elders meetings was spent arguing over the switch from the King James Version

of the Bible to the New International Version and over the impending switch from the 1941 TLH to the new Christian Worship.

Other problems arose as well. The altar and the pews which Pastor Meier had originally expressed concerns about had now become a real problem. With 70 members and sometimes as many as 100 people attending church on any given Sunday, it was paramount that the entire building be used in the most efficient way possible. When Pastor Mischke arrived, a soundproof curtain divided the building in half. People were crammed into half of the building for church and then expected to squeeze their way out the door and through another door to get around the "sacred curtain" and into the fellowship hall for coffee and refreshments. After much gentle prodding, the congregation realized that it was time for the sacred curtain and the pews to leave. New paint, new carpeting, and new padded chairs were purchased. The sacred curtain was permanently opened. The basement of the parsonage was finished so that Pastor could have an office and another large room, which served as a meeting room for Sunday School and council meetings. Later this room could be utilized as a recreation room for the pastor and his family. Pastor Mischke identifies this period as the turning point for the congregation. It wasn't the cosmetic changes that were so important as the changes in attitude. For the first time, the congregation started to think about evangelism and it showed in their making the changes to the facilities to accommodate the larger crowds they hoped to attract. Of course, change is never easy. For some, it was simply intolerable. A few of those Missouri synod people left because of the changes from the King James Version of the Bible and introduction of the Sampler which occurred simultaneously with the changes to the building.

If the early years of the congregation were a struggle, the decade of the 90's were definitely the golden years for Hope. In October of 1990, Hope started its first daughter congregation, **Our Savior-Lexington Kentucky**. Although Hope lost 25 members to that daughter congregation, the attitude remained upbeat. Within a year, God had supplied enough new members to make up for the 25 that went to Lexington. However, this was a mixed blessing. While the addition of these new members was a great blessing to be thankful for, there was a continuing note of sadness because most of these were once again Wisconsin transplants or disgruntled Missouri Synod members and not the results of the congregation's evangelism efforts to reach local people who needed to hear about their Savior.

The 90's were also a time of tremendous growth in the area of worship. The Sampler and eventually the new hymnal combined with the formation of a choir for the first time added more joy to worship. The people of Hope began to realize that there was more than just pages 5 and 15 in TLH and that variety in music and liturgy could be a good thing. Even some of the staunch old Missouri converts began to understand and appreciate the joy that variety added to the services.

Of course, the 90's also came with many challenges. The biggest challenge facing the congregation was the start of a building program. The WEF unit that had served the congregation so well for so many years could no longer meet the needs of the congregation. A building committee was formed and plans were drawn up to add a sanctuary and classroom space to the existing building. The architect came back with a design and an estimated cost of \$750,000 to build the sanctuary and 8 classrooms. For a while, fear gripped many of the members at the prospect of spending that kind of money.

The challenge was to get the congregation to develop a plan for growth and take a leap of faith by executing that plan and leaving the responsibility for results in the Lord's hands.

Once again, divine providence worked in favor of the congregation. Within days of receiving the architect's plans, an ELCA congregation that was about to disband approached the congregation. They owned property about a mile from the Chamberlain Lane location where Hope had been meeting since 1981. The building included everything the congregation had asked to be included in the original plans the architect had drawn up. The congregation purchased that building on Shenandoah Drive at a bargain price and sold their existing WEF unit to a new Free Will Baptist congregation for a price very close to the cost of the new building. When Pastor Mischke contacted the Board for Home Missions chairman, Harry Hagedorn, the chairman was in a state of shock. He told Pastor Mischke that such things did not happen in home missions settings.

Shortly after the purchase of the building was completed in September 1993, a hailstorm hit the Louisville area. Because of the storm, the insurance company paid the cost of having the roof replaced on the new building, a cost that the congregation was looking at having to pay anyway because the buildings prior owners had neglected a lot of necessary maintenance due to their lack of funds created by the loss of members over the years. Still, additional monies were borrowed to pay for other expenses involved in redecorating and fixing up the new property.

By far, the toughest challenge the congregation faced was evangelism. Of course, this is nothing new, evangelism had always been the toughest challenge facing the congregation. There was still a lack of evangelistic zeal on the part of most of the

members of the congregation. What the congregation needed was a plan for growth. What the congregation needed was a clear mission. On August 12, 1993, for the first time a mission statement was adopted. This mission statement was the product of a lot of hard work on behalf of the stewardship committee with help from the Church Council, Board of Elders, and all of the other committees. A Bible study was planned and carried into the home of every member of the congregation. Along with the Bible study, a survey was drawn up which allowed every member to have input into creation of the church's mission statement. The mission statement focused on the Great Commission and set down specific goals for meeting its mission. The goals focused on both nurture and outreach. The congregation for the first time had a road map and a specific direction and destination they hoped to reach.

The mission statement was only the beginning. At that time, I was elected as President of the Evangelism committee. With the support of Pastor Mischke, Dave Neiderstadt, the President of the Congregation, the Church Council, and the Board of Elders, the Evangelism Committee set to work preparing Bible studies and evangelism training programs. One Saturday a month was spent doing surveys of the neighborhood and sharing the gospel with our neighbors. As many as 10 people would show up and go out into the neighborhood sharing the gospel and inviting people to church.

The Evangelism efforts met with limited success because of factors previously mentioned. There was still a lack of trust on the part of the neighbors because of their unfamiliarity with Lutheranism. The one thing that was still lacking was a point of contact whereby bridges could be built between the church and the community that would encourage our neighbors to give us an opportunity to share the gospel. The church

needed some way to become involved in the lives of the people of the community and build up a trust to obtain an opportunity to share the gospel with them.

The other problem was an internal problem. It had to do with those Wisconsin transplants and those who came from the Missouri Synod. It was the cultural issue. One of the greatest blessings that Hope enjoyed was a curse when it came to the congregation's evangelism efforts. The Hope family is exactly that a close, tight-knit family. The problem is that it is so tight-knit that it becomes almost impossible for a visitor to break in and become a part of the family. That reserved German culture has not been inviting to people who are used to and enjoy a more open culture where displays of affection between total strangers is the norm. Failure to loosen the bonds that knit the Hope family together just enough to allow others to be adopted into that family hindered even their best Evangelism efforts.

1995 was a year in which the congregation lost many of its most active members. Dave Niederstadt and I left Hope to go to New Ulm and begin our studies for the public ministry. Dave entered the staff ministry program and I began my studies for the pastoral ministry. Several others also left Hope to return to Wisconsin and other areas in the Midwest.

July 1996 was another banner month for Hope. In that month, Hope started its second daughter congregation in the area where the congregation first considered back in 1972. In July 1996, **Faith-Radcliff/Fort Knox** officially became an exploratory mission. Of course, unofficially, they had been meeting for over a year on their own. Sunday services were transmitted via the phone lines from Hope every Sunday as a small group

of people gathered together in Radcliff to worship their Savior. Pastor Mischke and lay leaders visited often to lead Bible studies as well.

In January 1997, Hope once again took a leap of faith and opened Precious Lambs Christian Child Care Center on property across the street from the church that the congregation purchased in August of 1996 and had spent 4 months refurbishing. Prior to the purchase, a secular childcare center had been operated on the property. For the first time, it looked as if perhaps one of the missing ingredients in their evangelism program was finally in place. It was hoped that the childcare center would provide that point of contact with the community that had been missing for all those years. If Hope could earn the people's trust by providing good Christian childcare for the children of the neighborhood maybe that trust could also be used to gain the opportunity to share the gospel with their neighbors.

Unfortunately, the child-care center presented more problems than it solved. Hope was not large enough to support called workers to staff the daycare center. Since its opening, the church has struggled to hire and keep qualified, dedicated workers and to ensure that the children are exposed to the saving message of the gospel. Despite the problems, approximately 3 families have joined the church because of contact made through the daycare. Currently, there are 99 children enrolled in the daycare. However, it remains a drain on the financial resources of the congregation and the time of the pastor and a couple of members. It remains to be seen whether the congregation will be able to continue to keep the daycare center or whether they will be forced to decide that God has chosen to lead them in a different direction.

In 1998, Pastor Mischke accepted a call to serve a congregation in Grainger Indiana after serving in Louisville for 10 years. On July 12, 1998, Reverend Steven Lange was installed as pastor of Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church. Much of his time since 1998 has been spent addressing the needs of the congregation in the areas of spiritual growth.

As was the case in the 90's, the church needs to reexamine themselves and their mission in carrying the gospel to those who do not know Christ as their personal Savior. Currently, they are involved in just such self-examination with help of the Board for Parish Services. They must, once again, attempt to foster a mission mindset in their members. It may be that they need to find new ways to establish points of contact in the lives of the members of their community.

Hope still faces many challenges. From a human standpoint, it often appears as if they are teetering on the brink of extinction just as their forefathers have down through ages. However, from the eyes of faith one sees a different picture. In the words of Norman Long who now rests comfortably in the arms of his Savior with his wife Margaret by his side, "Just because things don't look good is no reason to quit." The members of Hope still carry the same hope that Elsie Rogers carried with her until she too went to be with her Savior a few years ago. *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.* (He 6:19) Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church rests in the hands of Jesus Christ. He will continue to use her for His glory.

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Minutes of Church Council and Voter's Assembly Meetings from 1990 to present.