

Holy Trinity: One of Its Kind

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Grand Rapids is a big, beautiful city located in the southwest part of Michigan. It has recreation, industry and agriculture. Grand Rapids also has over 500,000 people living in it, of whom almost 90% are Christian. When Grand Rapids is compared with Milwaukee, they appear to be similar. Milwaukee is a bit larger--over 700,000 people. The percentage of Christians may even be similar. But there is one major difference between the two cities and that is ^{the number of} Wisconsin Synod churches. In the city proper, Milwaukee has 38 churches, while in Grand Rapids proper there are none. While there are over 60 congregations in the greater Milwaukee area, there is only one Wisconsin Synod church in the Grand Rapids area, but that is in a small suburb on the southwest side of town--Wyoming. When one thinks about this fact, one question always comes to mind, "Why only one church?" Why the only one its kind?

Granted, when Grand Rapids is compared with Milwaukee, there are some obvious reasons why the Wisconsin Synod is stronger in Milwaukee. The Wisconsin Synod was founded in Milwaukee, flourished there and then spread out. Milwaukee is the heart of the Wisconsin Synod. Milwaukee is also primarily German--the roots of Lutheranism, while Grand Rapids is located in Dutch country, *which* has its leaning to the Christian Reformed. But the question still remains, "Why only one WELS church in Grand Rapids?" This paper

will try to answer that question. We will look at the one church's--Holy Trinity's--past, see what was done for growth, how it grew and also what the future holds for this congregation and for the Grand Rapids area.

It all began in 1961 when one family became increasingly dissatisfied with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to which they belonged. This family was concerned about the liberal doctrine that was being fostered and practiced by their church. So inquiries were made about the Wisconsin Synod, which has long been concerned about faithful adherence to God's Word. This family also asked about the possibility of establishing a Wisconsin Synod mission in ~~the~~ Wyoming area. After this, more families became involved in this matter.

The request of these families was turned over to the Mission Board of the Michigan District. The Mission Board was asked to determine: 1) how these people could best be served, and 2) the possibility of starting a mission congregation. The Mission Board directed Rev. Westendorf, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in South Haven, to begin some preliminary survey work in the area.

In October of 1961, Rev. Westendorf contacted a layman in the area, Glen Gibson (later to become the congregation's first president), and asked him to be the contact person in the Grand Rapids area. This was necessary because someone was needed to put out press releases and other vital information. He also was helpful in further explorations. In addition to this, the need was also

there for a "home-base"--a place where they could meet and talk. At this time, Rev. Daniel Habeck of Grace Lutheran Church in Muskegon was appointed as the pastor in charge. A meeting was held to determine the most likely area to begin exploratory work. It was felt that Wyoming would be the most favorable area. Wyoming was growing and had the potential for more growth.

In the Spring of 1962, Rev. Walter Beckman and members of his congregation in Battle Creek conducted a survey of the area. Press releases were put out stating that a Wisconsin Synod mission was beginning. This prompted a number of inquiries from interested parties. It was thought at this time that there were approximately twenty families who shared in the concern for doctrinal truths. It was also thought that these twenty would be the nucleus that would form the base for the new mission. Interestingly, it was later discovered that the majority of them were not really concerned about doctrinal matters, but that German services were being curtailed in their own congregation and they had hopes that a Wisconsin Synod pastor would be able to accommodate them. Many of them turned away when they learned services would be conducted in English. But there were some from that group of twenty who left ^{the Missouri Synod} for doctrinal reasons.

In October of 1962, a call was extended to Rev. Harold Hemple of Hutchinson, Minnesota. He accepted the call but did not move to Wyoming immediately because there was no house for them yet. By January of 1963, property for a

for a church and a parsonage were purchased.

In as much as the congregation had not been formally established, informational meetings were held at the houses of interested families. Necessary business was transacted and plans were formulated. At one such meeting a name was selected for the church--Holy Trinity.

For the first six weeks following Rev. Hemple's installation, no worship services were held. During those six weeks Rev. Hemple made contacts with people. Finally, on February 17, they were ready to begin actual services. Having rented the gym of East Newhall Public School for worship services, they had nineteen souls present for the first service. Services were held in this gym for the next nineteen months until their own chapel was built.

Much was done to aid ~~the~~ Holy Trinity's growth. Many contacts were made. These people in turn would speak to their concerned friends who were still in the Missouri Synod. These same people would likewise go out to canvass the area. But with the area being so large and having so few people to do it, help was needed. It was then arranged to have the Evangelism Committee for the Southwestern Conference come to Wyoming and canvass the area. So on a certain Sunday in May, over 5,000 homes were contacted. After this general canvass, Holy Trinity made follow-up calls on those who were considered "good" prospects.

With the number of calls to be made so large, Rev. Hemple found it almost impossible to do this by himself.

So, through the District Mission Board, four undergraduates from the Seminary came and helped make follow-up calls. These four men came twice during that summer, early and then again later. This helped a great deal to aid in the growth of Holy Trinity.

In addition to the canvassing, quite a bit of material was produced about the congregation. Newspaper ads were used for a while, but this got to be quite expensive. Holy Trinity was listed in the neighborhood's motels. For Advent, Lent, Easter, etc., special materials were made up and distributed in the community.

When we look at the growth of this congregation (or any for that matter), we need to remember that it is the Lord who gives the increase. All we do or can do is deliver His Gospel message. However, in carrying out the Lord's directive, Holy Trinity felt that this mission should begin with a school. This was and is not standard procedure of the Mission Board, but in this case they permitted it. Grand Rapids is predominantly Christian Reformed territory and that church body is very much school-minded. In Grand Rapids, they have many schools, at every level. So, not only for the solid base of Holy Trinity, but also to be able to compete, they felt it was necessary to begin with a school.

In 1963, the congregation planned and built its own worship facility. The plan was to build a Christian Day School. Two of the classrooms were used for the Day School and two for worship. On September 13, 1964, the

building was dedicated. That fall also saw them open its doors for its Christian Day School. It opened with nine students with Robert Mohr its one teacher. The plan was to build a regular worship facility in the future once adequate growth came and then use the ^{entire} school as a school.

The years that followed saw many changes at Holy Trinity. It saw three vacancies in the pastorate and three new pastors: Ronald Semro (1970-76); Richard Raabe (1976-80) and Frederick Adrian (1980-present). It also saw nine different teachers. The church grew at a steady pace for a number of years, but then stayed at a plateau for a while. In the mid-70's the church ^{once} again began to grow.

Although the church did not grow by leaps and bounds, it did have a steady pace. All the pastors did what they could to reach out to more people with the Word, realizing it was the Lord's doing. On page 15 is a chart showing the growth of Holy Trinity from 1963-1982.

Rev. Semro was very excited about the "Talk About the Savior" program. This was beneficial for the church, but not enough people from the congregation were involved in the program and so this program did not fair very well. Rev. Semro and the congregation felt that more people needed to hear about Holy Trinity and this is what they tried to accomplish. Cable TV was just getting starting in the area at this time and a couple of times Rev. Semro was invited on a program to talk about the school and the church.

Rev. Raabe used similar methods during his time at Holy Trinity to aid in its growth. He tried to get as much of the congregation involved as he could. He got many of them involved in canvassing. This method helped the congregation because the Reformed Church in that area are not canvass-minded. But Rev. Raabe attributed much of Holy Trinity's growth to Vacation Bible School. During his years at Holy Trinity, Vacation Bible School attendance ranged from 120-150 children. He felt that this was a major step, because in Vacation Bible School, you get names. This in turn led to prospective members. Rev. Raabe felt that it was an ^{arm} of the church that helped them reach out to other people in the community.

Growth of Holy Trinity remained steady when Rev. Adrian arrived in 1980. At the time of his arrival, there was no real organized outreach program in the church. This was the case until 1982 when an Evangelism Committee was elected. At the time of this writing the official outreach of the church is follow-up calls by the pastor on those who have signed the guest register on Sunday mornings.

Holy Trinity does *do* some advertising at this time. They have a listing in the "Yellow Pages." In addition to this, the members of the congregation help. They talk to other people about their church and invite them to church and also to the Adult Information Class.

Things have been going well for Holy Trinity and they have grown over the past twenty years. But there have been problems. Some of these I believe have hurt

the growth of Holy Trinity. Many churches have problems which could probably account for decrease in growth, but Holy Trinity's problems are somewhat unique.

One of these problems has to do with the school. When the church started in 1963 the Mission Board, along with the members, thought that for Holy Trinity to grow in Grand Rapids, they would need a Day School. They thought they would need this so they could "compete" with the Christian Reformed, who are very much pro-Day School. So a school building was built with two rooms used for worship. Perhaps the Mission Board did not know as much in 1963 as they do now in 1983 about starting a mission. We need to remember that Holy Trinity began at the time of the split with Missouri Synod and Missouri Synod was the one who usually began such endeavors.

But the Synod permitted Holy Trinity to begin with a school, which is not the policy today. Synod also subsidized everything in a mission back then--the church, school, pastor and teacher. Holy Trinity was also permitted to jump from one teacher to two teachers in a short period of time, all of which was subsidized. The rug was pulled out from under them when Holy Trinity's subsidy was cut off and they were forced to cut back to one teacher.

This was a frustrating time for the congregation. The congregation was not able to meet all its debts. This, in addition to a personality conflict between a pastor and a teacher, led to a division within the church. This made matters worse. One group was in favor of a Christian

Day School at any cost while the other was in favor of erecting a new worship facility, even if it meant getting rid of the school. The prevailing attitude at the time was that the school was a burden which kept them from growing and building a new church building. It always seemed that just when things appeared to be a little better financially and they had some extra money^{with which} to think about building, then the school needed something and the money was gone. For many years there was a very negative attitude concerning the school. Now this negative attitude is diminishing.

This is their situation today--a temporary worship facility. This^{is the} same as it has been for the last twenty years and this still bothers some people in the congregation. It is still a "church" without pews (folding chairs are used). This in turn causes a seating problem. The church can seat 152 people. But on those Sundays when there are over 160 in attendance, the church is extremely crowded. Some people use this as an excuse to stay home, but it is really no excuse at all. That kind of "problem" is good. It means the church is growing.

What does the future hold for Holy Trinity? Do they see the church continuing to grow? They believe it will grow with the help of the Lord. As I said before, they now have elected an Evangelism Committee. Now, perhaps for the first time in the congregation's history, they have set down some goals that they want to reach with regard to their communicant and soul growth. What follows

is Holy Trinity's projected growth patterns along with their plans.

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>COMM</u>	<u>SOULS</u>	<u>CH. ATT.</u>	<u>AD. CONF.</u>	<u>PLANS</u>
1981	231	319	185	10	
1982	254	351	207	12	
1983	279	386	239	12	20th Anniversary Plan building
1984	312	432	281	17	Build Church
1985	343	475	299	16	Add 2nd teacher
1986	370	513	323	14	
1987	399	554	355	15	
1988	429	595	369	15	25th Anniversary
1989	421	595	369	16	Start church in Jenison (45 souls--40 comm.)
1990	450	637	389	15	
1991	477	675	412	13	Call 3rd teacher
1992	500	709	432	11	
1993	477	682	423	10	Start church on North side (55 souls-43 comm)
1994	494	706	438	9	Call vicar
1995	509	728	458	8	
1996	524	750	465	8	
1997	540	773	479	8	L.A.C.E. debt paid
1998	562	804	498	11	Plan and build fellowship
1999	579	828	522	9	Call 4th teacher
2000	536	778	490	9	Start church in Kentwood (75 souls-60 comm)
2001	552	801	505	8	

Rev. Adrian, the present pastor, is also optimistic about the continued growth for Holy Trinity. He sees a number of reasons for this;

1. "We are in a good location. Wyoming may not be the fastest growing area in the Grand Rapids area, but it has a lot of potential for growth over the next years.
2. "We are in a good location. Burlingame and 44th Sts. are both major streets of the city, and we are within 4 miles of two major interstate highways (US 131 and I 196).
3. "We are seriously contemplating the construction of a new worship facility. And a new building project always sparks enthusiasm in the people within the congregation, and also sparks some interest from the people who are outside the church.
4. "We are beginning to do more things outside of church services, even things in the community (like a men's softball league), which gives us a chance to advertise our church to the outside world.
5. "Our congregation seems to be, at least to my way of thinking, energetic, friendly and willing to do things. This is always good for growth.
6. "Many of the Lutheran Churches in our area are very liberal, so we stand as perhaps the only Lutheran Church in the city that is still conservative."

Rev. Adrian does see some problems which could result in slow growth. One of the biggest reasons he sees for slow growth is our doctrines. He feels that too many "former Lutherans" have been inundated with liberal theology to the point that the Truth may now be offensive to them. But what must also be kept in mind is the Christian Reformed Church, which is a Bible-believing conservative church. The differences between the Christian Reformed and the Wisconsin Synod is sometimes very subtle and many people cannot see the differences. So they attend the bigger church.

When talking about the Reformed, it always brings up

the question whether the Reformed have hindered the growth of Holy Trinity, because over 85% of those living in Grand Rapids are Reformed. In talking with all the pastors about this, they all pointed out that the Christian Reformed Church was not really a hinderance. They are very conservative. They still respect the Word of God and so they pose no real threat. One interesting aspect about the Reformed is that they are not *active*ⁱⁿ canvassing an area. So that is one thing in Holy Trinity's favor because they make use of that tool.

Holy Trinity plans on growing and expanding, as can be seen on the chart on page 10. In 1998 they hope to start a mission in Jenison (another suburb of Grand Rapids-- just west of Wyoming). Their plans also call for another church on the north side (1993) and one in Kentwood (2000-- it is a suburb east of Wyoming). Holy Trinity's basic philosophy is this: "It is better to have a number of smaller growing congregations than one huge cathedral." Many families that I have talked to are in complete agreement with this, because for many, it will mean a church closer than 45 minutes.

I too feel that Holy Trinity will continue to grow and expand. But there are some things that perhaps should be done before they consider expanding too much. One item is their debt with L.A:C.E. The debt is still large. Their plans call for this to be paid off by 1997. I think that is waiting too long. They should begin now to lower that debt before starting the other churches.

If not, they could just be digging their own grave by piling debts upon debts. There is no reason to have two struggling churches there or to spread oneself too thin.

Another point that also needs to be taken into account is their present worship facility. The building they are using now was fine years ago, but not so now with the growth they have experienced. The building does not look like a church but like a school. Yes, Holy Trinity is established in the community. They have been there for twenty years and, God willing, more to come. But I feel they need a church building. They would like to begin building a church building in 1984. This would be wise. The building of worship should not really matter, but when dealing with sinful humans, it *often does*. They can look and say, "That is a church." It would give those in the congregation a feeling that they really go to a "church."

The last two points, about paying the debt and building a church, do not appear to agree with each other. This is a problem. I do not know exactly how to join these two problems. Perhaps if they combined them. It may work if they went ahead and built next year and also tried to pay the L.A.C.E. debt off before 1997. They will need a lot of support from the congregation.

The goals Holy Trinity has set are reachable. I do not think the church will ever go backwards (except possibly financially). Their projected growth rates, especially the Adult Confirmation, appear to be somewhat high. But one has to shoot high and to have great expectations.

We cannot second-guess the Holy Spirit. Who expected 3,000 on Pentecost? Twenty years ago people came to Holy Trinity from the Missouri Synod because they did not like the liberalism of their church. Holy Trinity may experience something similar when the other Lutheran church bodies join together in the late 1980's.

Yes, the potential is there. Getting the people in the congregation involved more in their evangelism program will definitely help. They need to continue to tell others, not just about Holy Trinity or the Wisconsin Synod, but about Jesus Christ and what He has done for them. That is one of the strongest assets of Holy Trinity-- they have preached God's Word in all its truth and purity for twenty years. With the help of the Lord they will continue to do so, not just at Holy Trinity, but also at other areas of Grand Rapids.

Holy Trinity may be the only Wisconsin Synod church in Grand Rapids now, but not for long, God willing. It will branch out and grow. In Grand Rapids, the harvest is truly ripe. God willing, in the future Holy Trinity will no longer be one of its kind in Grand Rapids.

Available Statistics for Holy Trinity

YEAR	COMMUNICANTS	SOULS	CHURCH ATT.	PCT OF SOULS IN CHURCH	CHIL. BAPTISM	ADULT BAPTISM	CHIL. CONF.	ADULT CONF.	PROF. OF FAITH
1963	30	66	--	--	3	4	0	4	--
1964	40	70	52	74.3%	7	6	1	12	--
1965	54	97	--	--	8	1	1	2	--
1966	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
1967	78	151	--	--	5	1	3	3	--
1968	87	170	102	60.0%	10	2	3	3	--
1969	87	172	90	52.3%	8	0	2	3	--
1970	88	177	--	--	6	0	1	6	--
1971	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
1972	105	190	115	60.5%	9	1	4	1	--
1973	110	190	109	57.4%	8	4	7	5	--
1974	120	210	112	53.3%	1	1	6	1	7
1975	135	228	121	53.1%	1	0	5	2	14
1976	140	206	120	58.2%	3	0	7	0	0
1977	140	215	131	60.9%	9	0	7	0	0
1978	160	237	150	63.3%	7	1	4	4	0
1979	180	215	158	62.9%	6	2	4	2	0
1980	213	287	168	58.5%	4	0	9	8	6
1981	232	317	173	54.6%	12	3	6	10	3
1982	260	360	181	50.3%	8	1	7	6	7

Conversations and communications with the following
laypeople and pastors:

Rev. Frederick Adrian

Mr. & Mrs. Hugo Bilitz

Mr. Glen Gibson

Rev. Harold Hemple

Mr. & Mrs. Harold Johnson

Mr. & Mrs. Richard Kruizenga

Rev. Richard Raabe

Rev. Ronald Semro

Mr. & Mrs. Harry Van Dam