

CENTRAL HEIGHTS,
GETHSEMANE
&
PRINCE OF PEACE
40 Years of God's Grace

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I. The 50's- The Founding Histories

Booming Potential

In the early 1950, the area of Northern Iowa was growing in prosperity and population. North Iowa's largest city, Mason City (formerly named River City), was centrally located in the large agricultural area that was now beginning to attract budding urban development as well. Winnebago Industries ,the founding company of recreational vehicles (RV's), of Forest City was only about 20 miles away and projected to offer more jobs than ever to thousands of people in the North Iowa area. Many other large businesses would soon follow suit and bring other factories to the area. Such potential spurred the development of a local community college in Mason City, North Iowa Area Community College (NIACC). According to estimations at the time, Mason City's population would double in size in just a short time to come.

With such glowing reports being sent back to the Minnesota District Mission Board of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, the WELS added Mason City to the list of new missions, and in 1956, Gethsemane Lutheran Church was born.¹ The Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) had already jumped at the opportunity of starting a new mission in Mason City and established Central Heights Lutheran Church on the opposite end of town in January of 1956.

¹ The Golden Jubilee History of Mn. Dist. p. 197

Central Heights Lutheran Church

Central Heights began its congregation with a small nucleus of families and was served by Pastor Paul Petersen of Thorton. Pastor Petersen served the Richland Lutheran Church in Thorton as well as Central Heights until the fall of 1956 when he accepted a call to another parish.² During the initial months, services were held in a rented room of the YMCA and later moved to Mason Township Public School #4 near the Southwest corner of the city in the Central Heights District. The initial congregation consisted of three families, the Reuben Holt family, the Raymond Dale family, and the Adolph Anderson family. On August 3, 1957, articles of incorporation were filed under the name of Central Heights Lutheran Church.³

Neighboring congregations helped in their contributions to the budding church allowing six lots to be purchased in Central Heights for the sum of \$2,700.00. The new church building was to be a simple rectangular structure of about 2,000 sq. ft. with a ground floor basement to act as a fellowship hall as well as Sunday school classrooms. Able to seat about 150 people, the building cost was around \$14,500.00.⁴ Much of the interior furnishings were donated to Central Heights by Pastor Molstad's other church in Thorton, Richland Lutheran Church. The building was put up and enclosed during the fall of 1958. Interior work was done through the first half of 1959, and was dedicated in the last week of October, 1959. On January 12, 1963, permission and funding were given to erect a parsonage just north of the church building. After a couple years of

² Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

³ Central Heights Church Council Minutes

⁴ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

reviewing and estimating plans, construction began in October, 1964.

Nowhere to Live

After Pastor Petersen left in 1956, the congregation was served by Pastor John Molstad who came to Central Heights in January, 1957. A pastor was present but something was still missing, a parsonage. Pastor Molstad oversaw much of the building during his time at Central Heights and was eagerly looking forward to moving into the new parsonage when he received and accepted a divine call to the Board of Regents of Bethany College in Mankato, Minnesota. Pastor Molstad stayed on as interim pastor for a short period until he left on June 5, 1966 and Pastor George Gullixson was installed June 12, 1966. Pastor Gullixson also followed Pastor Molstad and Pastor Petersen in serving at Richland in Thornton until June 4, 1967 when Richland extended a call for a full-time pastor of their own.⁵ On September 18, 1966, the new parsonage that had been so long in the works, was dedicated during a worship service at 3:30 in the afternoon.⁶

Gethsemane Lutheran Church

A residence was purchased at 1658 Meadowbrook Drive in Mason City by the Minnesota District Mission Board of the WELS, and Pastor Leonard Schmidt of Newton, Iowa was installed on February 26, 1956. Worship services were held in the basement of the house on Meadowbrook Dr. until April 1, 1956 when the City of Mason City

⁵ Central Heights Church Council Minutes

⁶ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

would not allow the tiny congregation to gather since the house did not meet the Building Code for such usage.⁷ The Mission Board on April 23, 1956 gave permission to Gethsemane to purchase the property on 12th St. N.E. for the sum of \$8,500.00. The parsonage was built with a temporary chapel built into the west end of the building and was dedicated on September 9, 1956.

Mr. & Mrs. Alfred Martin and their two sons, Milton and LeRoy were the first family to join the new church and despite the fact that there were no visitors during the first two months, the third month would see four more families added to the fledgling flock. With the new parsonage/chapel completed, in a matter of a few years, the congregation could boast a membership of around 50 members. By July, 1956, the congregation was organized and officially became a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

As plans for the new church building were proceeding, Pastor Schmidt received a divine call to serve at St. John's Lutheran Church in Fox Lake, Wisconsin. Despite the ardent pleas of everyone in the congregation to continue on in what he had started, Pastor Schmidt accepted the call on April 13, 1958.⁸ Over the next two months, Pastor W. Geiger of Cross Lutheran Church, Charles City, Iowa served as vacancy pastor. At a congregational meeting on April 30, 1958, a motion was made and accepted to extend a call to the Assignment Committee for a graduate from the Theological Seminary of Thiensville, Wisconsin.⁹ One month later, graduate John F. Chworowsky of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was assigned as the new

⁷ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

⁸ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

⁹ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

pastor at Gethsemane Lutheran Church. He was ordained and installed into office in June, 1958.

An "A-Frame" Design

After looking at several options for plans, and taking several bids for construction, ground breaking ceremonies were held on May 1, 1960 with Pastor Chworowsky, chairman Jack Helgren and trustee Milton Martin. The church itself was to be a unique "A-frame" design, which was not included in originally accepted designs, but changed by contract arrangements. The design was done by architect Richard W. Scheife and were similar to another WELS church which was being constructed in Wisconsin.¹⁰ For the construction, the nave and chancel portion of the church measures 36 ft. by 48 ft. rising to the peak of the a-frame at about 36 ft. On the east side of the church building another unit measuring 34 ft. by 24 ft., a two story split level classroom, was also included. The classroom was added in the hope of establishing a parochial school for the many young prospective families of the N.E. Mason City area.

The unfurnished estimated cost for the whole construction was \$40,000.00, \$35,000.00 of which was loaned to Gethsemane by the Wisconsin Synod Mission Board. The cornerstone was laid on August 7, 1960, and three dedication services were held on Sunday, October 23, 1960. A pre-dedication thanksgiving service would be held at 9:00 a.m., a service of dedication would be conducted at 3:00 p.m., and a post-dedication service would follow at 7:00 p.m.¹¹

¹⁰ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

¹¹ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

Both Churches Well Under Way

Central Heights Lutheran Church and Gethsemane Lutheran Church both had very similar beginnings in the thriving North Iowa area. Both had very meager beginnings with a handful of families to start their congregations, and they both saw a change in leadership as they struggled to construct their churches and parsonages. Yet in view of the growth and accomplishments of just a few years, it is most evident of all that God granted them both the grace to make their beginnings under the watchful eye of His loving care and guidance.

II. The 60's & 70's - The School Issue

Slow & Steady for Central Heights

Central Heights grew with steady effort and relatively uneventful problems during the mid 60's and on into the early 70's. The rate of growth which was so eagerly expected by so many optimistic reports was at a stand still as America turned all eyes to the war developing in Vietnam. Prayers went out for the safe return of all the men sent to fight there, especially the sons of the congregation. When thoughts were not directed at the war, they dealt with controlling the noise in the Sunday school room, or painting the trim of the church, or visiting the sick, or conducting baptisms, or funerals or weddings or confirmations. It was a quiet time to settle in and become adept at being a congregation, and as they did so, time kept moving right along.

1969 had crept up so slowly and patiently, many people at Central Heights found it hard to believe they had made it through their first 10 years. Two services were set at 10:30 am and 2:30 p.m. on September 21, 1969 to celebrate the dedication of the church building 10 years earlier. The Rev. Paul G. Anderson, Field Secretary of the Mission Board of the ELS and pastor in Belview, Minnesota, preached for the 10:30 service with the theme "God's Blessing on His Chosen House" from 2 Chr. 7:12-16.¹² The congregation was also blessed to have Bethany professor and former Pastor John Molstad come and preach at the 2:30 p.m. service.

Over the next couple of years, things would settle down again for the small congregation until November 28, 1971 when Pastor Gullixson would announce his plans to accept a call he had received to the Jerico-Saude parish near Lawler, Iowa. Pastor Gullixson's final service was January 30, 1972. In June of 1972, Rev Martin Teigen arrived at Central Heights to serve as the congregation's new pastor and would serve until May 2, 1976 when he accepted a call to serve as a missionary in Peru.¹³

Although the congregation's years in the 60's and 70's were rather uneventful and did not grow numerically by leaps and bounds, the congregation was very devoted to the spiritual growth and Christian education of it's children on into college through a strong relationship with Professor Molstad and Bethany Lutheran College. With Bethany College in Minnesota less than 2 hours away, many sons and daughters of the congregation went on to attend and

¹² Central Heights Church Council Minutes

¹³ Central heights Church Council Minutes

graduate from Bethany, including Becky Browning who was the homecoming queen in 1974!¹⁴

Gethsemane Adds a School

As Central Heights kept up a good reputation for Christian education, Gethsemane was striving to do the same at the other end of town with the plans for a Christian day school underway. Plans were temporarily put aside in 1961 when the termination of fellowship from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) was announced by the WELS. The split had been long expected and did not have major ramifications for Gethsemane or Central Heights who were new mission congregations with very little involvement or history with LCMS church bodies. More delays arose with school plans in October 1962 when Rev. Chworowsky accepted a call to Trinity Lutheran Church in Caledonia, Wisconsin. Pastor Donald Uhlhorn of Cross Lutheran in Charles City served as vacancy Pastor from November of 1962 until April of 1963. In April, Pastor James C. Berger, former pastor at Grace Lutheran Church in Neenah, Wisconsin, was installed at Gethsemane.¹⁵ All the while, school surveys were slowly but surely being passed out, handed in, and evaluated with the strong desire to get the school up and running.

The congregation made 5 calls to teachers from the fall of 1963 to spring of 1964 with no one accepting any of them.¹⁶ On May 21, 1964, the Assignment Committee of Dr. Martin Luther College assigned Miss Sharon Biesmann to Gethsemane. During summer,

¹⁴ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

¹⁵ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

¹⁶ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

final work was concluded to get the school ready for the 28 registered students from grades K-6. Miss Biesmann arrived at Gethsemane on August 12, and the one room school officially began about a month later on September 8, 1964.¹⁷

As the first year of classes were going along well, the congregation was given another challenge as Pastor Berger accepted a call to serve an existing congregation and help open another one in Pompano Beach, Florida. Pastor Uhlhorn served as vacancy pastor through April and May until Pastor Robert Uttech arrived to serve in June of 1965. Spring of 1965 also saw the graduation of a son of the congregation from Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin. LeRoy Martin, whose family had been one of the founding families of Gethsemane, enrolled in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1995 and would graduate 4 years later as a Wisconsin Synod pastor.¹⁸

Support for the School Begins to Fade

The huge growth that was expected in Mason City never panned out although other surrounding towns all experienced small degrees of growth spread out over the whole North Iowa area. Membership at Gethsemane was experiencing some mild turnover, with more families leaving than moving in. By 1966, the school enrollment was down to 22 students. The congregation was somewhat divided on the level of support which the school was to receive and in March of 1966, Miss Biesmann tendered her resignation to the church council.¹⁹ The congregation again

¹⁷ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

¹⁸ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

¹⁹ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

requested and received another graduate from DMLC in 1966 and received Miss Ann Breitreutz to be the new day school teacher. Although classes went ahead fairly well for the next 2 years, the enrollment continued to decline to 19 students in 1968. In the spring of 1969, Miss Breitreutz accepted a call and a replacement teacher was not available to be assigned again from DMLC due to the high demand for teachers and a shortage of funds for the mission board. As of August 3, 1969, a request was made to DMLC and accepted to have student teachers aid the day school for the '69-'70 school year until a permanent teacher could be found. That year, the enrollment dropped to 14 students.²⁰

The following year, Miss Kathleen Barfknecht was assigned as the new teacher for the remaining 13 students still enrolled. The difficult situation with the ongoing replacement of teachers, the decline of the enrollment and the continued ongoing expenses all led to skepticism and uncertainty about a continual education program at Gethsemane.

To add more uncertainty to the tenuous situation, Pastor Uttech received and accepted a call to Mequon, Wisconsin on June 21, 1970. On July 11, 1971, Pastor Robert Waldschmidt was installed as the new shepherd for Gethsemane. Plans were made in October to make the school self supporting in 5 years in an effort to help build waning financial support.²¹ A crippling blow was dealt to the day school when Miss Barfknecht accepted a call to Tempe, Arizona in March of 1972. Pastor Waldschmidt continued to encourage support for the

²⁰ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

²¹ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

school in spite of a very vocal minority of opposition. A letter of concern was mailed out by the pastor in the hopes of peaceably discussing ways to help save the school, yet proponents of the plan made the situation very difficult to address and discouraged attendance. On May 18, 1972, Pastor Waldschmidt submitted his letter of resignation as pastor of Gethsemane.²²

Ron Besemer was assigned as teacher in 1972 on a one year basis. After a special voters' meeting on February 13, 1973, it was decided that with a lack of support and a lack of funding, the day school would be closed on a temporary basis for the next school year in accord with the recommendation of Minnesota District Mission board.²³ Support for the school was never mustered, and the school would never recover and never reopen.

III. The 70's & 80's- The Merger of Two Synods

New Beginnings

The loss of the school was of major concern in the early months of 1973, but it was soon overshadowed in June with the arrival of a new pastor, Donald Hochmuth. The congregation had petitioned the assignment committee at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for an older graduate in the hopes of maintaining a steady ongoing leadership for a church which seemed to have no continuity. Pastor Hochmuth was 33 years old upon his graduation with some years spent in an

²² Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

²³ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

extended field service assignment. Over the next couple of years, Pastor Hochmuth did his best to supply that steady continual support.²⁴

Across town, Central Heights was given what at first appeared to be a set back when Pastor Teigen accepted the call to be a missionary in Peru in May of 1976.²⁵ Pastor Hochmuth of Gethsemane served as the vacancy pastor over the next few months, and through much prayerful consideration was extended a call to serve Central Heights as it's full time pastor as well as continuing on as pastor at Gethsemane. In November of 1976, Pastor Hochmuth officially accepted the call to serve Central Heights as a dual parish with Gethsemane.

Over the next year, work progressed slowly for Pastor Hochmuth since the distance between the two congregations was about 15 miles apart. Simple projects became very time consuming and even frustrating at times. Through steady effort and encouragement, joint activities were planned on a more regular basis to cut down on the repetitive nature of some of the duties. Despite heavy criticism from some, Pastor Hochmuth continued to provide much needed leadership for both congregations.²⁶

Throughout 1978, the idea of a merger between the churches of the two sister synods was considered and prayed about. Joint activities and mutual special services brought an emerging single body into clearer focus. By August, a merger was likely and by October it was immanent. On October 21, 1978 Pastor Hochmuth

²⁴ Personal Interview Fred & Betty Wegner

²⁵ Central Heights Church Council Minutes

²⁶ Personal Interview Joe & Hazel King

preached the last sermon at Central Heights Lutheran Church. The following Sunday, the first joint worship service at Gethsemane was held on Reformation Day, 1978.²⁷

Prince of Peace

As the new family of believers celebrated the gift of God's grace, they busied themselves with the necessary logistic work of the merger, first and foremost, a new name was needed. Although Victory Lutheran, St. Matthew's Lutheran, Crown of Life Lutheran, and Faith Lutheran were suggested, Prince of Peace Lutheran was the overwhelming winner.²⁸ A new constitution was drawn up and set in place for the new WELS affiliated church as the details of the merger were falling into place. Months later, the Central Heights church building was sold and its proceeds from the sale were used to pay off all debts owed to the ELS. Salvaged before the sale were the 3 beautiful stained-glass windows of a chalice, an open Bible, and a cross, which were the central feature of the ELS church. The next year, 1979, would see the Central Heights parsonage (which was now free of all debt) sold for more than \$46,000.²⁹ The proceeds were paid to the WELS for the loan on the church and parsonage in full, fourteen years ahead of schedule! On the afternoon of May 4, 1980, a special service of thanksgiving was held as Pastor Donald Hochmuth was installed as the new pastor of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. In a joint expression of fellowship between the two synods, Pastor Steven Petersen of the ELS conducted the liturgy

²⁷ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

²⁸ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

²⁹ Gethsemane Church Council Minutes

while Pastor Verne Voss of the WELS preached. The new pulpit was dedicated and following the service, the mortgage for the building was burned.³⁰

For the next 5 years, Prince of Peace experienced a period of quiet growth and steady leadership. Evangelism efforts of the neighborhood became more current and a strong program of Sunday school education emerged. The peace and stability that had seemed so far off in the distance for the two fledgling congregations of Mason City now had become a reality. Yet the Lord would not let His new congregation of believers remain without new opportunities for challenge and growth. In the fall of 1985, Pastor Hochmuth would receive and accept a call to Salem in Woodbury, Minnesota. On November 3, 1985, Pastor Hochmuth preached his farewell sermon to the congregation he had helped start.

IV. The 90's- The Future of God's Grace

A New Resurgence

In May of 1986, Daniel Marshall was extended the call to serve as pastor by the WLS assignment committee. On Sunday, July 6, 1986, Pastor Marshall was ordained and installed by his father-in-law, Pastor Duane Tomhave.³¹ Pastor Marshall was quick to get his feet wet by being very active in the teen program and even helping to start a choir which boasted twelve voices. The congregation began to see it's potential for different areas of service.

³⁰ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

³¹ Personal Interview Dan Marshall

In 1988, the three stained-glass windows from the Central Heights church were resurrected and given a new face lift. On March 3, 1988, they were put in place above the chancel. The new construction would set off a chain of building and refurbishing projects by the new congregation on the 30 year old building. A new sign for the front of the church would go up in 1989, and new carpeting and new pews would be installed in 1990 as well as a parsonage patio.³²

In the midst of all the new activity, 10 years had slipped by without notice on Prince of Peace. On Sunday, November 11, 1990, a special anniversary service was held with Pastor Donald Hochmuth serving as guest preacher. The children beautified the service with song and a fellowship meal was held in the basement to reminisce upon the many changes and blessings Prince of Peace saw over the last 10 years.

New Faces and New Challenges

Prince of Peace was not done yet in seeing it's share of new shepherds to lead them. In May of 1991, Pastor Marshall accepted a call to be an associate pastor at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Cudahy, Wisconsin. On Sunday, May 19, 1991, Pastor Marshall preached his last sermon at Prince of Peace. Pastor Jon Wolff of Cross Lutheran in Charles City served as vacancy pastor while the congregation again went to the assignment committee to request a seminary graduate.

³² Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

Pastor Mark Aufdemberge received the position and was ordained and installed July 7, 1992 during a special service at 4 p.m.³³

During the year between Pastor Marshall and Pastor Aufdemberge, the small church had another challenge thrown their way when they found themselves without an organist. Pastor Marshall's wife, Sandy, had taken over the duties when the previous organist had moved out of the area. It was only by God's opportune planning that right about that time a new computer software program, Hymnsoft, was making it's preliminary debut. Quick to jump on board this new program, Prince of Peace was given a free trial program in return for their help in evaluating and testing it prior to it's final revision. When Pastor Aufdemberge arrived, his wife, Debbie, filled in as organist.

Pastor Aufdemberge remained at Prince of Peace for only one year, but was fortunate enough to see the building projects of the late 80's continue. In 1991, the parsonage received a new furnace, central air conditioning, new windows, new siding, and a new driveway.³⁴ In August of 1993, Pastor Aufdemberge took a call to serve in Sierra Vista, Arizona, at Trinity Lutheran Church.

After the resurgence of young blood into the congregation, there was a strong push to seek a new pastor with a little more maturity and stability. Pastor Donald Main had been out of the seminary since 1985, and had several years of experience serving already under his belt. When he accepted the call to Prince of Peace in December of 1993, he had taken a year out of the ministry from

³³ Prince of Peace Remembrance Book

³⁴ Personal Interview Mark Aufdemberge

congregations in Colorado and was living in Minnesota. On December 19, 1993, Pastor Main was installed in an afternoon service. Pastor Stanley Stein was the guest preacher and the liturgy was conducted by Pastor Jon Wolff who was serving as vacancy pastor.^{3 5} Pastor Main was a classmate of Pastor Wolff and had come to the aid of Pastor Wolff during his vicar year at the seminary when Pastor Wolff's bishop was taken ill during Holy Week.

Pastor Main's wife, Cheryl, was unable to serve as organist and it was very handy for the congregation to still have the Hymnsoft program hooked up to the speakers and available to aid in Sunday morning worship services. Hymnsoft continued to be the main musical lead for the liturgy and hymns for Prince of Peace until a daughter of the congregation would return to help out. Lutheran Preparatory School graduate, Christine Reige, would return after graduation to settle down in the area with her new husband to serve as organist on a part time basis between Prince of Peace and Cross Lutheran.

Pastor Main was able to offer the stability and guidance the congregation needed after it's youthful resurgence. Lots of joint youth programs were initiated between Prince of Peace and Cross Lutheran, and a strong push was also made by Pastor Main to regain the lost and delinquent members of the congregation. As of the writing of this paper (April 24, 1998), Pastor Main continues to shepherd God's people at Prince of Peace.

^{3 5} Personal Interview Donald Main

More Changes for the Future?

Over the last several months there has been a great deal of speculated talk between the congregations of Prince of Peace and Cross Lutheran. The declining Cross Lutheran is unsure of its ability to maintain the finances necessary for the operation of its church and pastor. Pastor Wolff has indicated a desire to continue his education in history and possibly consider a teaching position at a prep high school.³⁶ Among all the discussion have come possible ideas of asking Pastor Main to serve Cross Lutheran as well as Prince of Peace in a dual parish situation. Many members of Cross still see other viable options, but it is not odd that there may be a chance for history to repeat itself. It is still very undetermined how God will use the current situation for the furthering of His kingdom. The conglomerate congregation of Prince of Peace may play another role in the gathering together of God's people, or it may serve as a beacon to help guide Cross Lutheran through some of the challenges they had faced some 20 years earlier. With confidence in God's grace, we know that all things will work out for the good of those who love God. To His name be the glory!

Conclusion

It is easy to see the grace of God amid 40 years of challenges and uncertainty, amid change and renewal, amid trial and blessing. Central Heights, Gethsemane, & Prince of Peace are congregations that have never been very large or outstanding. In many aspects, from a worldly perspective, it hasn't seemed to amount for much.

³⁶ Personal Interview Donald Main

Yet for 40 years, God has provided a place for His word to be preached to both believer and stranger. In the midst of it all, God's word has prevailed and produced a living bounty of souls that will ever sing the glory of His faithful love.

O Lord, let this your little flock,
Your name alone confessing
Continue in your loving care,
True unity possessing.
Your sacraments, O Lord,
And your saving Word
To us e'er pure retain.
Grant that they may remain
Our only strength and comfort.

(CW 536 v2)