

THE LAND OF ENCHANTMENT:

Mission Work in the Rio Grande Circuit

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On May 19, 1998, 43 seniors from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will attend the call service where Lord-willing they will each receive a divine call from the Lord to serve him full-time in the public ministry. Rumors fly around about how many tutor and foreign mission calls will be assigned to the graduates. Other rumors fly around how many home mission calls there will be due to a recent increase in opportunities to open exploratory and mission stations.

This brings the writer to the conversation he had with his bishop. When he received his call to an exploratory station, he was told that 5 out of 13 of the graduates who went to an exploratory/mission station would not succeed in establishing a church. He talked about the anticipation of this group of men as they prepared to go their separate ways. One could only try to imagine the thoughts that were going through the minds of these graduates as they looked forward to their divine calls with zeal, but also with apprehension. They probably started to wonder who would be the 5 out of 13.

This statistic seems to create an overwhelming pressure to do your best and to be one of the few who beat the odds. This statistic would cause any sinful nature to doubt God's reasoning for such a call. It would urge any sinful nature to achieve success through any means. Most importantly this statistic would cause any sinful nature to be weighed down by shame and guilt because of failure. The Lord has very encouraging and comforting words for missionaries who may experience some of these fears in Isaiah 55:10-11:

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

In this paper, the writer will look at the mission work in the state of New Mexico and the city of El Paso. When looking at these churches, you will see how the Lord has guided his

shepherds to build His kingdom through His Word. Even though the Lord is at work, this area of the United States offers some unique challenges, which some people may overlook. These unique challenges will be looked at and will help you come to the conclusion that the home mission work in New Mexico and El Paso is a great example of how the Lord works faith even in the hearts of people in such a remote portion of land.

At this time, the writer would like to take an opportunity to thank all those who helped gather information for this paper. Information was gathered from anniversary historical booklets of most of the churches, from synodical reports, and from the personal experience of pastors who served the Lord in New Mexico and El Paso. A special thank-you is extended to the following people: Pastor Charles Found, Professor Westerhaus, Mr. Norbert Manthe, Pastor Marty Hahm, Pastor George Swanson, Mrs. Lois Owen, Pastor Paul Siegler, Pastor Wayne Vogt, Pastor Scott Martz, Pastor Steve Wilkens, Pastor Fred Casmer, Pastor Don Seelhof, Pastor Beck Goldberg, Pastor August Ristow, Pastor Steve Spencer, Pastor Ernst Zimdars, Pastor Steve Blumer, Pastor Dennis Halvarson, Pastor David Schultz, Pastor Jim Connell, and last but not least Pastor Dan Baumler.

THE RIO GRANDE CIRCUIT

The churches in New Mexico and El Paso form the Rio Grande Circuit. Why is it called the 'Rio Grande' Circuit? The churches hug the Rio Grande River from Los Alamos, NM, to El Paso, TX. A list of these churches is as follows: Messiah, Los Alamos; Peace, Rio Rancho;

Shepherd, Albuquerque (ABQ); Emmanuel, Las Cruces; Beautiful Savior, west El Paso; Trinity, central El Paso; San Juan, east-central El Paso; Victory in Christ¹; east El Paso. Only one church in this circuit finds itself far from this famous river, Redeemer in Roswell, NM. Interesting enough, as you will read, this church has been served by several pastors who resided at churches on the Rio Grande.

When you look at the background of the Rio Grande Circuit you end up going back in history to the purchase of land presently known as the states of Arizona and New Mexico. In 1850, the United States purchased this land from Mexico. This purchase is known as the Gadsen Purchase. Several years later, on July 27, 1954, a group of pastors in Arizona gathered at Grace Lutheran Church in Tucson, AZ and organized the Gadsen Conference.

This conference was primarily begun as a Pastor/Teacher/Delegate Conference. Eventually it became a pastoral conference of southern Arizona, El Paso, and New Mexico. As churches began to spring up all over the area, a motion in 1985 was accepted to split the conference into two circuits. The western circuit was named "Saguaro Circuit" by its pastors and the eastern circuit was named "Rio Grande Circuit" by its pastors. In 1989, a motion was accepted to make the Gadsen Conference a pastoral conference. Teachers were encouraged to meet on the District level or Mission District level. The Rio Grande Circuit continued to meet monthly when time was available. The Gadsen Conference, consisting of the two circuits, continues to meet annually. Distance between the churches of this conference calls for the pastors to alternate meeting places between the El Paso/Las Cruces area and the Tucson area.

¹ Formerly known as Faith Lutheran. This topic will be discussed later on in the paper.

WHERE DO WE START A MISSION?

In the 1540s, the Franciscan monks began doing mission work in the area now known as New Mexico. Traveling up through the present city of El Paso and slowly but surely make their way to Santa Fe, these monks worked with zeal to minister to the Catholics of New Mexico. This marked a stronger influence of Spanish Catholics in New Mexico. Even though it is not known for sure to the writer why the Franciscans decided to send priests north into new territory, it is not hard to imagine that they too wanted to spread God's Word and nourish the Catholics who were already there.

Our synod continues to spread God's Word through the Board for Home Missions (BHM). This board has set up an intricate system to meet the needs of WELS Christians throughout our country. The BHM works many hours to send missionaries and pastors to areas of our country where WELS Christians may not necessarily have access to a church. It also investigates and prayerfully seeks guidance from the Lord as to where to start exploratory work in order to carry out His Great Commission. In the Home Missions Manual(HMM) there are several reasons given as to the purpose of the BHM. There are also several steps to go through as a group of WELS people seek a missionary who can serve in their area, ministering to them as well as to the lost sheep of the community. The writer will not go into deep detail but would like to highlight several points in order to briefly show the careful, detailed work that goes into starting a home mission.

Out of the twelve points listed in the HMM, these six briefly sum up the purpose for having the BHM:

- To assist in promoting mission activity within our congregation through organized programs and mission material.
- To establish mission congregations primarily in major population centers.
- To enable each mission congregation to acquire land and buildings adequate for worship services and healthy growth of the congregation with a program of repayment fiscally sound both for the congregation and Synod.
- To plan our missions with the possibility of the future establishment of a Christian Day School, after self-support, or earlier, if in addition to normal support of the pastor's salary and other financial obligations the entire operating cost of the school can be met without synodical subsidy.
- To provide spiritual care within the limits of our ability in areas remote from existing congregations to WELS members and to others who express a desire to hear the Gospel and are in agreement with our confessional position.
- To establish a relationship of cooperation and coordination with neighboring congregations in planning new missions or daughter congregations (HMM,1, 1-A).

Even though the BHM helps WELS people throughout the country to begin mission work, it reminds the people that the prime responsibility lies on them, the members of the mission congregation:

“Prime responsibility for all mission work is placed on the members of a mission congregation. This is in keeping with our trust that the Spirit-born faith-life in the souls of all the priests of God in our congregations. Thus the work of evangelizing, of planning, of supporting is placed first on the members of the mission congregation (HMM,2).”

Early development of a mission congregation consists of three stages: 1) Initial Survey Work; 2) Exploratory Status; 3) Mission Status. The time it takes to progress from one stage to the next depends on several factors. One factor may be the availability of a missionary. As decades have passed in the history of our synod, the influx of pastors has somewhat determined the feasibility of starting new mission churches. Another factor may be the availability of funds for the BHM to use in order to fully support mission churches. One final factor that comes to mind is the most important one: the timetable the Lord has set for certain churches in certain areas. This last factor may be the most overlooked factor of any. Too often, people fail to remember that the Lord is in control and that he will make the church grow as he sees fit.

Initial Survey Work

“The purpose of this stage is to determine whether a field has a sufficient potential to justify the expenditure of time, money, and effort to conduct exploratory service or meetings.”² Canvassing, survey work (demographics), general publicity, survey of financial, and manpower resources are all techniques used to study certain areas. Sometimes the pastor of the neighboring WELS church does this work. The District Mission Board (DMB) may send a lay member of the Board to check out an area. Lay members of a neighboring WELS church have been used to investigate an area, which is very familiar or easily accessible. There are several instances where the neighboring WELS church has been the mother congregation, supporting work done in a close-by area in which some of its members may live. This area may be seen as a possible mission site because of expected growth or lack of churches in that area.

Exploratory Status

The purpose of this stage is to conduct “regular meetings or trial services by related canvass and witness work to determine the feasibility of establishing a viable mission congregation in a specific area.”³ This stage helps the DMB evaluate the mission potential and the commitment of the people willing to do mission work in a certain area. Exploratory status lasts at a minimum of eight months up to a year. If continued status is requested, reasons for continuation are submitted to the DMB who in return may grant additional four-month periods. It has happened that certain places have been denied exploratory status at one point in time only to be granted this status months or years later at the discretion of the DMB. Prayerfully, the men of the DMB decide where the church’s efforts can be used best at a specific point in time. It

² Home Missions Manual, p.9

³ *Ibid.*, p.16

may not always be easy to deny exploratory status but trust in the Lord helps lay people and boards make these sometimes easy, sometimes hard decisions.

Mission Status

The final stage before a church becomes self-supporting is the mission stage. The purpose of this stage it is “to make a long-term commitment to invest manpower and money in the establishment of a WELS congregation with the necessary facilities in a general or specific geographical area.”⁴ Mission status is normally granted to a church with the idea that within 10 years the church is self-supporting. **[The ten-year window is normally not often met, but most of the time mission status is continued.]** Mission status is divided into two main categories: 1) Operating and Interest subsidy (synod pays the whole bill); and 2) Interest subsidy (synod helps pay interest on a large loan(land, building)). The HMM lists five steps of implementation which mission status churches are encouraged to follow so that the formal administration of a self-supporting church is introduced to the members. This helps them see how a self-supporting church is organized and gives them a sense of confidence as they see their own church progress and grow. The five steps are: 1) Organization (loose with temporary officers); 2) An initial organizing charter (temporary constitution, provides acceptance by state and Synod); 3) Constitution (especially planned for smaller congregation, avoids many problems of a small group); 4) Incorporation (immediately after constitution, absolved of several legal responsibilities); and 5) Synod membership.⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24-25

The Board for Home Missions has set up an extensive system for carrying out the Lord's command of nurturing the sheep of his flock and reaching out to the lost sheep. Through the District Mission Boards, the BHM is able to cover a wide range of areas throughout the country.

The Land of Enchantment

The state of New Mexico is called "The Land of Enchantment." It is called this because of its beautiful scenery, majestic mountains, its desert terrain, and the many outdoor activities. These attractions provide a basis of a thriving tourist industry. If you find yourself visiting a family in New Mexico who has lived there for a while, they will tell you that they don't have dust, they have 'enchantment.'" There is another common, funny joke, which you might hear while visiting New Mexico. The joke is that some people who travel through New Mexico or have never been to New Mexico don't know that New Mexico is part of the United States. They think that it is part of Mexico. The jokes are humorous and can help break the ice for newcomers. However, when you look at the mission field in New Mexico, these two things seem to be quite true.

Mission work in New Mexico⁶ is a little over thirty years old. The first two mission churches began around the year 1966. New Mexico is one of the last states in the union where the WELS started mission work. The writer wonders if twenty years ago, most people in the WELS knew about mission work in New Mexico. The question may be asked, "Is New Mexico part of the WELS mission scene?" It may also be said that mission work in New Mexico is

⁶ Note that when the word "New Mexico" is found, the writer is referring to the Rio Grande Circuit, which includes El Paso, unless specified otherwise.

“enchanting.” Many reasons support this opinion: 1)New Mexico is the only state with two official languages; 2)New Mexico is the fifth largest state in land area; 3)New Mexico is the home of two different Indian reservations: Navajo and Apache; 4) El Paso is a main gateway into Mexico; 5) EL Paso is the largest U.S.-Mexico border city; 6) The Rio Grande Circuit is 500 miles long; 7)There was hardly any Lutheran influence in this area in the mid 1960s; and 8)Most WELS transplants to southwestern United States were in Arizona.

The final portion of this paper will take a brief, yet close look at the beginning of the churches in the Rio Grande Circuit. When looking at these churches you see why New Mexico offers unique challenges as a mission field. In order to prepare for this paper, several of the founding pastors (exploratory/ mission) were given five questions to answer. The five questions were:

- 1) What were the reasons for wanting to start a church in your respective area?
- 2) What were the main methods of outreach used during exploratory/mission stage?
- 3) What were the reasons for the church’s specific location?
- 4) What were some unique challenges during exploratory/mission stage?
- 5) What were some unique stories at the beginning of the church?

All of these questions were answered by almost all of the pastors. With the answers to these questions and brief written histories, the writer will show the unique challenges of the Rio Grande Circuit.

The Rio Grande Circuit is centered around two major cities on the Rio Grande River. Albuquerque, NM, is just a little north of the center of the state. The Rio Grande River lies on the west side of the city and the Sandia Mountain Range lies on the east side. Farther south, about 5 hours is El Paso, TX. In 1966, the synod started three missions in this area, one in ABQ

and two in El Paso. As each major city is looked at, the mission churches begun in the outlying areas will be examined.

El Paso, TX

San Juan Lutheran Church

In the mid 1960s, the Synod began to seriously look at the ministry to the Hispanic people east of Tucson, AZ. The WELS' Board for World Missions and the Executive Committee for Latin America commissioned Pastor Ernest Zimdars to begin missionary work among the Spanish-speaking community in El Paso. Initially work was to be done in El Paso and Ciudad Juarez (Mexico), a very large city on the west side of the Rio Grande. El Paso was the largest border-city besides Tucson. So logically this was the place to go. The name of the church was San Juan Lutheran Church. As you look at the history of the church you see that progress was slow. There are several reasons for slow progress. According to Pastor Zimdars it was hard getting a nucleus mainly because Hispanics, then and now, have difficulties understanding the concept of a church. The thirty-year anniversary booklet of San Juan gives several other reasons for slow progress in such a large mission field with so many prospects.

“There were a number of reasons for this, the most important being that Lutheranism proved to be a ‘tough sell’ in a region where an often nominal Roman Catholicism and a usually vigorous Pentecostal or Reformed Protestantism had long worked successfully among the target Spanish-speaking population. It needs to be remembered, too, that only in 1989 did the El Paso mission...obtain a pastor whose exclusive responsibility was to serve the San Juan flock. [The duties of the clergy before 1989] extended well beyond the sphere of the congregation.”

The fact that this mission was more or less a center for the pastors to work out of makes this a very unique situation. In a letter from Pastor Jim Connell to Pastor Charles Found, Pastor

Connell offers another reason for slow progress in this area, "Since expatriate missionaries were not allowed to live and work in Mexico, these men served at San Juan in addition to their duties to the Mexican national church under their calls by the Latin American executive committee." Split duties continued for the next thirteen years which somewhat hindered growth. One acre of land was bought in 1976, which housed the Latin American seminary, the Latin American Mass communications (Hispanic literature and media productions), and the congregation. Finally in 1986, it was approved to move this mission from the Board for World Missions to the Board for Home Missions under the Multicultural Missions Committee.

Split-duties, language and cultural differences, religious background and isolation all play a role in the particular challenges of this mission church. Undoubtedly, great strength was needed to overcome feelings of failure, frustration, and exhaustion. The difficulties of living in a different culture, in a different climate, and/or a different country may sometimes be overlooked. In order to mesh in with different cultures, different means of communicating and learning have to be used. Pastor Zimdars mentioned that the main methods of outreach back in the 1960s in this area was canvassing and distributing handouts in specific areas of El Paso as well as downtown. As a core or nucleus of people was found, new ideas were used to reach out. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the VBS and Sunday School programs were successful tools of outreach directed toward the children who would in turn hopefully tell their parents. In 1982, the WELS missionaries at San Juan felt it would serve God's family better if their strategy would become more centered on adult ministry.

Present-day San Juan still continues to offer a unique situation. When you look at the souls of this church you see a wide variety of nationalities. Pastors Zimdars told a unique story of a family he received when he began work in El Paso. He tells how a very liberal LC-MS

pastor brought a family for him to serve. This family is still active today at San Juan. The history booklet of San Juan relates the diverse number of people in this church.

“Not only do we offer public worship in Spanish and English and conduct religious instruction in both languages; we have people in our congregation who could offer it...in languages as diverse as Arabic, Indonesian and several dialects of Nigerian....Our congregation consists of former Roman Catholics, former non-Lutheran Protestants, former Muslims, former atheists and agnostics and relative handful of ‘born’ Lutherans. We are brown-skinned, black-skinned, pink-skinned and every other shade except ‘thin-skinned.’ All we have common are our sins and our Savior.”

To have several different nationalities and religious backgrounds makes ministry in a church at times difficult and frustrating. It also must make it very rewarding to see barriers broken down and color and race set aside in order to praise and serve the Lord.

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Zimdars along with Pastor William Winters worked together to serve not only the Hispanic-people but the English-speaking people of El Paso as well. Pastor Winters served at St. Paul’s in Douglas Arizona, which is 90 miles west of El Paso. Douglas, AZ is a U.S.-Mexico border city. Since this work in northeast El Paso was considered a mission extension of St. Paul’s in Douglas, the group of Christians in El Paso retained the name ‘St. Paul’s’ until their own church was established. According to Pastor Zimdars, exploratory work and monthly visits began in the summer of 1965. By 1966, a group of scripturally confessional Lutheran Christians organized as a congregation of believers under the name, St. Paul’s. Pastor Zimdars was presently working on establishing the Spanish mission at San Juan, so Pastor Winters made the 90-mile trip once a month to conduct communion services.

When one thinks of a mission church in respect to numbers, one might usually think of a core number of around twenty people. Back when this church began there were only 4-6 people in attendance for worship. For the whole first year the average was only 8-10 people. The meeting place of these Christians also changed several times within the first couple of years. The 4-6 people in El Paso first met at the Colonial Motel. Just down the street was the Kaster & Maxon Funeral Chapel which become their home for the one to two years. Finally, they met at the Missile Rodeway Inn before they were given permission by the synod's mission board to purchase their present-day service. On March 9, 1969, the congregation changed its name to Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church. That same year they called their first resident pastor, Pastor Richard Hennig who arrived and was installed in July. A few months later, they bought their church building. Oddly enough, the building they purchased was the old "Skyline Pentecostal Church."

The writer has spoken to a friend who has begun exploratory work out west. Bible class and services were held in his home. The District Mission Board gave him and his wife the okay to rent storefront space in a strip-mall. They hope to have everything ready in order to conduct Easter worship services there. Careful consideration is taken when choosing a place to worship. The community associates location to a church. It may have been difficult for the missionaries in El Paso to advertise their church when they would have to tell people where they hold worship. The hotels may not have been as bad, but people don't always associate positive feelings with a funeral home. Or maybe someone may know a little about Pentecostals and wonder just what is behind this church that has started in the old Pentecostal church down on Taj Mahal Road. This situation certainly would lend itself to being quite unique. When you think about it, though, a funeral home may not be bad when proclaiming the wonderful gospel

message that Christ has destroyed the powers of death. Worshipping in a building associated with the Pentecostal church may prove to be a great turn from subjective feelings to objective truths.

Trinity Lutheran church was started because there was no English-speaking WELS church in El Paso. Being a rather large border city, it was felt that a WELS influence was needed in order to bring God's Word to the English-speaking people. As was mentioned before, Pastor Winters and Pastor Zimdars began work in the northeast section of El Paso. This section of El Paso was largely non-Hispanic. There was also Fort Bliss. There were several WELS people in the army and friends of members of Trinity in the army who might be interested in church. According to Pastor Zimdars, at first the main method of outreach was working with military contacts. Not much else is known as to methodology, but it is probably safe to say that as the number of worshippers grew, new ideas of outreach grew.

In a very brief historical paper of Trinity, an average attendance chart shows the growth of this church in the first ten years of its existence. The attendance average started at eight to ten people in 1966 and by 1976 the average was 108-110. The biggest jump of attendance occurred between 1970 and 1971. In 1970 the average was 42-44 and in 1971 the average was 99-101. It was this big growth in ten years, which led to the start of the Trinity Ev. Lutheran School in 1986. Trinity Lutheran School was the second of only two Lutheran elementary schools in the Rio Grande Circuit.

The statistics shown above certainly show how the Lord greatly blessed mission work in this area of El Paso. Small numbers in the beginning, not so ordinary meeting places, having few if any WELS transplants, and a pastor who lived out of state might have seemed to be huge obstacles. You see how the people of this congregation were given strength to persevere and

grow, reaching out within their church and into their community to bring God's Word to the lost and straying.

Faith Ev. Lutheran Church

Faith Lutheran Church has a unique history separating it from the other churches in the Rio Grande Circuit except Redeemer in Roswell. In 1979, Pastor Steve Blumer was assigned to the east side of El Paso as a graduate missionary. Several years later, after Pastor Blumer accepted a call to Beaver Dam, WI, the church experienced some rough times and the men of the District Mission Board decided to close the church as the membership decreased. It must be very hard for missionaries to see or hear about their churches, which have closed. But the Lord says in Romans 8:28, “ **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**”

Pastor Blumer sent quite an extensive email about the beginning history of Faith. He also sent some information on why the church was disbanded in 1992. The following information is taken from his email letter.

Question #1: What were the reasons for wanting to start a church in your respective area?

“The AZ-CA mission board had been wanting to start a congregation on the east side for some time, because it was the fastest growing area of El Paso. The entire East side had been expanding into the desert throughout the mid ‘70s at a rate of about 1 mile per year—not just one street the entire side of town. Up until then, Trinity had served El Paso on the northeast side. The decision was made in the mid 70’s that rather than having one centrally located WELS congregation to serve the entire city, we’d be more effective in outreach to have a congregation on each side of town. Geographically, El Paso is split up into three regions, connected by the downtown, and the Rio Grande on the south side of the whole works. There is a mountain range right within the

city limits that separates Trinity from the west side (Beautiful Savior), and the airport and military land that separates Trinity from the east side (Faith, now Victory in Christ).

The prospects for a quick start for Faith seemed great. There were 30 communicants from Trinity on that side of town, and the closest LC-MS congregation had a liberal pastor. However, two things happened: 1) About 4 months before I arrived, the LC-MS congregation got a new pastor who appeared outwardly to be conservative. Some of the Trinity members on the east side decided to rejoin that congregation; 2) Most of the other Trinity members decided for various reasons to continue driving the 45 minutes it takes to get to Trinity from the east side. So we started out with a nucleus of four dedicated WELS families plus my own. Our work from the outset was true outreach—the LC-MS pastor gained quite a few members from dissatisfied Lutherans in the area.”

Question #2: What were the main methods of outreach used during exploratory/mission stage?

“I was given money to do some advertising, printed up door-to-door leaflets, and started visiting the potential prospects we knew of in the area. As far as a detailed ‘plan’ recommended from the mission board, there was none. Just go and preach the Gospel!

As far as methodologies go, we found door-to-door canvassing to be a very poor method. We gained a small handful of prospects that way, but I don’t believe a single member came through that method. We even had a team of Oshkosh college-students spend a week with us in January of 1984, but gained only 30 prospect names out of about 3000 homes canvassed. So basically abandoned that method of outreach in El Paso. Once we gained a nucleus, the most effective way to reach out was through friendship evangelism and members bringing others to church. And of course we did whatever advertising we could in the area for special events.”

In 1980, the BHM granted Land Search Authority, but because of a money crunch in the Church Extension Fund (CEF), land wasn’t purchased until 1982. The Lord worked things out for their good when they were able to buy the land at almost a quarter of what it cost six months later. It may have seemed hard to wait in 1980 for land, but the people of the congregation surely saw the blessings the Lord gave them two years later. The location of the land seemed to

be very promising. The land they chose to purchase was going to be a main road going through that part of town.

Faith found itself in the same unique situation as San Juan. Even though it was an English-speaking church, there were a wide variety of cultures among the members. Pastor Blumer wrote this in answering question #4: What were some unique challenges during exploratory/mission stage?

“El Paso is not a gringo town. The entire city is 75% Hispanic. So our mission was always a multicultural mission.... We always did our best to reach out to the Hispanics and all others in our area, but that’s not easy. By the time I left, we had about 5 or 6 Hispanic families, which was getting to be quite successful. We also had some black members, 2 single men unrelated and I had confirmed 3 black children from the area. We had members born in Mexico City, Jamaica, Korea, Germany, besides Texas and New Mexico. Another unique feature of our mission is that my family was at times the only one from Wisconsin. We seldom received transfers from WELS congregations, averaging one per year, and then it was usually from Trinity on the other side of town. Faith was truly a mission, not an outreach to far-flung WELS members.”

In August of 1984, Faith dedicated its first building with 155 people in attendance.

However, Pastor Blumer’s most memorable service best shows the unique, rewarding situation in which the Lord put him. “The most memorable service that will always stay with me was in August of 1986. On that one Sunday, we had 3 adult baptisms, 5 children baptized (all grade school age) and 9 adult confirmations. We gained 22 new members in one day.”

The Lord saw fit to strengthen the members of Faith and Pastor Blumer in the last three years that he was there:

“Part of the problem was the extreme unemployment in El Paso. The official rate was 12% for years but the actual rate according to someone who worked for the employment office was 25%. In Texas they take you off the unemployment list if you are on it for 6 months. Because of the high unemployment rate, people left town rapidly. It was so bad for a while that even native families who really didn’t want to move, left for other parts of the

Southwest just to find a job. In the last 3 years I was there, 1986 to 1988, the Lord had blessed our outreach efforts to the tune of 75 new communicants. However, we lost 78 communicants, almost all leaving the city and moving elsewhere.”

During the vacancy, attendance continued to drop. A new pastor arrived in a year or so.

Different personalities and different gifts kept the congregation from meshing with their new pastor. As membership declined and after much deliberation and consultation, the District Mission Board decided to withdraw financial support and Faith was closed. Pastor Blumer continues to look at the bright side as he recalls from personal records the many people whom the Lord touched with His Word during the 9 ½ years of ministry in El Paso.

Beautiful Savior Ev. Lutheran Church

As in most major cities, the ideal situation is to have enough churches, which would encompass several different areas (north, south, east, west) with God’s Word. No doubt this was the reason why Beautiful Savior was started on the west side of El Paso. Pastors Pieper (San Juan), Blumer (Faith), and Halvarson (Trinity) worked together to establish a church where people from the west side could be served with God’s Word. Just like Faith, there was a liberal Lutheran church on the west side of town. Transfers from Trinity (probably due to travel time to get to the east side) and the people who left the liberal church made up most of the nucleus with which the mission started. Beautiful Savior experienced the same results that Faith did with a canvassing team coming down from the University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh. It seemed to have little effect.

Situations which made this mission challenging are similar to the other churches already mentioned. One, though, that has not been mentioned is the location of the church. So far the

location of the church has not been a challenge. However, on the west side of El Paso, there were very few good sites for a church. According to Pastor Goldbeck, "The mountains, arroyos [very wide ditches], and dead-end streets made it hard to find accessible land. The spot we found was one turn off the main street on the west side, Mesa Street. Undeveloped land was available. But who could know when the subdivision would go in?" Before a church building was built, the people met in three rented facilities: 1) a savings and loan building with an excellent meeting room; 2) a dingy recreation center; 3) a store front used by Messianic Jews on Saturdays for their worship. One final challenge was the turn-over rate, which seems to be a re-occurring obstacle throughout the Rio Grand Circuit. Pastor Goldbeck describes El Paso as "a step on the ladder for many people."

One other piece of information, which is helpful in studying the challenges of establishing Beautiful Savior, is this time line. The different stages of a mission church are clearly shown in this outline.

- Feb. '77 – The Arizona DMB discusses the possibility of a WELS mission on the west side of El Paso after receiving letters from concerned Lutherans there.
- Jan. '80 – The DMB recommends an "exploratory" mission for west El Paso.
- Feb. '80 – The Wisconsin Synod Board for Home Missions(BHM) approves of "exploratory status" for the west side group.
- MARCH 9, 1980 – The first service of the new "Westside Mission" is held. 42 attended: 23 from Trinity and 19 prospects.
- May '80 – The group is given permission to call a pastor.
- Aug. '80 – The name "Beautiful Savior" is chosen.
- Oct. '80 – Full "Mission Status" is granted by the BHM. There are 37 souls and 28 communicants.
- DECEMBER 14, 1980 – The congregation's first pastor, Rev. Beck Goldbeck, is installed.
- Mar. '81 – The congregation is incorporated.
- Feb. '82 – Authority is given to search for a building site.
- Mar. '83 – The "Orizaba" site is purchased.
- May '83 – Authority is granted to plan a worship building.
- Sept. '84 – Funds are proved for a "Worship/Education/Fellowship" building.
- Dec. '86 – The second pastor, Rev. Spencer, is installed.

OCTOBER 19, 1987 – The congregation’s first permanent place of worship is dedicated to the service of God. (The congregation had moved six times during the past seven years!)

April ’88 – The new parsonage is completed.

July ’88 – A “Mission Statement” with goals, objectives, long and short range plans is approved.

Jan. ’89 – A comprehensive landscaping program is begun.

Sept. ’89 – “Outreach ‘90”, an evangelism effort, is put into operation with mass mailings and advertising.

MARCH 18, 1990 – The 10th Anniversary of Beautiful Savior Ev. Lutheran Church is celebrated. There are 70 souls and 46 communicants in the congregation.

Victory in Christ Ev. Lutheran Church

Victory in Christ offers a different aspect of mission churches in the WELS. The Lord does not always work things out the way Christians pray for things to work. Earlier you read about Faith Ev. Lutheran Church and the problems it had which eventually led the District Mission Board to close this church. The DMB still felt a need to have a church in this area so a few years later it called a seminary graduate to restart mission work in this part of El Paso. This is what has been simply referred to as a ‘restart’. In 1992, graduate Dan Baumler was assigned to what is now called Victory in Christ. The DMB restarted this mission with more of an emphasis on cross-cultural work. Pastor Baumler and his wife were sent to Guadalajara, Mexico for fifteen weeks to study the Spanish and the Hispanic culture.

According to Pastor Baumler the most unique circumstance about this mission is the fact that he started with a church building but no people.

“This is probably the only WELS mission church that started with property and a building and no people. Usually, our missions start with a nucleus and then work toward finding property and building a facility, but because of the situation prior⁷ to Pastor Baumler arriving, there was no nucleus.”

⁷ See Faith Ev. Lutheran Church.

Another unique, challenging circumstance keeps Pastor Baumler trusting the Lord that he has a plan for his ministry in El Paso. As was said earlier, Pastor Baumler was sent to carry out cross-cultural work. Family ties and the strong arm of the Catholic church keep prospects from learning more about the Lutheran church. Looking at the demographic study received from Pastor Baumler, you read some very interesting facts: 1)The outreach area of Victory in Christ is 57 % Hispanic and 80% are Catholic; 2)21 % of the population of El Paso is in this target area; 3)95 % of all Hispanics have Mexican origin (living on the border explains this); 4)Almost half of the people in this target area are between the ages of 25 and 54. Pastor Baumler wrote about the challenges these facts created for him.

“The Hispanic culture and the Catholic religion seem inseparable. (Thanks to God’s power, they are not.) Those who are Hispanic are born Catholic, baptized Catholic, confirmed Catholic, married Catholic, and die Catholic even if they don’t go to church. We have had lots of interested people who agree with and accept the truth of the gospel, but because of their family ties and because of the strong arm of the Catholic church, they won’t take the next step, like to a Bible Information Class.”⁸

Again, it is apparent that cross-cultural work in El Paso is extremely difficult with the Hispanic people because of strong family ties, including religion. Pastor Baumler’s main method of outreach was with ethnographic interviews. Looking at the ethnographic study, these themes were repeated: 1)100% of people interviewed mentioned “youth”; 2) 100% of these people mentioned “gangs”; 3) Majority of these people felt door-to-door methodology would be the best way to reach people.

“The main method...involved going door to door and really getting to know the people, their traditions, and their values. The interviews helped us understand what we needed to be doing as a church as far as outreach, worship, and other programs. Through the interviews we built a good reputation with the community, because the interviews are set up in such a way that people feel we

⁸ Taken from the five questions answered by Pastor Baumler.

want to know more about them first, rather than forcing ourselves on them. People found the approach refreshing.”

Even though the writer is not an expert in cross-cultural ministry, it seems that this is a rather rigorous task. Having lived there ten years, Pastor Blumer seemed to be under the idea that a stronger emphasis on an English-speaking church may serve the community better but still work with the Hispanic. Either way, one can be sure that the Lord will use his power to carry out his will. He will continue to bless the efforts of Pastor Baumler and the members of Victory in Christ. The following story assures us that the Lord has blessed the work at Victory in Christ.

“A single mother, Laura , visited church for the first time with her three teenage kids. After the service Pastor Baumler chatted with them and asked the mother how or why she came to Victory in Christ. Laura said with a smile, ‘A friend of mine that belongs to your church invited me.’ Pastor Baumler said, ‘Oh really! Who invited you?’ She said the name and Pastor Baumler politely chuckled, ‘Your friend doesn’t go to our church.’ It turns out that Laura went to the wrong church. That week she met with her friend, and her friend said, ‘Hey, I didn’t see you in church this Sunday.’ Laura responded embarrassingly, ‘Yes, I know. I went to the wrong church.’ Her friend said, ‘That’s okay. You can go to my church this week.’ ‘Thank you, but I have found the church I want to go to,’ Laura said contently. The church Laura was suppose to go was an ELCA church. She is now in our Monday night Bible Information Class.”⁹

Las Cruces, New Mexico

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church

WELS mission influence in New Mexico in the early 1970’s was small to non-existent. Good Shepherd Lutheran Church was the only church in New Mexico at the time but was located in Albuquerque. The south/southeast corner of New Mexico had no WELS church. It was felt by the DMB and some pastors of the El Paso area that mission work needed to spread north into

⁹ Submitted by Pastor Baumler.

New Mexico. Letters from Pastor Halvarson to the Arizona District Mission Board, five questions answered by Pastor Beck Goldbeck, and some historical facts from Pastor August Ristow (present-day pastor of Emmanuel) are the sources used to compile this brief look at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Las Cruces. As the facts and stories are presented, once again, you see the circumstances which make mission work in the Rio Grande Circuit very enchanting, very unique.

A small group of interested Lutheran Christians resided in the city of Las Cruces, NM, which lies about 50 miles north of El Paso. This opened the opportunity to dive into the "Land of Enchantment." Enchanting it was. This small group of Christians came from several different church bodies, which included the Lutheran Church of America, the American Lutheran Church, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The main problem these people saw with their former church was liberalism. The conservative approach of the WELS was the light at the end of the tunnel for these orthodox-starving people. Under the guidance of the Lord, Pastors Dennis Halvarson, Steve Blumer, Beck Goldbeck and Steve Spencer served these people with many hours and long days. Many miles were driven and many questions were answered to some degree concerning questions these people had concerning issues that were plaguing their original churches.

The differences between the Lutheran churches in Las Cruces were what led these people to look for a conservative church. There was a LC-MS church in Las Cruces at the time, Peace Lutheran Church. Problems started when this congregation received a pastor who was sympathetic to the Seminex cause. Around 1974-5, his sympathetic cause to the Seminex years become very evident as he led the congregation into the heresy promoted during the Seminex. Pastor Ristow believes the church joined a liberal church body, the ELIM (Evangelical Lutherans in Mission). Disgruntled and sad that Peace had left the LC-MS and lost as there was no longer a

LC-MS influence in Las Cruces, several members joined of the Wisconsin Synod church in El Paso.

On July 7, 1974, Trinity Lutheran Church in El Paso was visited by two couples from Las Cruces. Mr. and Mrs. Anton Thorn and Mr. and Mrs. Ernst Ohland had heard that there was a prospect of beginning a WELS church in Las Cruces. So they made their way down to El Paso to find out more about this possibility. These two couples had become disheartened with their own Lutheran churches in Las Cruces. Desperately seeking a church where the truth was being preached and taught, these two couples continued to attend Trinity until October. In September they became members of Trinity. They eagerly desired to stay in Las Cruces and the drive to El Paso seemed burdensome when a mission could be started in their own town. On November 7, 1974, a meeting was held at the Thorn home where matters were discussed as to what kind of church would be started. Pastor Halvarson vivifies for us the unique situation he found himself, sitting among several people from different Lutheran backgrounds, "A lively conversation brought out the difference between the different Lutheran church bodies." At the end of this meeting it was decided to hold temporary services at the Thorn home beginning on November 24, 1974.

In 1974, in a letter to Pastor Hugh Reaume, chairman of the District Mission Board, Pastor Halvarson expressed his enthusiasm of starting this mission in Las Cruces.

"The situation in Las Cruces, NM, is very promising. I have faithfully been going up there and a lot of people are interested in a WELS church. As far as the details are concerned, Las Cruces presently has a population of close to 44,000. The population is expected to reach 70,000 within the next 5 to 8 years. Right now, there are five communicant members in Las Cruces with the prospect of gaining five more in the near future. The main reason these people are holding off right now is because they are still hopeful of some change in their present church."

A year later, pastor wrote another letter to Pastor Reaume informing him that the three Lutheran churches in town were holding joint Advent-Communion services. Another rumor was flying around that the ALC church is going down the tubes. Supposedly the pastor was waiting another year so his boy could finish high school. So the possibility of many more disgruntled Lutherans would open the door for more prospects for the WELS mission church.

For over a year, services were held in Las Cruces. On December 1, 1975, an organizational meeting was held where the people chose the name Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church. A charter was adopted and a certain percentage of offerings was set aside to be used for missions. The people voted to pay Pastor Halvarson a stipend for his travels back and forth from El Paso to Las Cruces. Advertising and evangelism in the community were becoming bigger topics. At the time they were holding services on Sunday mornings in an office building.

Services continued to be held even though mission status had not been granted. The meeting place changed from the office building to the Las Cruces Bridge Club. In 1977, the Mission Board decided to begin exploratory status to the west side of El Paso. Concerned about what might happen to the people of Las Cruces, Pastor Halvarson strongly urged the Board to work at getting some help for Las Cruces as well as Beautiful Savior (west-side El Paso). Pastor Goldbeck was called to serve both missions as a dual parish. This created a unique challenge for Pastor Goldbeck.

“Building and land were not acquired in my time. We met in a bridge club. Services began at 8:00am, Beautiful Savior at 10:00am. I would get back to El Paso at about 10 to 10. Living in El Paso meant that I set aside a day (Tues.) for Las Cruces. I would go in the afternoon and return late at night. I would make quite a few calls and have Bible Class in members’ homes. At this time we also started the church in Roswell, NM, and attempted a start in Carlsbad, NM. Those were long Sundays.”

In 1986, Pastor Steve Spencer was called to fill the vacancy when Pastor Goldbeck took a call. Pastor Spencer filled the dual parish until Pastor Jeff Smith was called in 1988. In 1987, Emmanuel was granted mission status and purchased land, enabling them to house Pastor Smith whom the congregation would soon call.

Distance and religious background were the two main circumstances, which made this mission church a unique challenge. The distance traveled and time spent by the pastors of El Paso remind you of the old circuit riders of the early Lutheran church in America. Love for the people literally drove these men to give extra time to serve them with God's Word. Much patience was endured. These men offered lengthy discussions about the differences among Lutheran church bodies out of concern for these souls starving for truth.

Roswell, New Mexico **Redeemer Ev. Lutheran Church**

Roswell offers for an even clearer picture of the circuit riders in the beginning years of Lutheranism in America. Roswell lies 200 miles northeast of El Paso. 90 miles south of Roswell, 150 east of El Paso, lies Carlsbad, New Mexico. These two cities were new attempts at increasing WELS influence in New Mexico. Pastor Blumer spearheaded the work in both of these cities. At first, Pastor Blumer would travel to Carlsbad late Sunday afternoon for a weekly service at 4:00pm. Once organizational meetings were held in both cities it was decided to go ahead and start services in both cities every other week. Roswell would have service at 7:30pm and Carlsbad would stay at 4:00pm. Pastor Blumer explained the rest of his weekend when he would carry out his "circuit rider" duties.

“On Monday, I drove a different route, visited one family in Capitan, had confirmation instructions for a girl along with visiting her family in Ruidoso. Then I stopped for communion at the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation outside Ruidoso because we had two Apache WELS families there. So on my turn I got home Monday night, after a round trip of 500 miles.”

Pastors Goldbeck and Gerlach (Trinity) took turns visiting Carlsbad and Roswell but didn't always stop in Capitan and Ruidoso.

The situation in Carlsbad didn't pan out. In 1982-3, there was a small nucleus of people in Carlsbad and soon a larger number of prospects as the pastor of the CLC mission took a call to Alaska. The CLC terminated its mission efforts in New Mexico, so once again a WELS mission church was able to reach out to Lutherans (4 to 5 families) from a different church body. This created the opportunity to begin services averaging about 15 people. Members helped conduct Sunday School and an occasional Bible Study if the visiting pastor was unable to remain after the service. However, in a few years, two things happened:

“1) All six WELS families moved from the area within six months of 1984; and 2) The local LC-MS church received a new pastor who was a true conservative and that satisfied the old CLC nucleus.”¹⁰

Roswell was still in the picture. Redeemer had continued to grow to about 20 communicant members. Sadly enough though, Redeemer experienced the same history as Faith in El Paso. Pastor Blumer had done some survey work on Roswell and an outside independent company did the same. This company projected that the city was going to explode in size. They figured that in twenty years the city would double in size. A good economy, tired “circuit riders”, and great potential made Roswell seem like a logical place to start a mission. So a resident pastor was called to begin work in Roswell. For whatever reasons, the pastor resigned after fifteen months and efforts at this mission diminished for a while. Synod administrators wondered if isolation wasn't the cause for this pastor's efforts of not thoroughly testing the area

and his departure from the ministry. Isolation would be a key point when the Mission Board would take another look at starting the mission again.

This would create a unique situation for Pastor Don Seelhof who was called to Roswell in 1988. He would have to overcome possible negative thoughts toward the Mission Board, isolation from neighboring WELS churches (the closest was 175 miles), and a non-Lutheran city. There were only two small Lutheran churches in Roswell. Pastor James Radloff examined the survey done of Roswell and came up with these challenging issues: 1) Field is 175-200 miles away from the nearest WELS churches; 2) It gave appearance of an old, sleepy, almost rundown community; 3) Fairly low wage scale; 4) Lutheranism seems to have a low profile in the community. He said it would take a very aggressive missionary who could withstand the isolation.

These challenges kept Pastor Seelhoff very busy. Several different evangelism methods were used in order to serve the unchurched. Door-to-door canvassing, "Phones For You" program, Newcomer Solicitation, booths at the mall, and "Farming" were some of the Synodical programs which Redeemer used to spread God's Word. Although it is not known to the writer why the mission church was closed a second time, isolation and the points stressed by Pastor Radloff seem to be overriding factors in this mission's demise.

As children of God, one must also remember that this was not the time the Lord wanted this mission to survive. A couple of months ago, the core of WELS people still in Roswell were granted permission to call a semi-retired pastor. One must not overlook the strength of the members who remained faithful to the WELS teachings. They continued to hold video services and Sunday School. Once a month, neighboring pastors and vicars from the Albuquerque area

¹⁰ Taken from five questions answered by Pastor Blumer.

served Redeemer as a preaching station. But the members continued to trust in the Lord and they continued to do what they could to get permission to once again call a pastor to serve them.

Pastor Seelhoff answered the question, “What were some unique challenges during exploratory/mission stage?” with this answer,

“Challenge of Roswell –Its isolation from the rest of the state’s cities; missionaries are isolated from rest of the WELS. Roswell is perhaps the most isolated mission in our continental U.S.!”

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church¹¹

The first WELS influence in New Mexico was in Albuquerque (ABQ). In 1966, Pastor A. Hugh Reaume of Winslow, AZ , began to meet with WELS families in ABQ once a month. Due to the fact the Pastor Reaume has returned home to his heavenly Father, information concerning the exploratory stage was not received. However, much information was received from Pastor Paul Siegler, first resident pastor, and Pastor Wayne Vogt, second pastor who led Shepherd from mission status to self-supporting status. Two anniversary booklets will also help provide information, which will show the unique challenges of the Rio Grande Circuit.

First of all, the city of Albuquerque offered several reasons for developing a WELS mission church. When you look at the history of WELS interest in New Mexico, you notice that this interest dates back to the post-World War II years. There was a group of pastors from the Colorado Conference who took the time to see if a mission church in ABQ was feasible. For reasons unknown, nothing happened at that time. It was not until 1966, that the Arizona-California District Mission Board took the time and effort to evaluate ABQ. It found ABQ to be

an untouched major population center. The Synodical Conference had just broken up so the WELS was in an expansion mode. Before this the WELS had for the most part stayed out of New Mexico and concentrated on Arizona. The LC-MS had made its presence known in several parts of New Mexico including ABQ. Once the Conference had dissolved, it was time for the WELS to start work in New Mexico. Disgruntled Lutherans and the presence of WELS families in ABQ preserved the desires to start a mission there.

“The LC-MS congregations there, with the exception of two or possibly three, were quite liberal. Some LC-MS folks were dissatisfied. We had a few WELS folks living there. They and the disgruntled LC-MS folks were in contact with our board.”¹²

So work began in ABQ. Again you are reminded of the early circuit riders of Lutheranism in America. Having made two trips to ABQ to meet with the people who were interested in establishing a church, Pastor Siegler and the Mission Board decided to begin exploratory services once a month. The trip from Winslow, AZ, took about 4-5 hours by car. In order to make his car last longer, Pastor Reaume often traveled to ABQ by train or plane. The first service was held on September 18, 1966, in the hospitality room of the Albuquerque National Bank. Within two months, the number of services doubled per month. In the 1968 Synodical Proceedings of the Synod Convention, the challenge for Pastor Reaume was addressed.

“Albuquerque presents a serious problem since the plane schedule was changed. New missionary Reaume must drive 235 miles one way. This city of over 300,000 population appreciates the services of our Synod. It is our highest priority request that Good Shepherd of Albuquerque be granted a missionary.”

Not only was he putting in a lot of driving, but he also was serving his church in Winslow and also people in Holbrook, AZ. Pastor Reaume was a busy man.

¹¹ At first the church was called Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church. The writer didn't find out why the name was changed.

¹² Taken from the five questions answered by Pastor Siegler.

In December of 1967, the people chose to hold services every Sunday evening beginning in 1968. Pastor Reaume flew in from Winslow every other Sunday, and then for every Sunday for two years. One can imagine the toll this would take on any missionary. The lack of manpower didn't allow the General Board for Home Missions to authorize the calling of a full-time resident pastor. So for 1 ½ -2 years Pastor Reaume faithfully served these people. Even when he took a call to Scottsdale, AZ (Phoenix area), he still served as interim pastor.

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Albuquerque continued to grow. In the middle of 1967 it was granted mission status. In May of 1968, it called Pastor Paul Siegler from Coon Rapids, MN, who accepted the call and was installed on September 18, 1968 (exactly two years from the first service held in ABQ). On July 20, 1969 the final draft of the constitution and by-laws were adopted. Good Shepherd was approved membership into the Arizona-California District and become incorporated in the state of New Mexico. During the same year land was purchased at the present-day site of the church. In the spring of 1971 the church building was dedicated. The site was on the northern edge of town located at the intersection of two major roads. Several years later the church requested permission from the Mission Board to start a school. Classes would be held in the fellowship area of the church. Members committed a generous amount of money and a two-room trailer was loaned to the congregation for the first year. ON September 3, 1982 the first day of school was held. Mr. James Hahn was called to teach all the grades at Good Shepherd Lutheran School, the first of only two schools in the circuit.

Pastor Siegler recalls the many challenges that he faced in ABQ which were unique. Some of the challenges were the same ones faced by other missionaries in the Rio Grande Circuit.

“One hurdle for our family was our isolation from other WELS congregations and pastors. We were 270 miles from the nearest. The advantage was that we were definitely not involved in shifting members from one to the other....For some time, over one-third of our members lived more than a hundred miles from church, many of them were the most active and faithful....Some would come Saturday night and park their camper in the church parking lot. We regularly had about a dozen of these folks for Sunday dinner. While I held confirmation class with their son, the Plehn family made evangelism calls and follow up calls. They were amused when someone would complain that our church was too far for them to come often. (The Plehn family lived in Los Alamos (90 miles).)

Because of distances, I regularly “rode the circuit”. About every six to eight Sundays I would head out for Clovis and had evening service at the air base. Monday I drove to Roswell to meet with a couple of families there. That afternoon I would go to Santa Rosa for another communion visit and then try to be home by early morning. An easier trip on the circuit was the one some distance south of the Belen area to visit a young couple. The other was to a family in Gallup. Then we had a cluster in the Espanola and Los Alamos area.”

Pastor Siegler recalled several memorable experiences when he served in ABQ. One story stands out and shows the uniqueness of his service in the Rio Grande Circuit.

“Another memorable experience was the week of confirmation instructions in Espanola. We had one boy in Albuquerque, one in Los Alamos and one girl in Espanola. The three of us met daily, morning and afternoon at the Albrecht home in Espanola. Paul and I from Albuquerque stayed in a trailer out back. It was the closest I have ever been to a confirmation class.”

When Pastor Siegler took a call out of ABQ, the Lord blessed Good Shepherd with a vacancy pastor from El Paso (5-hour trip). Pastor Halvarson from Trinity, El Paso, would fly up Sunday afternoon for Sunday evening services. Pastor Wayne Vogt accepted the call to serve Good Shepherd and led this church off mission status. He also was instrumental in starting Good Shepherd Lutheran School.

As Good Shepherd grew in numbers, its mission grew as well. In the dedication booklet for the present building, mention is made of the fact that Good Shepherd was the first WELS church in New Mexico. The booklet then continues, "It is our prayer that the Lord would enable us to become a mother church for an expanding mission outreach in New Mexico." The last two churches of this paper are living results of this prayer.

White Rock, New Mexico

Messiah Ev. Lutheran Church

The best way to introduce this church and the challenges the city in which it lies is to listen to the way Pastor George Swanson answered the question, "What were some unique challenges during exploratory/mission stage?"

"Los Alamos is where they delivered the Atomic Bomb to the world's weapons arsenal. That said, the general public tend to be high-minded and highly-motivated scientists...who take little on faith and everything on cold logic and hard facts. That, and our WELS conservatism proved [and still proves...] to be a bit of difficulty."

This didn't keep the Word of God from working on the souls of several believing people in the Los Alamos area. When Pastor Wayne Vogt arrived in ABQ to serve the people at Good Shepherd, there were about 20 people who were the making the 95-mile trip (one way) to ABQ each week to worship. They were very faithful attendees and were very active within the church. Several of them were Sunday School teachers and church officers.

The possibility of starting a preaching station/exploratory church in the Los Alamos area was very high. Since Los Alamos was the site of a nuclear bomb plant, it is not surprising that this area had the highest number of PHDs per capita of any place in the country. This meant that

a group of believers from this area would most likely have no problem supporting a church. Also the solid commitment of the 20 people who weekly traveled literally hundreds of miles each week to hear God's Word was a great booster for starting this mission.

So on November 8, 1974, Pastor Vogt announced that exploratory status had been granted. It is not for sure known why services were held in Santa Fe. The writer can only speculate that this would be close to a half-way spot for the people to meet with Pastor Vogt who was driving from ABQ. Also, there most likely would be the possibility of reaching out to a few in Santa Fe through advertisement or word-of-mouth. After six months, not a single prospect was found in Santa Fe, so it was decided that services would be held in the Los Alamos/White Rock area. This would make it easier for the members to set up for services. Besides the preparation for Sunday services, this would also give the people the opportunity to invite neighbors and co-workers to come to church. The LC-MS church in Los Alamos, Grace Lutheran, had disbanded. This brought these Lutherans to the WELS mission as well. One could see the hand of the Lord at work.

The group of Christians and the number of visitors were growing. In May of 1976, mission status was approved for Messiah and a pastor was called as well. Pastor Vogt had served the people well but the traveling in his ministry in New Mexico seemed to be taking a toll on him. He describes his "circuit-rider" days in New Mexico. Besides serving the vacancy in White Rock, he also ministered to people in Gallup, Clovis, and Durango.

"The distance made it impossible for me to do much other than hold worship. I was the only pastor in the state of New Mexico at the time. I had groups of people in Clovis, Roswell, and Durango that I also served every other month. During the first two years in New Mexico, I averaged driving more than 500 miles per week. Our closest WELS neighbor was more than 300 miles away. I served the Los Alamos for 1 ½ years from Albuquerque before

they had their first resident pastor. Later on I also had weekly services for 1 ½ years in Gallup.”

Pastor Swanson’s arrival in July of 1976 was a wonderful blessing for the people of Los Alamos. It was also a blessing for Pastor Vogt.

In the fall of 1976, the congregation was given permission to start looking for land. It had been meeting at the St. Joseph’s Hall in White Rock (just 5 miles south of Los Alamos). After 3 ½ years, land was purchased adjacent from where they had been meeting. They found it hard to find available land in Los Alamos, the land in White Rock was in good location (subdivision), and the cost of the land was more than reasonable.

Word-of-mouth methodology, canvassing and mass mailing seemed to be the basic, simple tools used to increase attendance to a very sizable number. Pastor Vogt said that the communities were not that large so the people of the congregation pretty much knew everybody else in town and they didn’t hesitate to talk about their church and invite people to come and visit. Pastor Swanson describes some of the people who made up this congregation. It is wonderful to see the effects God’s Word had on such a wide variety of people. This almost must have made serving them challenging at times.

“Our congregation included several theoretical weapons and guidance research scientists and physicists, not to mention experts in nuclear health, concrete containment for nuclear reactors and the world’s ozone layer....a group of enthusiastic Bible students and active children; a location which made it possible to make friends (and members) from four ethnic groups: Anglo – Native American – Pueblo Indian – Hispanic; an appreciation of the “family” atmosphere of the parish due to our distance from many WELS neighbors.”

Despite circumstances that could have hindered growth, Messiah grew. In November of 1976 the church constitution was ratified and in April of the following year the voters signed the constitution.

As the congregation watched Pastor Swanson leave, they would soon greet their new pastor, Pastor Robert Schumann. Several years later, the congregation was blessed with another pastor when Pastor Schumann took a call. Pastor Martin Hahm made the trek west from Texas to serve the flock in White Rock.

Rio Rancho, New Mexico

Peace Ev. Lutheran Church

In the early 1980s there was a strong desire to start a mission on the west side of ABQ. Several members of Shepherd lived in this part of town. The rate of growth in this area supported the desire to spread out into other areas of ABQ. However for reasons not necessarily known, work in this part of ABQ was postponed. It wasn't until late 1982/early 1983, that the District Mission Board was given a graduate from the Seminary to begin work on the west side of ABQ.

A special fund drive for mission expansion created the financial support to start new missions throughout the country. The fund drive was called "Reaching Out." This expansion began in 1982 and continued into 1983. In the spring of 1983, a rather large percentage of the graduating class of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was assigned to exploratory stations throughout the country. One of these stations was the west side of ABQ.

Pastor Vogt was serving Shepherd at the time. If you remember he also helped start the mission in White Rock. Even though he was the pastor at Shepherd and had much to do with the mission in White Rock, Rio Rancho offered a different situation. Pastor Vogt gives some explanation to this difference with the answer he gave to the question, "What were the reasons for wanting to start a church in your respective area?"

“We had about 25 people from Shepherd who lived west of the Rio Grande River. They were very active in worship, so again we knew we had a solid core of people to begin the work. Rio Rancho was just beginning to mushroom as a development. Intel had built a huge plant in Rio Rancho. Land prices were starting to escalate, We had talked to the Mission Board for a number of years about beginning there. The time was right.”

But Shepherd was growing and had just opened its school. There was quite a bit of work to be done there, so Pastor Vogt wouldn't have the time to really devote himself to the west side. This was a reason for asking for a missionary.

The city of Rio Rancho was established around the mid 1960s. As Pastor Vogt said, the city was beginning to mushroom, now was the time to plant a church. Even into the 1990s, the city continued to grow, topping the charts as one of the fastest growing places in the country.

On May 17, 1983, the call for exploratory work was given to candidate Steven E. Wilkens. This young candidate, along with many others in his class, entered into the mission harvest field.

Looking at the progress of the church and its growth in such a relatively short time, you see the Holy Spirit working through the faithful teaching and preaching of Pastor Wilkens.

Within the next couple of months, the Wilkens family saw itself packing and driving to a very unfamiliar place. In an interview with Pastor Wilkens he expressed the anxiousness as he made the trip with his father. The U-Haul trucks at the time didn't have power steering and it was very loud. The truck shook so much that it would almost put them to sleep. He said that when he got to ABQ, he got out and literally kissed the truck. His wife Karen was pregnant with their second child and their daughter was only a few years old. This was a time of many questions as they spent many hours driving and thinking about this new experience. At the beginning of July, they arrived safe and sound and two days later Pastor Wilkens was ordained and installed. Pastors Swanson and Vogt performed this service on July 10, 1983. More mission work in the Land of Enchantment had begun.

Pastor Wilkens recalled the different methods of evangelism he used. Some worked, some didn't. When he started his work, Pastor Wilkens had no real training on how to do mission work. It was pretty much get your call and "Go West Young Man!" Next to the Bible, the Home Missions Manual was the second most sacred book to him. He studied this manual over and over again, since he had no idea where to start. He spent many sleepless nights wondering how to reach people and how to get them interested in this church. For him, door-to-door was not the way to go. He said, "A farm boy from Wisconsin going door-to-door didn't work out." Newspaper advertising was a very practical and useful tool to let people know that a new Lutheran church was starting. A massive phone survey seemed to be the best tool. Along with the phone calls, friendship evangelism turned out to be almost as successful in getting people to visit the church. So methodology seemed to be one of the unique challenges due to a lack of training in mission work.

Pastor Wilkens made the comment that New Mexico seemed to be a haven for people who wanted to disappear for a while and not be found. He mentioned some book that asked the question, "What happened to the 50th?" This book was referring to the fact that it seemed like no one knew that New Mexico was a state. The fact that people seemed to come to this state to not be found made mission work that more difficult. How would you get people to become interested if they wanted to isolate themselves?

The other two challenges Pastor Wilkens mentioned were the lack of Lutheran influence and isolation from pastors in his situation or around his age. One day he was visiting either a visitor or someone on the prospect list. He walked up to the door and introduced himself as the pastor of the new Lutheran church in town. The lady responded by saying it was nice to see that Lutherans had their own holiday, too. Pastor Wilkens talked about their Thanksgivings in New

Mexico, which turned out to be the hardest holidays to endure so far away from family. He and his wife joke about how they use to race each other putting Rachel's (their oldest child) baby puzzles together, "Times were lonely, especially in the beginning." They changed Thanksgiving service to the night before so they could travel and be with friends for the day.

Pastor Vogt explains some other challenges. One of them was the location of the church. When the church was first established and then the first building was completed there was only one road that crossed the Rio Grande River. This caused access to Rio Rancho from ABQ to fairly limited. Pastor Wilkens said that the main road from his house up to Rio Rancho was dirt and often flooded out during quick, strong storms. Pastor Vogt also noted the rapid population expansion as another challenge. Indeed it was a great blessing but also quite possibly hard to keep up with all the new families arriving. The fact that homes were not being built in the close proximity of the church may have made it difficult to inform people where the church was located.

The Lord didn't take much time in working progress in the hearts of the people who started Peace Lutheran Church. At the end of July, an organizational meeting was held where the name of the church and officers were chosen. Pastor Wilkens recalls that night when they also named their church.

"The organizational meeting was held in the parsonage and it was a night we wouldn't forget. It was a typical night for Albuquerque. The clouds came and there was a great deal of lightning. With about 15 people there, the lights went out and the roads were flooded. But we went ahead and chose our church officers. The men said, "You do this and I will do that," etc.... Also we picked a church name. It was fitting on such a violent night, we chose the name PEACE."

On September 18, 1983, the first service was held at 4:00pm at the Rio Rancho Senior Citizens' Center, which was rented with the help of a charter member. It must have been a wonderful

sight to see the large gathering of 105 people as they joined together to praise the Lord for the marvelous blessings which he had placed upon them. Exactly one year after the first service, Peace was granted mission status, which meant it was no longer exploring the possibility of establishing a church.

Along with this grant came permission to look for land in order to build their own worship facility. A year later land parcels were approved and bought. It was decided to buy land centrally located on the west mesa. This would offer easy access to people from all parts of town. It was projected that this area of town would soon grow rather quickly. Surprisingly, this area has yet to grow as was predicted when the land was purchased. After 15 years, there is still no subdivision immediately surrounding the church. (The city of Rio Rancho has grown to the north of Peace.) In the same year, a constitution was approved and Peace was accepted into the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod.

Palm Sunday, 1987, not only celebrated the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it also was a ground-breaking celebration for the members of Peace. Soon they would have their very own worship facility. In August of 1987, the Lord blessed Peace with a parsonage into which the Wilkens family soon moved. On November 1, 1987, the new church building was dedicated. This joyous occasion is recorded in the anniversary booklet.

“On Dedication Day, November 1, 1987, we gave glory to the Lord who blessed Peace Lutheran with a membership of 31 families. These 31 families included a communicant membership of 51 and a total baptized membership of 70.”

Now Peace had more room to grow. It was time for Peace to begin an extensive outreach program. The anniversary booklet once again gives a descriptive report of this extensive program.

“During the month of June, 1988, 28 members made telephone calls to all residents of Rio Rancho. Over 20, 000 phone calls were

made and 1200 families agreed to have their names placed on our mailing list. Many of the members of Peace Lutheran today trace their first invite to our church through this evangelism program.” This was the main method of reaching out into the community. In later years, a “friendship” evangelism program was started with an annual pig roast following the Friendship Sunday service. Through these programs, the Holy Spirit caused the number of souls at Peace to reach the 100 mark for the first time. This rate of growth encouraged the church to ask the Home Mission Board for permission to build a permanent church building. On June 10, 1990 ground was broke an on October 28, 1990, the new worship area was dedicated.

In December of 1997, Pastor Wilkens accepted a call to Ft. Atkinson, WI, after many years of faithful work in Rio Rancho. Pastor Eric Ziecker accepted the call in January of 1998 to fill the vacancy at Peace.

CONCLUSION

Mission work in the Land of Enchantment is very enchanting, very unique. Two main obstacles seemed to continue to rear their ugly heads in this area. One is the challenge of isolation. Isolation caused many to long for a fellow brother in the mission field. Isolation may have also been the cause for some to leave this mission field. The other main challenge seems to be the lack of Lutheran influence in the Land of Enchantment or the surplus of Catholics and the Bible-Belters. It seemed to be hard for the missionaries to introduce Lutheranism to these people who had more than likely never heard of it. When you look at the religions that were present in New Mexico, you see why it may have been rather difficult to show these people the need for

Lutheranism. But as the missionaries will most likely tell you, all they had to do was preach the Word and the Holy Spirit did the rest.

The writer was a vicar in Rio Rancho. Even though the vicarage was only a year long, you can see the unique situation of mission work in the Land of Enchantment. It creates a huge need for brotherly fellowship among pastors. District, conference, and circuit meetings are wonderful times to sit back and enjoy the company of familiar faces. It seems to be a time of replenishing low batteries. Circuit meetings were not mandatory, but you probably could count on one hand the times someone missed one of these meetings. Pastor Wilkens mentioned that when a friend in the area had a call or if he had a call himself, it was not rare to drive 300-400 miles to chat and discuss a call for just 4-5 hours. Isolation created a very close, unique bond between brothers in the ministry in this area of the country.

At the end of the 10-year anniversary booklet of Peace Lutheran Church, a portion of Scripture is quoted to emphasize the power of God's Word. This portion of Scripture ties together the unique challenges of mission work in New Mexico and the awesome power of God's Word.

1 Peter 1:24-25 "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever."

TO GOD ALONE BE THE GLORY!!