

History of Ascension, Chapter 1(continued)



Pastor Walter Gravrock

was agreed to begin regular worship services on July 4, 1948.

Am Vet Post #49 kindly consented to allow the little band of believers to use its facilities located in a Quonset hut on Chiquita Lane, and on Independence Day 1948, a total of 35 people assembled for worship.

Every Sunday thereafter, services were held; on Wednesday evenings, Pastor Gravrock gave lectures on the history and aims of the church. But the little church did not grow. In fact, recalled founding member John Beyer in his history of Ascension, that first attendance figure was not matched again.

"It became increasingly difficult to raise the rent money (\$50), and in this period, the congregation struggled to be—or not to be," he wrote.

Attendance kept shrinking. One Sunday, Beyer recalled, it was down to three people. The offering plate had to be passed twice to raise the customary \$3 weekly salary for the pastor.

"The final blow came when word was received that we would not receive any mission help in any shape, form or fashion, simply because we were too few in number," Beyer wrote. "It was then that Pastor Gravrock called a meeting of his remaining faithful little flock. He put it bluntly to the half-dozen members present:

"Do you want to go on or disband?"

*"Do you want
to go on or
disband?"*

"For a while, which seemed like an eternity," Beyer continued, "there was a deadly silence. It was finally broken by the voice [that] seemed to come out of the wilderness, saying, 'If we disband now, it may be a long time, if ever, before we start another church. Where there is a will, there is a way. It is up to us to find that way.'

"That night was the real beginning of Ascension Lutheran Church of Thousand Oaks," Beyer wrote.

NEXT: Build It and They Will Come—Really?



John and Myrtle Beyer



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Example 25.

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Susanne Hopkins

"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors, realize what it has taken to build this church."

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part 2

"Do you want to go on or disband?" Faced with that tough question, six determined Christian Lutherans decided to forge ahead to build a Lutheran church in the Conejo Valley.

Once the decision to go on was made, the tiny group of worshippers was galvanized into action. On Aug. 20, 1948, a temporary church council was convened; the group decided to purchase a one-acre site at the corner of Conejo School Road and Los Feliz Road – 158 Conejo School Road – for \$1,500 cash (most of the money was put up by Walter Reynold). The transaction was completed that very day.



The church's own first building was a shabby, war surplus structure on Conejo School Road.

A war-surplus building was purchased for \$300, dragged up the Conejo Grade from Oxnard, and moved onto the lot on Jan. 27, 1949. The building consisted of a frame with four rooms and a small hall. The plan was to use it as a combined church and Sunday School, and later, as a building for the Sunday School.

But first, it had to be repaired. A small group—Beyer, Reynold, Leonard Ohlrich, and Henry and Norris Paulsen—volunteered time, materials, and labor. They set the structure on a foundation and repaired it so it was usable. They also obtained donations of lumber and foundation blocks from area businesses—a huge help since no funds were forthcoming from the Mission Board. Finally, on Feb. 20, 1949, the first services were held in the church's new home.

Even though there was now a structure, the fledgling church had not been formally organized. So, on April 3, the group of faithful parishioners met in the hall, approved the formal organization of the congregation, and adopted a constitution and by-laws. The group also decided to join the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, formerly known as the "Norwegian Lutheran Church of America" (NLCA), which was founded in 1946. The new church boasted 22 charter members and 12 children – a total of 34 souls.

The business of the church followed in quick succession: April 6, officers of the church nominated; April 8, officers elected; April 14, first communion held (Maundy Thursday); and April 17, first Easter services held.

By the end of October 1949, the congregation had a new pastor, Pastor Ommund Nielsen, to whom they had to pay \$6 a week, double what they had paid Pastor Gravrock.

On March 13, 1950, the church became incorporated under the laws of the State of California as "Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church of Thousand Oaks". John Beyer, Alexander Herzog, and Henry Paulsen were trustees and directors. Norris Paulson was president and Walter Reynold, secretary and treasurer.

Ascension was finally formally organized and had a building. Now the real work would begin. How could this small band of Lutherans get people to come and hear about God's love and grace?

NEXT: *The Struggle and the Children*

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Susanne Hopkins

*"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors,
realize what it has taken to build this church."*

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Three

The newly formed Ascension had it all together—incorporation, a church council, a building that worked. But where were the people?

Incorporated or not, the church was still struggling. Attendance was slight; so was the offering (Easter Sunday 1949 brought in a whopping \$16.25).

"It was as if you could hear Jesus ask the question he once asked of his disciples in John 6:67, 'Will ye also go away?'" cofounder John Beyer recalled in his history of Ascension.

"The one encouraging and bright spot in this struggling congregation was the Sunday School," he remembered. "It was the guiding and also driving force which carried the church through its darkest days."

Through the efforts of Beyer's wife, Myrtle, and other women, the Sunday School grew to 65 children. The Beyers and others literally drove around town picking up children and bringing them to Sunday School.

"Some of the children brought their parents later to church," Beyer wrote. "When we looked at the children that God was sending to us to be instructed in His Word, we had to go forward for them. And we remembered Isaiah saying, '...and a little child shall lead them'; and Jesus said, 'suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.'"

By 1951, the church had outgrown the war-surplus structure; the congregation decided to build a new sanctuary, and the first service in the addition was held on Easter Sunday, March 25, 1951. It was, Beyer recalled, "not much of a building—just the bare walls, three trusses and the heavens for a roof."

But it was "filled to overflowing that day," Beyer said.

Completing the new sanctuary was slow. "The bulk of the financing and the burden of physical labor rested primarily on four families," Beyer wrote, adding that a small group worked two nights a week, sometimes until 10 or 11 at night, to finish the structure.

On Sept. 23, 1951, a service was held for laying of the cornerstone and dedication of the new church. It is this cornerstone that was ultimately removed from the first sanctuary on Conejo School Road and moved to 1600 E. Hillcrest Drive, where it resides at the foot of the stairs.

By May 1953, the sanctuary was finally completed. The little church was now firmly established in the Conejo Valley—enough so that the Mission Board "became remorseful and offered us a loan of \$5,000 interest free for one year," Beyer recalled. That money went a long way, paying off the remaining debts, building a parsonage and adding rooms.

"It was a great challenge," Beyer said of establishing and building the church. "Little will be remembered of those who worked on it. There were untold headaches and many heartaches. ...As I look back now, building this church was more a case of ignorance than it was faith. But our womenfolk maintain that it was prayer and faith that built the church."



The sanctuary at Conejo School Road

NEXT: *A Gigantic Leap of Faith*

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

By Susanne Hopkins

*"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors,
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--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Four

*Pieced together by blood, sweat and tears, as well as a faith
that stuck, the church called Ascension Lutheran on Conejo School
Road was growing. But was God calling it to be more than a church?*

Prayers and faith swept Ascension along the years. The church grew, and by the late 1950s, it was very apparent that the congregation was outgrowing its facilities. Membership had ballooned to 172 people. Ascension needed a new site.

So, on Sept. 13, 1960, a near-three-acre site on Hillcrest Drive was purchased for \$20,500 and the church buildings on Conejo School Road were sold to the Nazarene congregation for \$50,000 (the building is now owned by the Elks Club).

Construction on the sanctuary (now our Founder's Hall) and Sunday School classrooms began on Dec. 7, 1960. On June 4, 1961, they were dedicated "to the service of God."

By this time, membership had mushroomed to 307; the total cost of the building project was \$80,000. It was a far cry from Ascension's beginnings, when 36 members worshipped in a \$300 war-surplus structure.

There was a prayer on the back of the dedication booklet:

"A Prayer for Our Church

Here may Thy children meet in glad devotion to Thee;
Here may Thy way be taught and Thy Kingdom established;
Here may Thy name be hallowed and Thy glory praised;
And here may life in its fullness be nourished and guided,
And the social bonds of fellowship in the Lord Jesus
Built up in mutual love and service.

In Jesus' Name.

Amen."

Ascension knew Whose it was, and what its call was and, as always in Ascension's history, there was still more work to be done to carry out that call. Once again, it centered around the children.

At a congregational meeting in February 1963, then-Pastor Gerhard Knutson made a motion to investigate the possibility of establishing a Christian day school. The Church Council followed up, and in May, two members, Herb Bockelman and Ray Darden, presented a cautious proposal that called for the church to start a kindergarten-only day school that school year, 1963-64. If the pilot program proved unsuccessful, it would be abandoned. Moderately successful would mean continuing the kindergarten-only model. Good success would result in expanding the program to include first grade. At a special congregational meeting, the plan was passed by 85 percent of the vote.

On Sept. 10, 1963, almost three years to the day since the Hillcrest property was purchased, Ascension Lutheran School opened—that is, the kindergarten opened. Helen Celentano was the teacher and there were 15 children.

The program was a solid success. After that, the school grew at a rate of almost one new grade every year, with the eighth grade being established in 1972.



*Mrs. Helen Celentano, Ascension Lutheran
School's first teacher, with the first kindergarten
class, 1963.*

(continued next page)



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

July 27, 2018

Dear Ascension Lutheran Church,

Thank you for your generous support of the ministries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America this past year. Through your gifts to ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response, we have been able to support over 600 multi-year projects in over 60 countries worldwide and 46 states. We celebrate your efforts to bring about a world full of hope and healing to people affected by hunger and disasters, and we celebrate your future commitment to these signature ministries of the ELCA.

We are thankful for your generosity to ELCA World Hunger this past year, as you have earned the distinction of being one of the Most Generous congregations to ELCA World Hunger.

Additionally, you are one of the Most Generous congregations to Lutheran Disaster Response. Please note, while only 20% of LDR funds received in 2017 were expensed on immediate disaster relief projects, more than 90% of the unspent funds have been allocated for long-term recovery work. These include our ongoing recovery projects in Texas and Puerto Rico. We thank you for your continued support, as already in 2018, our expenditures for disaster are nearly double our income.

God's blessings to you as you work in your community to create sustainable change, and may we all continue to work as church together until all are fed and bring resurrection hope to those who are afflicted by sudden disaster.

Yours in Christ,

Robin K. Brown

The Rev. Robin K. Brown

Associate Director, ELCA World Hunger and Disaster Appeal



Ascension History, Part Four (continued)

"Little did we realize, not even in our wildest dreams, that 25 years later [after the church was established], we would grow to a membership of 360 families and a parochial school from kindergarten to eighth grade," Beyer said during the church's 25th anniversary celebration in 1973.

The various church councils read the writing on the wall. Ascension would need room to continue to grow, so parcels of land were acquired over time, beginning with the small half-acre Treister property, which became a much-needed parking lot.

The growth of the church also sparked a need for an all-purpose building that could be used for congregational get-togethers, as well as for students, for offices and for food preparation. That need launched a capital campaign, with the goal of \$400,000. By April 4, 1976, the goal having been achieved, ground was broken for Pederson Hall, named in honor of Pete Pederson, who had left a bequest of \$190,000 to the church. The new gymnasium-kitchen-office-meeting rooms addition was an early Christmas gift, dedicated Dec. 12, 1976.

What, though, to do with the bequest? That question deserved a committee, so the Church Council convened the Pederson Fund Committee to determine the answer. The determination: create an Ascension Lutheran Foundation "for receiving gifts, holding the gifts in perpetuity and expending the interest gained...on charitable, education and religious purposes of significance to Ascension Lutheran Church."

The foundation was officially established on May 18, 1980. The church, the school, the foundation—all the pieces of "One Ascension"—were now in place.

NEXT: Moving Forward on Shaky Ground

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors,
realize what it has taken to build this church."

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Five

By the 1970s and '80s, Ascension, the church that almost wasn't, was flourishing. It boasted a growing membership, a thriving day school, and a Foundation that was gaining steam. But it would soon learn that following God's lead didn't always mean the way would be easy.

By 1978, Ascension was large enough to warrant three pastors. Pastor Willis Moerer, installed in October 1977, was soon joined by Pastor Verner Carlsen in January 1978 and Pastor Larry Wagner, September 1978. They were quickly—and fondly—dubbed “two Great Danes and a German Shepherd.” Pastor Art Sorensen would be installed in 1984 as the third pastor after Pastor Carlsen retired, but the “two Great Danes and a German Shepherd” moniker stuck.



Ascension co-founders John and Myrtle Beyer at 1989 dedication of Ascension's new sanctuary.

Under the aegis of these able pastors, Ascension experienced a major growth spurt. By 1980-81, the church had three services on Sundays. And by 1985, the church reported 1,653 baptized members and an average worship attendance of 558. Already, the church had purchased the Trummer property for a parking lot. It was time to expand once again. In 1985, the Church Council made a momentous decision: to build a new sanctuary.

“To do the building project, we did a capital campaign and we sold notes,” Pastor Larry recalled. Individuals and even church ministries, such as the youth group, purchased notes, he said.

By the end of 1986, another chunk of property, a near-acre, was purchased from the Harpe family; the church had contracted for its new Reiter organ; there was a ceremonial mortgage burning for the current church; and the church's first bus, purchased about four years prior, was paid off. Time to concentrate on building a new sanctuary.

But first, Ascension had a decision to make. Starting out as part of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Ascension had later become a part of the American Lutheran Church. In 1987, it needed to decide whether or not it would become a member of a new entity, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, an amalgamation of the ALC, the Lutheran Church in America and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches. In March 1987, Ascension members voted 116 to 38 to join the ELCA.

Six weeks later, on April 26, 1987, the ground-breaking ceremony for the new sanctuary was held. The new worship space was to cost no more than \$1.152 million. Occupancy was expected by summer 1988, with the final service in what would become Founder's Hall set for Aug. 9, 1988.

It was not to be. The construction was fraught with significant problems.

“It really was kind of a rollercoaster time for the congregation and myself,” remembered Pastor Moerer, who was Ascension's senior pastor at that tumultuous time. “The church wanted to move forward on building a larger sanctuary, he said, because “we needed it, the community was growing and the congregation was growing.

“And then we ran into all those difficulties, but the congregation really hung in there and I was really thankful for that,” he said.

The difficulties were daunting. The first contractor went bankrupt and didn't finish the job; the second contractor, hired for \$584,551, also did not complete the job and left behind a plethora of work that needed to be corrected. There was no more money; the congregation had to take out an additional \$1.3 million bank loan so the work could be completed under a third contractor.

“[The new sanctuary] cost almost twice what it was supposed to,” Pastor Larry said, adding that the church had

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Ascension History - Part Five Continued

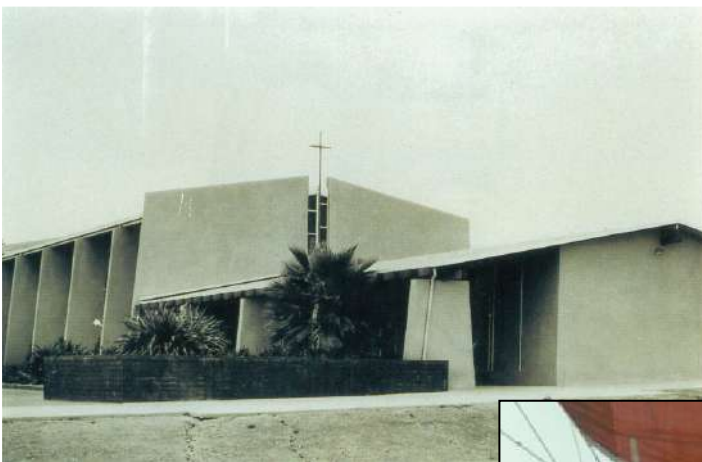
to do another fund-raiser later to retire the debt. Valuable lessons were learned, however, he noted: Hiring a project manager would have been a good investment and so would purchasing a construction bond, insurance "to make sure it happened the way it was supposed to happen."

Those hard-learned lessons would pay off 30 years later.

Believing that God was still calling Ascension to enlarge its ministry, the congregation soldiered on. Under the third contractor, Larry Carignan, the sanctuary was finally completed. On Oct. 22, 1989, it was dedicated, more than a year later than first anticipated. By that time, Ascension had 1,901 baptized members and drew 657 to worship each Sunday.

"The new sanctuary became a stunningly beautiful testimony to God's faithfulness to believers who put Him first and practice God's word," wrote Iris Carignan, Carignan's wife, in her book, "Fresh Eyes." "It is a house of God that stands strong now because it was truly 'built on a rock.'"

NEXT: *Following the Dream*



Sanctuary 1961 - 1988



View from the air 1989



Pastors ascending



Interior sanctuary, now Founders' Hall



Pastors Art Sorensen, Willis Moerer, & Larry Wagner and Lisa

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

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--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Six

By Susanne Hopkins

Ascension had survived a near-disastrous building project with its spirit—and its resolve to follow the dream that God had planted—firmly intact. It was thriving in so many ways. But was it the lull before the storm?

By 1994-95, with more than 2,200 baptized members, Ascension had its sights set on the future. What became known as "the great Ascension land rush" began. Three slices of properties bordering the church were purchased. One had a little house on site—the answer to yet another dream.

At that point in its history, Ascension had a small preschool that met in Founders' Hall in the mornings only and served a very limited number of children. When that small house became a part of the Ascension campus, it sparked an idea: Why not turn it into a preschool that could serve many more children—and serve them better?

So, with a lot of elbow grease from school parents and congregational members, the little abode became a full-fledged preschool. Pastor Larry Wagner, accustomed to working on his uncles' farms in North Dakota, muscled a tractor around the grounds clearing off trees and brush, while other church members, both older and young, enthusiastically wielded paint brushes, hammers and shovels.

"I couldn't believe how many people were excited to do this," said Judy Halweg, a seasoned preschool teacher and long-time member of Ascension who was named the director of the new preschool. She and fellow Ascension members and preschool teachers Jeanne Hengst and Beth Camarillo saw it as a chance to create a vibrant, experiential place where little ones could thrive.

"The idea was to expand the hours and to also change the curriculum and make more opportunities [for kids] to experience things, like a dress-up center, a kitchen center. [At the time], they pretty much had blocks and that was it," Halweg said.

The Ascension Early Childhood Center was to open in September 1996, but the opening was delayed for a month while sprinklers were installed—an unexpected development that caused the new facility to go \$90,000 over its budget. Licensed for 47 children, it opened with 37 but quickly hit its maximum of 47, Halweg said. And the kids had more than blocks to play with. "People were very generous with their donations," she said.

Today, with the addition of modular structures to the site, its staff of 22 teachers serves 107 children daily. With its acclaimed outdoor classroom, the Ascension Lutheran Early Childhood Center (ALECC), now under the direction of Pam Musburger and assistant director Kari Grecco, has the distinction of being named the best preschool in Ventura County in 2017 by readers of the Ventura County Star.

As the years flew by, Ascension garnered a reputation not only for its preschool, but for an outstanding youth program under the aegis of Pastor Larry, and for an energetic music program under Howard Sonstegard. A host of other ministries also expanded Ascension's reach, including Stephen Ministry and ChristCare programs—one to help those going through a crisis, whether Ascension members or not, the other to nurture faith through Bible study and community. Even the church campus continued to grow. Two more properties were added to the church's holdings, bringing the campus footprint to about 7.3 acres. The three worship services were drawing attendance in the 700s each week. Ascension was flourishing.

But church leaders were starting to grapple with an emerging problem: how to best serve professionals who couldn't attend church on Sunday mornings and families whose Saturdays and Sundays were consumed with club sports.



(Continued next page)

Ascension History, Part Six (Continued)

They had considered adding a 7 AM Sunday service, “but that ended up not being the answer,” said Pastor Larry, then an associate pastor at Ascension.

Then they became aware of a Saturday evening service model.

“We had heard about it at Community Lutheran Church in Las Vegas,” Pastor Larry recalled. “We had seen other models, but we fell in love with the country gospel model they were doing at Community Lutheran.”



Nancy Lee

They pulled together some music leaders, including Nancy Lee, who still leads the Saturday night music. Then, they came up with a way to “salt” the first service.

“We had a church council retreat at El Camino Pines,” Pastor Larry said. Would the attendees help populate the first Saturday night worship service, they were asked. “We planned our return trip so we arrived in the No. 1 bus at about five minutes to 6. That’s how we kicked [the service] off.”

The service took hold and, over the years, has built a comfortable following.

But the very need for that service was an inkling that a sea change loomed not only for Ascension, but nearly all churches.

NEXT: *On the Way to a New Normal*

Women’s Bible Study: ‘Wonderstruck’

What are you doing on Monday mornings in the fall? If you want to take a trip to the spectacularly beautiful Canadian Rockies, delve into scripture and reawaken your sense of “holy awe” for God and the wonders of His world, then this year’s Monday Morning Bible Study is just the ticket.

From 9:15 to 11:15 am on Monday mornings from September 24 through late spring, women will gather to enjoy breakfast, fellowship and discussion swirling



around “Wonderstruck: Awaken to the Nearness of God,” a DVD-based study by Margaret Feinberg that was filmed in the Canadian Rockies.

Come join us on this adventure! Cost is \$45 for the year or \$50 if you’d like to donate to the scholarship fund to aid those who otherwise couldn’t come. You must be registered to attend. Sign-up sheets are available in the church office. They can be returned to the office or mailed to Cherie Dunk. For more information, contact her at (805) 373-6286.

Welcoming *the* Stranger

You are invited to attend the Conejo Valley Interfaith Refugee Welcome Team Potluck here at Ascension on Today, August 26, from 5-7 PM.

Meet friends from other faith communities in the Conejo Valley who are helping refugee families establish their new homes.

Bring a small potluck dish to share and enjoy a time of fellowship and learning!



The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

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realize what it has taken to build this church."*

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Seven

By Susanne Hopkins

In its almost half-a-century, Ascension had grown from a small, struggling church meeting in a war-surplus building to become the largest of the churches in the Southwest California Synod of the ELCA. It was thriving, but change was afoot.

In 1998, Ascension celebrated its 50th anniversary. The theme was "Fifty Years of Promises Kept."

John Beyer, Ascension's stubbornly faithful and eloquent co-founder, sadly was not there to remark on Ascension's half-century. Beyer, who had also had a hand in crafting the Thousand Oaks community, suffered a stroke on Aug. 11, 1990, while helping to paint the Goebel Senior Center; he died from its effects on Jan. 6, 1991, his 90th birthday.

But there was a bit of an echo of Beyer in a letter in that year's pictorial directory signed by Pastor Willis Moerer, along with Pastors Larry Wagner and Verner Carlsen (who had rejoined the pastoral staff after Pastor Art Sorensen left in 1991).



Worship service in T.O.
Civic Arts Plaza, 1998

"As one reads the history of Ascension and talks with those who have been a part of the history for much of those 50 years, it becomes evident that Ascension has had its share of struggles and also its share of great celebrative times," they wrote.

"The heartbeat of Ascension has been its desire to be faithful to God and to reach out to the world in the name of Jesus Christ. One thing that is very evident is that God has kept His promises to the people of Ascension. God has demonstrated very clearly His trustworthiness, not only to us as individuals, but to His Church.

"The 50th anniversary celebration gives us an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to a God who keeps His promises."

That would have pleased Beyer, who knew that the only way for the church to survive was to keep Almighty God at the forefront, to never lose sight of the God it was established to serve—the "God who keeps His promises". That had always been the true north for Ascension; it mustn't waver now. Especially now.

The 50th anniversary was close to the end of the millennium; it was also close to the end of the status quo.

Up to that point, Ascension, as most other churches, thrived on tradition. Families routinely came to church on Sundays and children routinely attended Sunday School. The church was a gathering place, a social hub, for potlucks, bingo nights and other activities. It was not unusual for volunteers to sign up for positions such as Sunday School teacher, librarian, or ministry leader and keep them for years.

But as Ascension had become aware in the mid- to late-1990s when it saw a need for an alternative worship service, such devotion was fading. Church was often no longer a weekly priority for many families. Many were juggling family time, children's sports activities, errands and even work on the weekends. In many families, both parents worked, cutting into time for volunteering and church

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Back to School Time For Our Tutoring Program

Children all over the Conejo Valley are back in school starting a new year of learning. And our Tutoring Program at Conejo Elementary School is getting ready to go back to school too! The new Tutoring Program year starts on Thursday, October 18, 2018. We hope you're ready to go back to school with us!

Through this Ascension community outreach ministry that started last year, the Holy Spirit called together a team of caring and compassionate volunteers who touched 165 lives (85 children in Tutoring and 80 parents in ESL Classes) weekly from October 2017 to April 2018 in wonderful ways. The Tutoring Program is a wonderful opportunity to share the gifts God has given to us - our love, compassion, time, talents and financial resources - with those in need at this public school in our neighborhood.



For those who volunteered as tutors last year, we thank you and ask you to give prayerful consideration to signing up again to spend 90 minutes on Thursday nights with some very special kids. And we look forward to having new volunteers join us as tutors in this privilege to put our faith into action. Adults and high-school youth – women and men. You don't need to have teaching experience – just a caring and compassionate heart, ready to provide encouragement to our young friends at Conejo Elementary. If you have limited time to share, maybe you want to be a part of our “sub”- team—a couple of volunteers who will order, pick up and distribute the sandwiches to the classes before class time starts.

Thank you also to the many generous donors who provided funding to pay for the sandwich snacks for the students on tutoring nights. For the October to April tutoring term, the cost of the sandwiches was approximately \$3000. Financial gifts from individuals and philanthropic organizations made the sandwiches possible in our first program year. Requests for new grant funding are pending. If you know of other organizations that may have grant funding opportunities, please let us know. Maybe your employer has a grant program and might be interested in helping provide funding for the sandwich snacks? Financial gifts are welcomed and appreciated at any time, with checks written to Ascension Lutheran Church and designated for the tutoring program on the notation line.

To everyone who participated last year, our Tutoring Outreach Program would not have been possible without your generosity of time and financial support and your prayers and words of support and encouragement. We hope you're ready to go back to school with us in October!

For more information about the program and opportunities for this year, please contact Mary Wennes at mwennes@aol.com or send a note on the Connection Card.

Ascension History, Part Seven (Continued)

activities. And with the rising cost of living in Ventura County, retirees were moving to cheaper locales. The end result was that, like churches everywhere, Ascension was starting to see declining attendance, membership and involvement.

“Ascension has seen a great deal of change in this last chapter of its history,” observed Pastor Tim Delkeskamp, who came on board as an associate pastor in 2003 (he was elected senior pastor in 2017). “Not just internal changes in leadership, but huge external changes in the culture. Consumerism, busyness, and pluralism have become stronger forces in our culture.”

It was the perfect storm of cultural changes. How could Ascension live out its mission—“to create opportunities for all people to become devoted followers of Christ”—in this new age?

NEXT: *Where Do We Go from Here?*

The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

*"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors,
realize what it has taken to build this church."*

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Eight

By Susanne Hopkins

"The heartbeat of Ascension has been its desire to be faithful to God and to reach out to the world in the name of Jesus Christ." That quote from Ascension's pictorial directory in 1998 turned out to be prophetic as Ascension sought a new way to carry out its mission.



Pastors Moerer (l) and Wennes

After 24 years as Ascension's beloved lead pastor, Willis Moerer retired in fall 2001.

Pastor Howard Wennes, a former ELCA bishop in Arizona, became the interim senior pastor. He brought with him a new way to live out Ascension's mission in a culture that was experiencing almost a seismic shift: to think outwardly.

"We wanted the Lutheran community to understand that to be Lutheran is to be global," he said.

With his encouragement and that of his wife, Mary, Ascension's Missions Committee (now called the Global Ministries Team) started "Gifts of Hope" about 2003.

The idea was for members and friends of Ascension to support the critical needs of others around the world as identified by a Lutheran entity such as Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran World Federation and the ELCA. With the help of LWR, the Missions Team put together a booklet of possibilities.

"I remember our first Gifts of Hope booklet and we had 18 different things in it," said Mary Wennes. "We didn't have a project that first year."

But the booklet of needs captured the enthusiasm of Ascension members and friends. "I think the first year [we raised] \$16,000 and we were amazed at how that happened," Mary Wennes said.



"We had a trusted vehicle in our ELCA connections because they really do their homework and the job gets done and it gets done well," said Pastor Wennes. "There was a very good response and a positive sense that we really are doing a lot of things and we're doing them well."

Positioned in November, just in time for Christmas, Gifts of Hope gathered steam. In 2006, the project was goats, which would be purchased and, through the ELCA, be given to people worldwide to help lift them out of poverty.

"It ended up being 700 goats," said Mary Wennes, noting that you could purchase a goat for \$25 on up to \$250—and about 10 or 15 people purchased the latter.

But it was the next year that really caught fire. "Then in 2007, we did the water project in Kenya and we really hit that one out of the park—that's when we raised over \$100,000," Mary Wennes said.

Gifts of Hope and that outward-looking sense of ministry got another boost in 2008 when Pastor Steve Herder joined the pastoral staff as an associate pastor overseeing stewardship and senior ministries. A proponent of the concept of "Jubilee", which seeks to help the world's poorest nations by relieving debts so funds can instead be funneled into ending poverty and enhancing healthcare, schooling and housing, Pastor Steve, who now serves as secretary of the Jubilee USA board, brought a heightened sensibility for those who are disadvantaged.

Since then, the Gifts of Hope has become a hallmark of Ascension and has raised a total of more than \$1 million



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Ascension History, Part Eight (Continued)

for global and local projects, including building a church and a school in Africa, helping orphans with AIDS and, through the local Lutheran Social Services office, helping the homeless.

That seed planted by the Wenneses and nurtured by Pastor Steve and others has flourished. Ascension continues to reach out to the community through such ministries as Project Response, Stephen Ministry, Senior Adult Ministry, Griefshare, Alpha classes, Great Music at Ascension and Matthew 25:35, all of which serve not only Ascension members but the community.

The school, particularly ALECC, also has proven a magnet for the community. In 2004, it opened its infant care center—and filled it to capacity immediately with about as many children of the community as children of members.

That was further enhanced in 2010, when ALECC became a certified Nature Explore Classroom—and drew even more children to Ascension. The philosophy, according to Pam Musburger, ALECC director, is “to offer a loving, safe and structured environment for ages two through five and encourage a deep connection with nature and a sense of stewardship for God’s world.

“We know,” she added, “that virtually every aspect of the development of the human brain is shaped by experience. We embrace active learning and honor our student’s sense of wonder through emergent science-based curriculum that ensures personal growth.”

The culture had changed dramatically, but Ascension was adapting, still filled with the desire, as her pastors wrote in 1998, “to be faithful to God and to reach out to the world in the name of Jesus Christ.”

“The research shows it has been a time when an increasingly large portion of people have stopped coming to and actively participating in church,” Senior Pastor Tim Delkeskamp said. “Ascension, however, because of her deep and healthy roots, and commitment to the mission— is remaining faithful. We are continuing to serve, and give and grow in our discipleship. We are to tell the ‘old, old story’ in new ways so that people may hear it and become devoted followers of Jesus.”

In the fall of 2015, Pastor Larry Wagner retired after nearly 38 years of fruitful service, the last 14 as senior pastor. The congregation went through a “visioning” process in an effort to regroup and pinpoint answers to two questions: What was God calling Ascension to become? Where would the Holy Spirit lead it in the future?



NEXT: *Into the Future*

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY REGISTRATION

Sunday School

[HTTP://BIT.LY/SS_ALC_2018](http://bit.ly/ss_alc_2018)

2 YEARS OLD TO 6TH GRADE
STARTING SEPTEMBER 23RD
9:30AM

KIDS OF THE KINGDOM

http://bit.ly/KOK_2018-19

4TH GRADE-6TH GRADE ARE INVITED
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SEPTEMBER 19TH
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ASCENSION
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The (Amazing) History of Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church

*"I often wonder how many of you, when you enter these doors,
realize what it has taken to build this church."*

--John Beyer, founding Ascension member

Part Nine

By Susanne Hopkins

In Fall 2015, after Senior Pastor and Youth Director Larry Wagner retired, Ascension was faced with a key question: Where do we go from here—and who on the ground will help us get there?

As Ascension sought to find its footing in the wake of Pastor Larry's retirement, two events occurred that brought together the past, the present and the future.

Rev. Dr. Paul Gravrock, a retired pastor and son of Ascension's founding pastor, Pastor Walter Gravrock, accepted the position as interim senior pastor; and a process to study where Ascension was in the present and where God was calling it to go in the future began taking shape.

"When I was invited to serve as the interim senior pastor at Ascension, two thoughts initially shaped my response," recalled Pastor Paul, now Ascension's director of worship.



Rev. Paul Gravrock

"The first was that I was incredibly honored to be asked to take on this important ministry at such a wonderful congregation. The second was that there was an amazing symmetry—being able to give pastoral leadership to the congregation my father, Rev. Walter Gravrock, founded in 1948."



The Three Amigos: Pastors Tim, Larry and Steve in 2015

Like his father before him, Pastor Paul would help maneuver Ascension into position for the future.

The "visioning" process would offer a guide for pinpointing that position.

"When Pastor Larry retired after 38 years of service at Ascension, the

congregation decided it was time to step back, do some self-reflection and re-calibrate as we moved into the future," said Rev. Dr. Tim Delkeskamp, then one of Ascension's two associate pastors.

That fall of 2015, Ascension embarked on a study that involved interviewing scores of members and surveying the congregation for input on numerous aspects of church life.

In March 2016, the Visioning Team, comprised of seven people whose membership at Ascension ranged from four to 40 years, issued its findings in a 50-page document. The team identified five "critical factors for Ascension's success":

Worship: "Reinvigorate the weekend worship experience to address all age groups, leverage new technologies and encourage individuals of all ages to remain on campus to participate in other opportunities;"

Evangelism and outreach: "Develop and promote an evangelism culture...and purposefully equip members for outreach";

Youth: "Focus on family, youth and young adult ministries to engage demographic groups whose participation is declining significantly";

Staffing: "Determine whether Ascension should embrace a lay ministry or staff-driven model, and then train and provide appropriate support and staffing";

"One Ascension": "Introduce greater alignment and touch points between church, school and Foundation and different ministries."

"The leadership of the congregation then used the data to shape the senior pastor position and, in turn, create a new children, youth and family pastoral position moving forward," said Pastor Tim. "[The process] also led to a reshaped master plan document, a new way to structure the church staff, and a renewed effort to engage members of what has come to be known as 'One Ascension' into ministry."

Thirty-six years after the establishment of the Foundation,
(continued next page)

Ascension History, Part Nine (Continued)

the last of the three entities (the church, the school and the Foundation), all the pieces of Ascension finally coalesced into 'One Ascension'.

Ascension leadership took seriously the study's findings. The master plan now reflected the congregation's interest in building a new, larger early childhood center and refurbishing the tired, worn sanctuary with its dated lighting and technology.

Pastors and staff renewed efforts to invite members into ministries, reactivating Cursillo and Fellowship teams, reinvigorating the Evangelism Committee, starting a Eucharistic Ministers ministry and working on a new small group model.

"The future, we believe, is in God's hands, and God wants Ascension to continue to find creative and life-giving ways to serve locally and globally," said Pastor Tim. "We will continue to teach the faith and develop young people into leaders; we will continue to grow together; and we will continue to glorify God with our worship. We trust and believe that the Lord of the church calls us into the world for His sake."

It wasn't only ministries that changed and expanded. Personnel changes led the way to a new staff configuration.

"I was very much aware that Pastor Larry's retirement marked a major change in the life of Ascension and that there would be challenges," Pastor Paul said. "I knew that we would need a new youth director, but I did not know that our long-time administrator and our finance director would also be leaving in the year ahead."



Pastors Tim and Chamie Delkeskamp the day of his installation

In relatively short order, Addie Behm joined the staff as youth director; Kaylee Searway as director of administrative ministries, and Jim Glynn joined the finance team.

In 2017, Pastor Tim was called and elected to the senior pastor position, after an 18-month call process and a congregation-wide vote.

Pastor Julie McCain joined the staff as the children, youth and family pastor in April 2018. Director of Music, Howard Sonstegard, retired in June 2018 after 25 years of leading the chancel choir; Wyant Morton stepped in as the director of the chancel choir; and Pastor Paul became the director of worship.



Rev. Julie McCain

"As is always true, God has provided what we needed: a new senior pastor; children, youth, and family pastor; youth director; director of administrative ministries; and finance person," Pastor Paul said.

In the fall of 2017, Ascension launched a capital campaign under the able direction of Past President Todd Klipp. Mission Possible's goal is to raise \$7.3 million for a number of projects over time, the most urgent being the building of a new early childhood center and the refurbishing of the sanctuary. Future projects, as funds are available, include expanding the east narthex, creating a new music room, sacristy and vestry.



In their appeal to the congregation to participate in the campaign, the pastors referenced

Ascension's amazing history. "We have risen to challenge after challenge, all for the sake of the mission of 'creating opportunities for all people to become devoted followers of Christ,'" they wrote. "After nearly 70 years of doing this we have come to realize *this is who we are*. We are the ones who, with God's help, rise to the challenge day after day, year after year and season after season. And when we do, we discover just how faithful our God truly is."

The campaign has so far raised \$3.2 million, allowing the sanctuary to be updated. Today, our sanctuary refurbishment is completed. Construction of the new early childhood center is set to begin next August. God is
(continued next page)

Ascension History, Part Nine (Continued)

faithful indeed.

And so have been countless members of Ascension, all the way back to that time 70 years ago when those stalwart half-dozen people told Pastor Walter Gravrock that they wanted to continue working toward their goal of establishing a church to spread God's word.

"Where there is a will, there is a way. It is up to us to find that way," said those faithful six. And so it is, 70 years later.

The goal has not changed. We still exist to spread God's word. The people may change, the facility may be altered, the methods may differ. But there is still work to do for God's people.

"As we celebrate our 70 years, we look back in gratitude," Pastor Tim reflected. "We celebrate the faithful saints who have gone before us, sacrificed, and made Ascension what it is today. But we also look into the future. Building our new preschool, refurbishing the church sanctuary and creating our new garden space to make us a 'church and school in a garden' is our gift to the future, a future that we entrust into His hands."

Let John Beyer, that stalwart, faithful man of God and co-founder of Ascension, have the last word. At the church's 25th anniversary dinner, Beyer prayed: "That the seed planted July 4, 1948, shall continue to grow. God bless us! In His holy name we pray."

Amen!

PROJECT RESPONSE NEEDS VOLUNTEERS FOR CHURCH FOOD DRIVE!

Project Response is part of the community concerns ministry where volunteers collect groceries from our Church Families to restock our food pantry and distribute groceries to Lutheran Social Services and Manna, a local food bank.

On Saturday, October 20, 2018, groceries will be collected from church members who reside in Thousand Oaks, zip codes 91360 and 91362. (In May, groceries will be collected from the church members who reside in the other zip code areas.) We need Callers to contact members in their area to donate groceries, and pick up and deliver groceries. If you are interested in volunteering, contact Tom Saldin at (805) 492-9742 or email tlidsaldin@msn.com.



Observe the Season of Creation by Planting Peas!

As One Ascension lives into the vision of being a church and school IN a garden and encouraging nature-connections near and far, members and friends of the congregation are invited to plant snap peas, sugar peas, shelling peas, and/or sweet peas at their homes. September to early October is a great time to plant peas in the ground or in a pot.

All of the students at Ascension Lutheran School are planting peas in the teaching garden as they study President Thomas Jefferson and how he and his neighbors would have a "first peas to the table" contest each year.

Packs of various pea seeds - complete with instructions - are available for a \$1 donation after worship services or in the church and school offices. If you have questions or wonders, contact Pastor Chamie at cdelkeskamp@alschool.org.

Save the Date:
September 26
ALECC Toppers Pizza Night
3:30-9 PM