The Woodlands Lutheran Congregation - The First 25 Years

Written in Celebration of 25 years of God’s mission at Woodlands Lutheran Church.

To God be the Glory!

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and the Congregation of Woodlands Lutheran Church

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Forward to the 25th Anniversary Booklet

This historical record of Woodlands Lutheran Church as it celebrates its 25th Anniversary comes with mixed emotions. First, it comes with sadness. The original writer, photographer, interviewer, gatherer of information, and editor, Dave Herbst, was called to his heavenly home unexpectedly. Dave brought to this project an expertise and style that he developed over the years as a writer at Walt Disney World. The task came to a screeching halt with uncertainty as to its future.

Secondly, it comes with much joy that God touched the heart of another Walt Disney World “cast member,” Bob Beaver to step up and take on the overwhelming challenge of digesting what Dave had begun and then completing the project. Bob has been part of the Woodlands family for twenty of its twenty-five years, having served as President during the crucial time of restructuring, when the congregation and camp became independent of each other. Bob and his wife Terri, who has served as office secretary for the past 15 years, have lived through a great portion of our congregation’s history. So this anniversary booklet was handed over to a qualified successor to Dave. Thank you, Bob! God is good!

Thirdly, as we read through and digest the unique and fascinating history of Woodlands, we cannot help but rejoice and praise God for His mighty hand in raising up faithful people to carry out His ministry through this congregation. Oftentimes only when we look back can we truly see God’s activity in our lives. And He has been active, indeed, through Woodlands!

So sit back, get comfortable, and prepare yourself to enjoy an amazing 25-year journey of twists and turns in a ministry of God called Woodlands Lutheran Church. When you are finished, offer a pray of thanks and praise. And then pray that God will continue to smile upon our efforts to connect people to His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Reverend Dr. Brian Kneser
Chapter 1

“The Beauty of it All”

It was the late 1960s. The Florida - Georgia District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod had a seed it needed planted. There was no one better to plant and nourish the seed, the District believed, than Pastor Harold Storm, who at the time was “happy as a clam” living in Miami Shores and serving at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Miami. The seed, the District told Pastor Storm, was for a youth camp.

But the truth is, that’s only what the District thought and Pastor Storm, a self-professed “Miami boy right down to the sand in my shoes,” initially groused about. God had a different idea. God’s idea didn’t involve the land donated by agri-baron A. Duda & Sons. As for the youth camp? It was to till the ground for a congregation… in a place where man’s sense of reason never would plant a church.

Crazy, huh?

“Plant a church in Montverde?” Pastor Milan Weerts at Orlando’s Trinity Lutheran Church responded to a query about the District’s vision for what would grow from the seed. “Ah… no!”

In fact, Montverde wasn’t even the place envisioned for the youth camp that was supposed to be in the seed. Rather, it was in Brevard County. Andrew Duda, a Slovakian immigrant who had realized “the American Dream,” growing a family agricultural and real estate empire from a 40-acre celery plot, stood at a meeting of the District in the 1960s and gifted 100 acres in Brevard County for a youth camp.

But Iowa-based camp designer and developer Art Harrison didn’t even have to step foot on the donated land before concluding it wouldn’t be suitable. Hired by the district as consultant for the project, Harrison, a pilot, flew over the acreage in his private plane and recalls, “It was all water when I saw it. “I went back and called, I think it was Harold Storm, and said, ‘Let’s talk to Mr. Duda,’” Harrison recounted.

During the ensuing discussions, when Harrison brought up the soggy state of the acreage, there was a proposal that “we can drain it.” Harrison stood his ground, noting that “if it has water on it, it’s awfully low” and based on his expertise not a suitable location for the campground.

“Andrew Duda was very gracious,” Harrison said. “He finally said, ‘Okay, I’ll forget this.” Pastor Storm recalls, “Andy Duda took the land back and gave the District $100,000 to buy land the District found – 137 acres from the Carpenter family in Montverde.” And even then, Pastor Storm wasn’t too sure about the land in Montverde being suitable for a youth camp. He had been to youth camps before and wasn’t impressed. He drew a line representing the span of the Florida Georgia District to Montverde from the north and south extremities of the District – 7 hours trip from the south and 9
hours from the north...nope, no way is that going to work. But the District said “Do it.”

However, a member of Pastor Storm’s congregation in Miami Shores talked to him about the possibilities. What if we make it so adults, the snowbirds that come to winter in Florida, can enjoy the campground too? Make it attractive enough so adults wouldn’t mind staying there, as well as the kids. So as the ideas began to take root, the vision became clearer.

Now Harrison and Pastor Storm had something to work with that didn’t involve wearing rubber boots above the knees – acreage that included lots of trees and a secluded lake.

“We had a committee,” Harrison recalls. “They wanted to design a camp that had never been developed before – very modernistic ... way out!” The “blue-skies” idea that emerged was for “very Martian-looking structures,” Harrison said. But that concept was too “way out” as far as the District was concerned. It didn’t fly.

The focus shifted from futuristic space travel to a bygone transportation system: the Tavares & Gulf Railroad. Founded in 1890 and known locally as the “T & G”, the railroad had track on the campground property from a spur once used to transport citrus from local groves. But at the time the campground was being developed, the rail service was a memory and crews were removing track from the area. In the end Pastor Storm settled for the feeling of truly being in the forest, preserving the trees and understory, making it feel as though you were traveling through a “tunnel of trees,” it gives one that feeling of not being sure of what may be around the next bend.

The Woodlands

Of course, you can’t have a ministry without worship. In the beginning, like Jesus demonstrated, worship was down by the lake, in the woods, in a barn or in the bath house. Pastor Storm recalled the first Thanksgiving service that was held in the pool’s bath house, the first building on the property. It rained that day, and several campers brought the fixings for Thanksgiving dinner. They spread them out on a table at one end of the porch. After the service the campers made themselves plates and had to run back to their campers to eat, lest they be stuck in the rain.

The Ministry Center is located on what?

The Woodlands Lutheran Ministry Center (Disciples Hall) sits just off the old railroad tracks. That’s right. And here we take a slight detour to learn about how THAT came

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1 Storm, Et. al. Tales of the Woodlands, 1989
to be. In 1887 two communities on the west side of Lake Apopka, Montverde and West Apopka (Ferndale), were connected to the Orange Belt Line and to the rest of the world by the aforementioned Tavares and Gulf Railroad. Known locally as the Tug & Grunt, the Try & Go, the Turtle & Gopher, and some more colorful names, it became an integral part of the local residents’ lives. The T&G had originally intended to bypass the Town of Montverde, but citizens persuaded railroad officials to come through the town with promises of free right-of-way, building materials, and voluntary labor. The T&G provided freight and passenger service between the Lake County communities of Tavares, Astatula, Montverde, Minneola, and Clermont, as well as the Orange County communities of Oakland, Winter Garden, and Ocoee. They were entirely dependent upon the freight and passengers of the local communities it served. Freight consisted mainly of agricultural supplies, watermelons, truck crops, rough cut lumber, and citrus. At one time the train ran holiday excursions from Winter Garden in Orange County to Gourd Neck Springs and Montverde. When the local economy flourished, the railroad prospered, and for several years the small railroad with only 38 miles of track was one of the most profitable in the U.S. But hard times were experienced through neglected track and roadbed. During a period of decline at the beginning of the last century, the railroad boasted that it held the U.S. record for jumping the tracks the most times during a single round trip, a total of nine times. The T & G Railroad was eventually bought in 1926 by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad marking the end of the T & G era.

Remnants of the track remained in the former Woodlands Camp, along with several boxcars. The foundation of the Howey Heights depot is located near the northern terminus of the corridor along the highway right-of-way.

**The Boxcars**

An idea sprouted out of that old railroad: acquire old railroad cars and “make them into cabins for the kids.” Pastor Storm pursued the idea, hoping the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad (which had acquired the T&G Railroad) might like to donate some old cabooses.

Cabooses - no. Boxcars - yes, six of them, to be exact. But one of the boxcars came to serve a different purpose. It would house the worship center.
In “Tales of the Woodlands,” Pastor Storm relates as to how one of the boxcars became the first chapel at Woodlands. “[It] had been used to carry fertilizer. It measured 44 feet long by 9 feet wide and could seat 50 persons. “We made a cross out of 2-inch plastic water pipe and affixed it to the open sliding door of the boxcar.”

“We leaned a ladder against the doorway and climbed to church. It was not heated or air conditioned. Dirt and fertilizer still clung to the steel side walls. However, it was our church. If Jacob could use a stone for an altar, we could use a boxcar.” The story of the acquisition of the box cars is worthy of note, because it is an example of “ask and ye shall receive.” It’s just that sometimes; you aren’t going to be sure how you’re going to receive. In this case, Pastor Storm had written twice to the president of Seaboard Coastline railroad in Jacksonville to inquire of a donation of used box cars – each time with no reply. In the meantime, the foreman for demolition of the tracks that went through Woodlands informed Pastor Storm of the impending removal of the tracks. He called the president and got his secretary. The Pastor explained the situation to her. She said the president was in a meeting but that she would type up the necessary papers and have him sign them - while in his meeting. That’s how the box cars got to Woodlands, and that’s how Pastor Storm discovered the power of a secretary.²

Early on at the camp, getting the arrivals to stay must have been a challenge. Pastor Storm opened the camp up to adult campers – snowbirds. The first time some of the campers laid eyes on Woodlands must have made them wonder if they had gotten off the right exit from the Turnpike. Minds changed, however, once they experienced the lure of the quiet, wooded areas, the lakes and natural beauty of it all. They decided to stay. The Holcombs, Kuhnles, Tomkos, Peggy and Bobby Davis, the Madsens, Lillichs, Schotts, Hansens, and many others among them. Joe and Joan Battle uprooted themselves from a perfectly fine situation in Oveido to come all the way out there to help Pastor Storm get the camp going. They arrived to find that “home” was now a mobile home with holes in it.

² Storm Et. al, Ibid, 1998

Joe and Joan Battle – Camp and Office Managers
Marian Holcomb remembers arriving in 1979: “...we got there in January 1979, and it was raining cats and dogs. We had to move picnic tables in and out to hold services... in the bath house. Nancy took pictures outside the doors of the pavilion on Sunday by a big cactus.”

The youth camp had very humble beginnings, tents – subject to flooding as could be expected in a Central Florida summer – camp lanterns because there was no electricity, and sometimes, the kids and counselors had to sleep in the hay loft in the barn to keep dry – which Pastor Storm discovered they preferred over tents! Along with the youth came senior counselors - Peggy Davis, Nancy Davidson (a local resident) and others. Of course, there were the aforementioned snowbirds – a ready-made volunteer labor force!

Youth Campers at the Boxcar Worship Center

Our Equine Friends

It started with the youth camp. Kids like horses and Pastor Storm knew that too. The kids were drawn to them. Along the way, something else happened. As Pastor Storm recalls in Tales of the Woodlands, it started with a grant from the Aid Association for Lutherans, which enabled the camp to offer free outdoor education for children that attended the Florida School for the Deaf in St Augustine. The Harbor School in Casselberry, Forest Park School, and Primrose School in Orlando, among others, also came to know Woodlands as a place where children with “learning disabilities” or emotional challenges could get a second chance through contact with the horses.

By 1981, the word about Woodlands was getting around. In an April article in the Orlando Sentinel Star, the writer observed the connection Woodlands was making with disabled youth through the natural resources of the campground, especially through the horse program. So began the “Horses for Handicapped ministry” or as it was called later, HeRD. By 1983, Woodlands was making an impact with its horses program which was associated with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association or NARHA. Susan Reinholtzen, Jean and Ray Heinlein, Joe and Joan Battle, Clarence Probst and many others from the ranks of the retirees at Woodlands assisted in introducing young people who might not otherwise get to interact with nature, a chance to feel, touch, ride and care for a horse.
Pastor Storm, Kids, and Horses

But what else was Pastor Storm thinking about? As the writer describes in his interview,

“Pastor Storm was quick to point out that although the camp was truly beautiful; the church was the center of this community. Regular services are held to “standing room” groups or worshippers each week consisting of winter visitors and local residents. They were already having weekly bible classes on Fridays and confirmation classes.”

Lutheran Life, May 1983, featured an article about the Exceptional Education Equestrian Trials that were held in March. The trials drew notable participant directors for Horse programs, including the Florida Horseman for the Handicapped and Kiwanis. About the program at Woodlands?…It was being directed by one Reverend Dr. Milan Weerts from Trinity Lutheran in Orlando.

The horse program made a lasting impact all the way until the closing of the camp, and gave our camper members (as well as our youth) a little extra incentive for ministry. As Lillian Matz can attest:

…I had a lifelong love for horses and also for people with disabilities and to find these two loves combined in the horse program working with the Bethesda group was a fantastic experience for me! I was never able to have my own horse but this gave me access to lots of them. I also had volunteered a little during high school at the Bethesda Home in Watertown, Wisconsin. And to be with this group made me feel young again!

The Pavilion

The pavilion came along after the bath house and boxcars. It started first as a meeting place for square dancing, dining and chapel. It was little more than a shelter with screens to keep out the bugs and then gradually “evolved” to have windows, divider walls, propane heaters, and paddle fans. Pastor Storm even expanded it around a tree, which appeared to grow out of the floor next to the portable altar made of plywood with glue on marble chips to make it look like it was made of stone. Services moved from the boxcar to the pavilion.

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3 South lake News Leader, February 24, 1983

4 Storm, Et. al, Ibid, 1998
Eventually the Pavilion could squeeze in up to 250 worshippers.

Pastor, there’s a tree in there!

The retirees always needed something to do, especially in summer, during youth camp. One summer, Pastor Storm came up with a project. They had already built an addition to the pavilion and a new altar. They had even decorated the outside with Tennessee flagstone, and had even done the hill top center and the camp office in flagstone. What next? Pastor Storm visited Nick Jones, an architect in Clermont, and asked Nick to design a bell tower—a tower that would act as a carillon, hold speakers and play music. Nick did the plans and the retirees built a tower out of telephone poles and they even had speakers so they could play Christmas music in December. That is how Woodlands’ first ever “tower carillon” came to be.

The First Carillon

The Stella Project

The campers and resident members at Woodlands weren’t all about feathering the nest. There was a community out there and surely someone needed help. Such was the case, in the late eighties, with Stella, who was 80 years old. She lived nearby the camp in a house that was little more than a cabin with a greenhouse. The house was heated with firewood and was in desperate need of repair. A neighbor, Jimmy, tried to help, but she needed more than a neighbor to gather firewood. Barbara Junge “found” Stella and

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5 Storm, Et al., Ibid, 1998
6 Storm, Et al. Ibid, 1998
soon was adopted by the Woodlands family when Lloyd and Jane Anderson organized a project to help repair her house. Over a period of 3 weeks, they repaired the roof, the porches, painted, and cleaned up the property. When it was all done, they celebrated with a big weenie roast.

Campers and Members Helping at Stella’s

How Bethesda became part of the Woodlands family

On October 15, 1984, a letter went to Pastor Storm, informing him that Bethesda Ministries had authorized purchase of a brick home next to Woodlands camp. This was another win in the ministry for Woodlands for many of these residents would one day become members. Some months before, Pastor Storm had become aware of the impending sale of this property. He was also aware of the affect of a place like Woodlands (and the horses) on those with disabilities and used that connection to convince Bethesda to place a home at Woodlands. He called to the director of Bethesda and encouraged him to begin a ministry in Florida and put him in touch with the realtor. Joan Hammond was their teacher for many years.

Thus began the presence of the Bethesda Ministry, which lasted up until the early 2000’s, when a final Bethesda home was closed in Clermont. During that tenure, the Bethesda residents were a part of the Woodlands congregation, participated in services, and helped at various functions. One of our members, Denise Volpe, became an accomplished equestrian, winning a silver medal and placing fifth overall in Equitation at the Special Olympics in 1995.

“It’s getting crowded in here”

By the late 1980’s, it was becoming evident that the pavilion wasn’t big enough. We needed more room. And people sometimes got lost trying to find the church. In June of 1987, Pastor Storm called a meeting of several members of the campers and friends to discuss the future direction of the worship group. Things were going to start happening – and soon.

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7 Storm, Et al. Ibid, 1998
8 Storm, Et al. Ibid 1998
The Pavilion – after final expansion

Pastor Storm on the melodica

Pastor Storm and Mel Schott

At the reins

Christmas at the barn

Pastor Harold and Ginny Storm
Our Worship...

We worship because we need to remember what we are, who we are, and where we are going. We forget those things when we get busy. So, we come together to remind ourselves that we have all been put together in the body of Christ, that we are all children of God, that we are pilgrims passing through this world.

We enjoy worshipping in our chapel in the woods, surrounded by nature so that we can sense God's creation. This worship is informal and open to all. The altar is around a great oak tree rather than cut down as a symbol of our respect for all of God's creation.

Our worship services are 10:00 a.m. every Sunday morning.

Our Faith...

We believe that Jesus Christ, true God and also true man, is our Lord. His suffering and death on the cross is the reason he has received the love and forgiveness of God. We also believe in the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

We believe that the Holy Spirit calls us to faith and it is the Holy Spirit who encourages us and guides us in our life as God's children. In times of temptation and hardship, the Holy Spirit gives us the strength to bear our burden and the faith to rely on the promise of His love, near and in eternity.

As St. Paul said, “...and if it is one body, it is one spirit; just as it is written, 'Adonai, one are we all in Jesus Christ.'”

We believe that all things to come, both death and life, will be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our Service to the Community...

As God's people we all have a responsibility to serve others according to our abilities. Because we are also a campground, we are able to serve the community in several unusual ways.

Since we have horses and ponies for our camping program, we were able to develop programs of “Horses for the Handicapped,” which is offered to handicapped children and promotes the growth of our camping program.

We, who by our location near the park, are in the presence of God, have become God's people. This means that we share with all people everywhere.

This is the first pamphlet describing worship opportunities at Woodlands Lutheran Church.
Chapter 2

Oh – That I had a thousand voices!

(Much of the following material is taken from a report provided by Raymond Hansen in January, 1990, as he prepared to step down from his presidency of the congregation)

Something had to be done. Attendance was getting larger but it was hamstrung by its location. Since it was not customary for the LCMS to operate a full time congregation past its “mission” stage, Woodlands had to reorganize its worship group. There was talk of an expanded sanctuary. But where would it be? At first, everyone was thinking it would be on the hillside on the north side of the camp, or maybe by Doll’s Lake.

But Pastor Storm had another idea. “Where are many of our new worshippers coming from?” The answer of course was, outside the camp! It just so happened that Pastor Storm and others (Rein Teder, Robert Michel, and Mel Fournier among them) had arranged to purchase 17 acres contiguous to the original Carpenter property boundary. This is where Pastor Storm would later build a parsonage. The property had frontage right on County Road 455 – perfect for anyone who happened to pass by on their way to Montverde or Winter Garden.

A New Congregation

A preliminary council was organized in December of 1987, so they could discuss and decide on a course of action. It consisted of Robert Milke, Terry Tiley, Carl Kuhnle, Julius Plymire, Wil Droege, Steve Agne, Delores Buffo, Ray Hansen, Starla Hall, Esther Seaman, Larry Hoffman, and Esther Mesnarich. But Pastor Storm needed more financial support. At Pastor Storm’s recommendation and further work with Pastor Frenke of the Florida – Georgia District Board, they came up with a plan to finance over $3 million to construct a new meeting facility, a retreat center – and a new sanctuary. First, the Fellowship Hall was built. Then, once in operations, Pastor Storm turned his attention to building a sanctuary.

Doll’s Lake at Easter

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In February, 1988, the worshippers met at the new Fellowship Hall and voted to organize as a congregation in the LCMS. They made application to the Florida – Georgia District LCMS as a fully fledged congregation. They also adopted a building fund campaign and selected volunteers to lead the effort. Later that month, they voted to authorize the new constitution and authorized the architect to begin drafting the plans for the new building. On February 23, 1988, the constitution and by-laws of the new congregation were adopted by a special meeting of the membership.

The New Membership

By May of 1988, the congregation had formed. Since there was no prior role taking, the leadership decided membership invitations would be extended to all the present membership of the camp’s worshippers. They also decided the part-time residents or snow birds would also be offered associate memberships. The first formal elections were held. The first president would be Ray Hansen. Plans for the new sanctuary were discussed and Pastor Storm had Nick Jones begin drawing up the plans. The new building would be laid out on a 3 ½ acre tract out by County Road 455, near the barn on the additional land Pastor Storm had acquired for the camp. The initial budget was set for the congregation, $51,250.

On June 13, 1988, the congregation was formally accepted into the Florida - Georgia District of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The constitution was signed by Ray Hansen and Pastor Storm. It was official! Later that month, the congregation was incorporated as a non-profit. Now the congregation could turn its attention to building the sanctuary that would support its growth and outreach into the community. It had 104 confirmed members.

It was the late summer of 1988, and the architect continued working on the plans for the new sanctuary, to Pastor Storm’s and the congregation’s specifications. The congregation made application for a loan through the Florida – Georgia District (since the church was still technically a mission church). The loan request was for $472,000, while the church building was initially estimated to cost $504,000. The congregation would have to raise the difference. Pastor Storm sent the architect back to “sharpen his pencil”. By November, donations to the building fund had started to come in. Hooray! - The estimated cost
had dropped to $475,000. In November, the congregation held its first annual meeting. Soon, bids were taken for the new building. The congregation got an early “Christmas gift” - the winning bid was from Emmett Sapp Builders, for a total of $308,488.50. The favorable price enabled the council to consider adding an extra 12’ to the narthex.

In the meantime, community outreach couldn’t wait. Woodlands was advertising in the local flea market and printing copies of a handout called “About being Lutheran”, for camp visitors, because they were getting people from as far away as Australia, coming for the serenity of the camp and the wonderful views and, as it turns out, the fellowship offered by the Christ centered environment.

**Groundbreaking**

It was a wet January Sunday, in 1989, when the groundbreaking was held for the sanctuary. Pastor Storm selected an appropriate passage from Ephesians 2: 19 - 22, for the groundbreaking – “Now you are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the rest of the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone; In whom all the building is fitly framed together, growing into a holy temple in the Lord; In whom you are also built together for a place of habitation of God through the Spirit”. Pastor Storm found an old plow and had it cleaned up and painted. As has always been the tradition since that time, the children were the focal point of the groundbreaking, so Pastor Storm had the children and anyone else who wanted to help “pull the plow” to turn the first row of sod for breaking ground on the sanctuary. It was wet, some slipped and fell in the mud – but no one minded. That plow is still with us today, on display behind the sanctuary tower.  

![Push!](image)

Shortly after construction commenced, someone asked, “Where are the pews?” These are a special type of furniture which need to be constructed to fit the building. The newly formed council went to work immediately and found a company in Rainsville, Alabama that makes pews and could furnish the carpeting. So in February, the council authorized the furnishing of pews at a cost of $17,521.25.

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10 Storm, Et. al. Ibid. 1989
Sanctuary – glulam beams going up

The construction took place through the spring. Our elders, led by Wil Droge, were now presented with the responsibility for worship activities. At the May congregational meeting, Ann Kuhnle presented changes to our church constitution that would enable it to operate as a 501(c) 3. Carl Kuhnle was working on fund raising, Esther Seaman reported on the activities of the local LWML (Lutheran Women’s Missionary League) and the recent meeting held at Woodlands, and Pastor Storm was looking for participants for an upcoming event to be held at Greenleaf Resort, called “Family Festival 90.” So this was no time to rest on one’s laurels. By the end of the quarter we had 183 baptized members with 30 children and 16 infants. Nearly 1037 souls had communed during the quarter. By May, the committee chairs were announced for the dedication. They were:

Joyce Droge - Flowers and Decoration

Rosmond McIntosh - Memorials Basket

Ushers - Steve Agne

Parking - Joe Battle and the Trustees (not a musical group, but they had a great following)

Invitations - Ardythe Hansen

By the end of May, the construction cost had gone to $490,536, but $235,464.26 had already been paid, leaving plenty of room within the $440,000 loan from LCEF...

During the course of final construction, Pastor Storm found a serious problem – as he recounts in “Tales from the Woodlands”, the location of the pulpit presented a problem – people sitting on the east side of the sanctuary would not be able to see the altar. So, summoning his “inner architect” one evening after the workers had gone home, he fashioned a crude representation of the pulpit using a piece of dry wall and help from his wife, Ginny, who acted as “viewer in chief” to modify the position of the pulpit. The next day he had the stone masons tear down and move the pulpit. Finally, it was done! One evening, after the workers had gone home, Pastor Storm and Joe Battle sat in the back of the church and looked toward the chancel. “It’s beautiful!” came their collective response.11

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11 Storm, Et al. Ibid, 1989
There are many interesting features of the sanctuary, one of which is no longer with us today. It was a ship’s ladder in the closet next to what is now the control area for sound and lights. What was a ship’s ladder doing in a church? It led to the second (and third!) floor of the old tower. There had not been enough space to build a regular staircase, and there was only so much space in the tower, but the ladder led to another “place apart” - a library and small meeting space on the second floor.

Pastor Storm held Sunday school classes for the teens in that room. They probably thought twice about slipping out before class was over. The third floor also held an area where the speakers were located on the third floor for the playing of songs as a small “carillon”. Two more unique and notable things are the carving Pastor Storm had purchased of the “Last Supper” while in Oberammergau, Germany, and the etched glass doors in the front and rear entry to the narthex. The carving was installed on the front of the stone altar with the original 12 disciples, with Judas Iscariot looking away. The doors were designed by a firm in St. Petersburg, Florida, and they depict several of the scenes in and around Woodlands, including a horse and a crutch to symbolize the horses for the disabled program, an eagle with a fish in its talons and several other animals. The doors also contain lyrics of the hymn sung at the dedication in 1989, “Oh that I had a thousand voices.” Next time you are at the doors, look carefully and see if you can find all the plants and creatures included in the etchings as well as the lyrics to the hymn.

But the most striking thing about the sanctuary building itself is the glass window behind the chancel and altar. It defines the
entire wall and has a view of the woods and trees beyond the north side of the sanctuary. It provided an unparalleled view of the natural area and of the horses when they ran between pastures. Many was the time I’m sure, when the Pastor had no doubt what was happening behind him as he delivered his homily – “Hmmm, they’re all looking to the right, ... Wait, now they’re all looking to the left,... the horses must be showing off again...”. “Was that a two horse or a three horse sermon?” may have been the question of the day.

Musical accompaniment to the voices in the sanctuary was provided by a genuine pipe organ which originally had been intended to grace the Fellowship Hall in the camp, but Pastor Storm had it installed next to the chancel area in a little room carved out of the corner and behind the pulpit. The pipe organ would someday be a source of “technological challenge” and puzzlement until it was eventually “retired” in 2008.

The sanctuary was dedicated on September 10, 1989. Reverend Thomas Zehnder, President of the Florida – Georgia District of the LCMS delivered the sermon. The liturgists were Pastor Storm and his cousin, Jurgen Storm, who came all the way from Dresden, in what was at that time, East Germany, along with Ferdinand Bellin from West Germany. The preacher was Reverend Milan Weerts (remember him?), who was at that time, the Pastor of St. Paul’s in Janesville, Wisconsin, and also formerly of the Board of Directors of Woodlands Ministries. The congregational president was Ray Hansen. Carl Kuhnle was the president elect, Ann Kuhnle was Secretary, and Robert Milke was the treasurer. Julius Plymire chaired the Building Committee. Marjorie McQuaig was organist and Mel Schott was the trumpeter. There were many others who contributed to the successful opening of the new sanctuary, too numerous to mention. By November, most, if not all the bills had come in. The total cost was $506,515.85. The church could seat anywhere from 350 to 400 people. By January of 1990, attendance at Sunday services had reached 385, with membership at 141 full time and 42 associates.

Looking for our Future Pastor

In the late fall of 1989, Pastor Storm felt it was time to start looking for a successor – or at least some full time help. Pastor Storm’s assistant, Pastor Dutzman, was planning to leave for other opportunities, but attendance was still climbing, and one Sunday saw an attendance of 492, after which the Elders and council decided it was time to have two services, at least during the winter months. In February, 1990, Pastor Storm announced his intentions to retire from directorship of the camp. A call committee did convene for the purpose of calling an assistant to Pastor Storm. Recall that at that time, the pastor of the church was also the director of the camp. The list of possible calls consisted of Arthur Krause of Zion in Orlando, Ron Weidler of Holy Trinity, Tampa, Roy Lidborn of Faith in New Port Richey, Charles Gieshen of Trinity in
Traverse City, Michigan, Ron Engel of Ascension in Casselberry, Florida, and Milan Weerts of Janesville, Wisconsin.

But in the process of looking for an assistant, everyone nearly forgot something really important. The church needed to call a pastor now! They resolved that by quickly issuing a call to Pastor Storm. By March of 1990, it was done, and Pastor Storm was formally installed in April.

As it turned out, no one accepted the call that was issued by the Ministries for Pastor Storm’s assistant, so another call was issued later in April 1990. Reverend Brian Kneser was on that list. It is interesting to note that Pastor Kneser was not the “first choice”. He had a growing, thriving congregation in Hollywood, Florida, with a school to boot and a young, growing family. Once more, the candidate who had been selected by the committee turned down the call – so it was back to the drawing board. In January 1991, Pastor Storm asked for another call committee. In the meantime, there had been all kinds of distractions, including a hurricane and a mosquito borne disease scare.

While calls were being extended, ministry went on. Kathy Keene, who was invited to Woodlands by Joe and Joan Battle, stopped Pastor Storm one day after service and asked him if the council and Elders would consider having a motion choir. Pastor said he’d take it to the Elders. According to Kathy;

“I was involved in the Motion Choir growing up in my church in Minnesota. There was one Sunday when the Sanctuary was finished and God just planted the idea of starting the group at Woodlands. He wouldn’t let me go until I spoke with Pastor Storm. I did and “auditioned” for the elders one day. That Christmas I was able to participate in the Christmas service and the song was “What Child is this?” Still one of our favorites... So as to how long, (ago)... it would have been the first Christmas in the sanctuary. The Praise in Motion just grew from there”.

Kathy Keene

Later that year, the youth committee asked if they could be allowed to handle an entire service (except for the pastor’s duties, of course). That precipitated the “Youth Sunday” we now have on the fifth Sunday of the month. Later that summer, Pastor Storm spoke with the Elders about something called “Stephen Ministries”, a ministry that would eventually take hold some years later.
In March 1991, planning was underway for the Easter Sunrise services. Sunrise service was held by the shore of Doll’s lake on the northwest side of the camp. It was necessary, however, to post guides to get people all the way back there and then back to the Depot (the camp kitchen) for coffee. One could easily get lost, and some did, or get stuck in the sand. The trip to Dolls Lake was always exciting, especially in a standard two wheel drive car.

Now, about that call for some full time help – later that summer, Debbie Kneser came to the camp to see the facilities before Pastor Kneser arrived in response to the call received from Woodlands. What she saw were horses... animals... woods... trails... campers... What manner of call was this? It certainly wasn’t Hollywood, Florida. But it looked interesting!

Pastor Kneser came to visit and talk to the congregation and Ministries Board leadership. Pastor Kneser graduated from Concordia Milwaukee in 1976 and obtained a Master of Divinity at Concordia Theological Seminary at Ft Wayne, Indiana in 1981. After serving his vicarage in Gainesville, Florida, he was ordained and installed at St. Marks, Hollywood, Florida. It was Decision Time for Pastor Kneser – Stay in Hollywood or go to Woodlands? On October 6, 1991, Pastor Kneser was installed as Assistant Pastor – Director of Woodlands Lutheran Church and Camp. He would go on to earn his doctorate in 1994, shortly after arriving at Woodlands.
Woodlands Lutheran Church – for all

Gail Swanson at Groundbreaking

The Inner Architect

Singing in the rain

Pastor Storm touring the site with Carl and Ann Kuhnle and others
The sanctuary just before completion, 1989

Adding the Finishing Touches
Chapter 3

The Preaching Station

As soon as Pastor Kneser arrived at Woodlands, he had his hands full. He would soon be handed the reins of not just a growing congregation, but a full grown camp as well, complete with horse program, summer camp program, and retreat center, not to mention the full time residents. Pastor Storm had made it known he would retire soon, but for now, had more plans. By November, Pastor Kneser was working with the various committees so as to enable his being able to attend as many of their regular meetings as possible. In the meantime, Pastor Storm was working on “Family Night” so that young families could get together in a Christian environment. Pastor Kneser was the right pick for this job. He even learned to drive Kate and Jane (the resident mules), too.

Kent Swanson was coordinating youth activities and fund raising. Kent was also working with Pastor Storm on the observations for the upcoming 20th anniversary of the camp. In the meantime, Joe Battle, Otis McQuaig and Bob Milke were working on the Guatemala Together in Mission (TIM) project, an opportunity for Woodlands to sponsor a missionary in another country.

Carl Kuhnle was elected chairman of the Elders and Paul Klump was serving his second term as President of the Congregation in 1992. Council member Nancy Davidson had an idea. We were now seeing many families with young children. She requested if the Elders would consider having a children’s sermon added to the service. Pastor Kneser also asked the Elders to present to the Council an idea to consider specific mission giving by the church. Although the idea was rejected initially, it would eventually take hold – a practice which Woodlands has to this day, of designating unspecified gifts to various missions, the District of the LCMS, and partnering with other ministries as a form of outreach and expression of tithing on a congregational scale.

“Teach Your Children of the Lord”

Pastor Storm’s intent always had been that the camp was a “preaching station”. New members were coming and many had children. Now Woodlands needed classroom space. He went to the architect and then pitched his idea to the council and the board. He had some funds left over from construction of the new sanctuary. The cost of a new building (not including taxes, furnishings, and permits) would be
around $149,000. It could even serve as a kind of child daycare center so it wouldn’t stand empty during the week. After all, some of the employees and members needed a place for daycare, and Woodlands was on their way to work between Montverde/Clermont and Orlando. Eventually, the Board allowed the church to construct a portable unit next to the new sanctuary, complete with a shelter area, playground and site work to improve the roadway in front of the sanctuary.

Preschool (Early Learning Center) Groundbreaking

Shortly thereafter, Heather Olsen, who at that time was teaching at Faith Lutheran Church in Eustis, was asked to come to a WLM (Woodlands Lutheran Ministries) board meeting to talk about the differences between a daycare and a preschool. Heather was serving on the LCMS Florida-Georgia District Task Force for Early Childhood Learning and was experienced at accreditation of schools. The board thought it over. We did need childcare for all these younger people moving into the area. Pastor Kneser called Heather and asked her if she would be willing to start a preschool at Woodlands. In August, 1993, the school began with 7 students and 35 volunteers. By the end of the school year, the student count had doubled. Many families of preschool children would later become members of Woodlands. Assembling the preschool was not easy. Lots of meetings – lots of discussions – some disagreements! But it was, as Heather says, a cooperative effort that made the difference to overcome obstacles and even the physical challenges of sharing of space so that a Sunday school program could coexist along side an accredited full curriculum preschool program in the same building.

One of the big differences, of course, between a parochial program and a secular environment, was the emphasis on faith and regular chapel, at which the pastors helped as well as teachers and staff. It did (and still does) have its humorous moments. As Heather recalls;

“During chapel we were discussing what the angels said to the shepherds on Christmas Day. When I reviewed the story (with the students) I asked what the angel said. A four year old raised his hand and said ‘IT’S A BOY!’”
The history of the school since then has been one of opportunity and redirection as the times and ministry opportunities presented themselves.

A New Idea for Christmas

Once the sanctuary was built and a preschool began, the church began to take on its own ministry “identity”. One of which in recent years, has become a signature effort in Woodlands’ outreach – The Living Nativity. The best way to describe its beginning is to read how David Kneser recalls the Nativity program and how it began in 1992.

“...Back then, the entire presentation, which was a half hour in duration, took place on the little grassy island in front of the church overhang while the congregation stood out front in the parking lot to watch. All the doors and windows of the church were fully opened in hopes the organ could be heard from inside.

The cast consisted of only about 10 to 15 youth – playing Joseph, Mary, King Herod, the wise men, and a few angels and shepherds. The pastor and (a) volunteer narrated the story while it was being acted out by the youth.

In addition, generic costumes, a couple stage lights, and volunteers leading the horses for the wise men were all that was really needed to make the production a success.

Yes, horses! That first year, I was one of the wise men that got to ride a horse to the manger scene to meet the baby Jesus! Imagine that: a 13-year-old getting to ride a horse during a worship service.

Despite what little we had back then, the service was a big hit. From then on, every year it seemed like something new was added to help aid in the quality of the service. The organ music was replaced by Teri Jo Wright who set up her personal sound system and electronic keyboard under the overhang. The words to the hymns were seen outside on the homemade big screen by a transparency overhead projector.

There did come a point when the little grassy island was not big enough for the presentation and the service was moved to the sheltered horse arena adjacent to the upper barn in the campground. Charlie Crownover led the “In God We Trust” praise band for the music that year.

God has surely blessed our Living Nativity presentation. What it is today is truly amazing compared to how it used to be.”

Later, Kirk Klemash, who has considerable experience in the theater arts, as a member of Clermont’s “Moonlight Players”, took on the task of guiding the Living Nativity event. So what started as a one-half hour Advent service, turned into a “walking tour of the
Holy land” service held on two nights – followed of course by cookies and hot chocolate at the Ministry Center. The cast has gone from the 10 or 15 youth and a few volunteers to hundreds of members (and non-member friends).

![Living Nativity Cast - 1993](image)

The “Re”-Retirement of Pastor Storm

In October, 1993, Pastor Storm and his wife, Ginny, were living part-time at their condominium in Ocoee and their parsonage at the campground. He focused his time on “getting the word out about Woodlands” and assisting with improving the reservation system for the camp facilities. He was also busy with applications for grants to continue support for the “Horses for the Handicapped” program. He closed his final report to the Ministries board with a recommendation they begin focusing on developing a strategy for expanding and improving the meeting facilities. He closed with some final thoughts given recent experiences with the sometimes cantankerous sanitation facilities at the camp, stating that his engineer once told him 20 years ago that “Everything in life depends on sewage,“

Sometimes, things seem to begin to come together in one short period of time. Such was the fall of 1993, when at the council meeting the month before Pastor Storm’s report, Pastor Kneser mentioned the congregation was approaching a time frame in which the typical mission church should be approaching “financial independence.” That is, the congregation is able to pay all its own bills without help from mission funding through the District. In November, the Ministries Board made two recommendations, one to call for additional pastoral assistance, anticipating needing more help for the continuing guidance of the camp and congregation, and another to announce a capital campaign for a new meeting facility and expanded horses program. Connie-Hicks Johnson, the equine manager, was busy with hosting various schools and scouting groups, and assisting with Special Olympics, and needed additional help. Many of our Woodlands family helped manage and take care of these horses. But the meeting facilities and Fellowship Village managed by Carol and Al Brown, were also in high demand and could hardly keep up.

That following March 1994, Pastor Harold Storm announced his retirement. His announcement in the church bulletin read - 
“The time has finally come for me to resign as pastor/administrator of Woodlands Lutheran ministries, effective July 31, 1994. I have spent 23 years in this challenging and
fascinating ministry, and I leave it with feelings of sadness and gratification. I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the church at Woodlands and most grateful to serve God for His blessings, which have been far greater than I had ever dreamed. Perhaps there will be further opportunities to serve the Lord as life and health permit.”

That summer, Pastor Storm was honored with the Servant of Christ Award by the Florida – Georgia District of the LCMS. Pastor Kneser said of him, “The Lord has blessed Harold with great vision, especially in terms of serving the needs of God’s people. God used Harold to dream, motivate and push Woodlands.”

A New Helper

The time was critical to find someone to help Pastor Kneser. Pastor Storm’s retirement was imminent. By April, a candidate had been selected for the call and was staying at Joe and Joan Battle’s house at the camp, while being interviewed by the call committee and being given a tour of the camp. Back then, the call committee consisted of members of the ministries (camp) board as well as members appointed by the congregation’s council. The candidate made a favorable impression. A unanimous decision was made to issue a call to Paul von Werder and wife, Julie, who was a nurse, to join the Woodlands ministry. The church council had to issue an emergency meeting of the membership to discuss and decide on the call. That August, Pastor Paul, as he was popularly known, was installed at Woodlands.

With Pastor Storm’s retirement, Pastor Kneser became Senior Pastor of the congregation and Administrator of Woodlands Lutheran Camp. Membership of the church was 320, with 259 communicant members in August of 1993. By July 1994, the membership had grown to 342 and 272 communicant members. That summer, the preschool also celebrated its first year, with 19 children registered and a summer day camp for 30 children each week. Brenda Perry joined Heather Olsen in managing the added attendance. In the following year, we would also gain a recently retired pastor to our membership. Pastor Carl Andre’ Brumme’, from Bristol, Tennessee, and his wife, Rose, joined Woodlands. As a “gift” to Pastor Kneser and Pastor Paul, he offered to preach on occasion, and help with extended care at the preschool. Pastor Brumme’ was with Woodlands until his passing ten years later.
In November 1994, one year after Pastor Storm’s final report, Ed Wronski began his second term as president of the congregation, with Brian Smith as vice president, Sue Wolf – Treasurer, Gail Swanson – Secretary, Carl Kuhnle – Elders, Brian Shiley – Evangelism, Beverly Anderson – Finance, Kathy Keene with Education and Youth, Walt Nielson with Trustees, and Kim Wronski chairing the Preschool Committee.

We now had a senior youth group with Brian and Sherrie Smith providing guidance, as well as a junior youth group being led by Kent and Gail Swanson. Sunday school attendance now included 87 children, some of whom met in the tower, some in the preschool, some in the camp offices and some – waa...ay back in the camp. We needed more space.

Something else was happening, the operating deficit for the congregation was dropping...
Christmas Celebrations Take to the Outdoors at Woodlands

[Montverde, FL] Christmas at Woodlands Lutheran Church offered members of all ages an opportunity, to celebrate the joys of the season in the great outdoors.

On the evening of December 23, the congregation youth group reconstructed the Christmas story under a star-studded sky. The living Nativity, which was directed by Pastor Harold Storm and Gail Swanson, was the final mid-week Advent service.

Joseph led the Woodlands resident donkey with Mary atop to the stable as “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” was being sung. The shepherds were greeted by the angels at their campfire, and the Wise Men arrived on horseback during the singing of “Silent Night.”

The report is that Woodlands plans to make this outdoor, lawn-chair worship service an annual tradition.

On December 25, the Woodlands aisles and stalls were filled with people and horses for the annual “Christmas Day Night in the Barn Service.” Pastor Brian Kneser led the worship with his accordion. Pastor Storm offered the message, and the youth played “Silent Night” on their guitars.

“Keys” Kneser – A man of many talents

Our Bethesda members

From “Lutheran Life” February 1993
Chapter 4

It's Time!

From the time the congregation was first formed in 1988, to mid-1993, the communicant and total baptized membership nearly doubled. The 172 members became 318 members. Attendance on Sunday during the “season” nearly topped 600. Sunday school was “bursting at the seams.” Pastor Kneser, when not being the camp administrator, was working with the Elders, developing the idea of a “Love Fund” and working to make the bulletins we use for weekly worship, something that could be used all week long and especially valuable to our shut ins, because the hymns were now printed in the bulletin.

Another one of the many ministry partnerships that Woodlands has supported is the Jewish evangelism effort. Pastor Bruce Lieske came to preach one Sunday and that next spring led everyone in a Passover meal (Seder) at the camp’s Fellowship Hall.

The Five Year Planning Committee

In November 1994, President Wronski appointed a five year planning committee, led by Joe Battle. Now Joe and his wife, Joan, had been at the camp since the beginning, and they had seen nothing like the growth they were now experiencing, since construction of the new sanctuary. Joe went to work and recruited some volunteers to help figure out just where this ministry was heading, because it was no longer just about the campers. There were new families arriving every month. The planning committee polled the members of the council; they polled the pastors, the other committees, and of course, the general membership.

Many ideas came out of that planning effort. The newsletter, now known as “Wood Chips” was one of them. Ken Marshall, Woodlands’ first part-time music director was brought on to assist in our music worship opportunities, and many ideas for new and enhanced ministries came forward. There was a great diversity of ministry interests – but how to prioritize any of them? And where were the resources? The one unifying idea was that we needed more space to make any of them a reality! Some Sunday school classes were being held out – of – doors, not as a matter of choice but because they had no other place to meet. Soon after, a building committee was formed to explore whether it was even possible for a young congregation that was not yet independent, could build a ministry center. Offerings showed that by February 1995, the congregation was near self-sufficiency. The committee worked through the summer to prepare for meetings with the Ministries Board of Directors and the congregation in the fall. By that October, the Planning Committee was ready to present its final report. The report included recommendations for more worship opportunities, musically oriented programs, more staff, and no less than eight areas of
ministry, outreach, care giving and community service – along with more space for the Preschool, family gatherings, and Sunday School.

The idea of a new building for the congregation was presented to the members of the Woodlands Ministries Board of Directors at their regular meeting. Hours were spent in preparation and rehearsal of the presentation. The reason for the building – how it would fit with the ministry – the draw it could be for events and meetings and even be a benefit for the camp – it was complete with presentation boards and charts. This author, one of the architects of that presentation, remembers the reaction... a moment of silence. What did they think? Were they going to reject it? One of the directors pronounced. “That’s it – it’s time!” What did THAT mean? The directors explained. It was time to separate the camp and congregation so the congregation would be free to pursue its programs without having to be a constraint to the District’s ministry. OK, so how are we going to do that? – This would not be an easy task. The decision to make the congregation independent set off a “chain reaction” of events that had to take place so the congregation could build the ministry center and continue its growth. Aside from drawing a physical boundary between the congregation and the camp properties, we had to determine how the congregation would be served by utilities, what services the congregation would provide the camp, and what services the camp could continue to provide to the congregation. We had to make very difficult decisions as well – about shepherding of the camp and congregation.

Restructuring the Mission

Since the congregation was now at self sufficiency, plans could proceed in earnest for financial and administrative restructuring of the two ministries. Through the congregation’s leadership and the Woodlands Ministries Board, led by Paul Klump, the wheels were put in motion. Pastor Kneser worked with the council and Board of Directors to develop a budget plan. The Trustees worked a plan to care for the sanctuary and preschool facilities. In many cases, we shared the tools needed to maintain the camp and sanctuary. Richard Neubauer, financial director of the Florida-Georgia District and a member of the Ministries Board of Directors, began working to make it happen and assisted in providing the boundary lines around which the camp and congregation would work. However, there was no survey! A surveyor was hired to establish the boundaries – an effort made more difficult by the fact that several of the key survey monuments establishing the property in the days of the old T&G Railroad (remember that story?) had been destroyed when the Florida Turnpike was built. This would also provide some challenges for the new building construction, as we would soon find out. The congregation would receive a set amount of the land around the new sanctuary and be responsible for continuing payment on the mortgage of the sanctuary and the preschool. The congregation could
for now, use the water line from the camp – but would have to develop its own offices for the pastor and new secretary! Coincidently, the congregation had approved space for a new music room to support the enhanced music worship – another one of the recommendations of Joe Battle’s planning committee. So the space was built and later turned over to our music program.

By 1997, the congregation and camp were financially restructured. However, the ministries and congregation would still continue to work hand in hand. So for a while, the pastor and secretary would share space with the music program. The decision was made to have Pastor vonWerder take on the primary duties of directing the camp, while Pastor Kneser would guide the congregation. However, both pastors would be there to support each other.

While the wheels were turning on all this administrative work, “real” ministry had to continue. In November 1996, Kathy Keene, who had spent so much time with youth and developed the Praise in Motion choir with Pastor Storm’s encouragement, was named the Florida-Georgia District volunteer of the year.

Heather’s Preschool was working on its accreditation through the Association of Lutheran Schools. The recently appointed building committee had to focus on what kind and what size the new building needed to be to satisfy requirements for both a school and a meeting place for Sunday classes. Fund raising had to be organized to enable the congregation to sustain the giving needed to support building it. The trustees had to figure out new maintenance schedules for the sanctuary, since the congregation would now be directly responsible for all the maintenance. There were other things with which the church leadership was faced – now the church would have “employees” – a secretary, organist, maintenance worker – all these workers were needed – and soon. Denise
Price stepped in to become the congregation’s first secretary. The new building would also have to include a work room, offices for Pastor Kneser and the staff, and assistants’ offices.

The year 1997 started with a special dinner meeting to roll out the plans for the new Ministry Center and promote the building campaign. What many members were not sure of at the time was how long Pastor Kneser might be at Woodlands! He was struggling with another decision. He had received a call to become a pastor at a well established congregation in Ohio in need of new leadership. Would he accept the call? Pastors Kneser and vonWerder were in the process of adjusting to their new roles. Would this be the appropriate time to change? What was the Lord calling him to do? After weeks of deliberation, during which time, Pastor and Debbie Kneser went to Ohio to meet with their leadership, Pastor Kneser made an announcement at the dinner meeting. He was staying at Woodlands – a giant sigh of relief – and prayers for the congregation in Ohio to find the “right shepherd!”

Later that month, the building committee for the congregation met with the county and had the architect and engineer begin drawing plans for the new building.

As for our youth? Sunday school attendance topped 116. The senior youth were planning a very ambitious trip to San Antonio, Texas, for a national youth gathering.

Our Senior Youth and “The Bus”

Then, great news for the Preschool - they received accreditation with the National Lutheran Schools Association. The long three year journey for accreditation was complete! One of our longest serving council members, Ray Hansen, our first president, retired from his post as financial secretary. Margie McQuaig, the first organist for Woodlands, also retired.

Mission Planting – The Manger

Just when you think everything was in place, along comes a new opportunity. In December, a special meeting was held to discuss a new mission – and Woodlands was in the best position to help. The LCMS was looking to plant a church in the “Four
Corners” area in southeast Lake County, where Orange, Osceola, and Polk Counties all converge at one spot with Lake County. This area was “bursting” with new growth – but no congregations! Woodlands would “host” the mission developer, who would use Woodlands as his “base of operations” while serving this area. Bill Price chaired the Call Committee that would later receive Pastor Garrett Knudsen the following year to serve as the mission developer. Initially, some candidates turned down the call. Debbie Armas’ report from the Board of Education summed it best when she quoted Galatians 6:9, “Let us not become weary of doing good, for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up”.

Pastor Knudsen was installed in 2000, and served the Manger, as it came to be called, until the funding ended in 2004. Until that time, the Manger was serving up to 70 at their weekly services. Reverend Knudsen since received a call to a congregation in Bordentown, New Jersey. At the time of this writing, the four corners area is once again being eyed as a potential site for a mission plant congregation and the Woodlands congregation continues to support mission congregations with its resources.

A New Pastor for Hope

With resources stretched in early 1998, and so much recent change happening so quickly, there arose a need for the congregation to re-examine its priorities. A self study committee was appointed to see what direction was needed. Was a resolution needed for calling another full time pastor for Woodlands? Should Woodlands become a “dual site” congregation (we had not yet called Pastor Knudsen)? There was no single item singled out as the significant obstacle to Woodlands. The biggest concern seemed to be how to respond to the needs of a growing community. At a December meeting, a decision was made to begin the call process for a mission director. In the meantime, it had come to the attention of many members that Pastor vonWerder may be searching for a change in mission, and his name was to be presented as a candidate for the mission. However, he declined, as he had responded to a call from a congregation in east Orlando, near the University of Central Florida. This congregation had no called pastor, was in a growing area near the university, and needed assistance that only a called worker, such as Pastor Paul could offer. Later that year, we would bid farewell to Pastor vonWerder as many members of Woodlands traveled to east Orlando to witness his installation at Hope Lutheran Church. Woodlands would issue a call for a Director of Christian Education at a later time, and we were fortunate that Pastor Art Krause (remember the first call for an assistant for Pastor Storm?), who had retired from Zion - Orlando some years earlier, came out of retirement to join the Woodlands family as an assistant.
Pastor Art offered his services for preaching duties, helped at the school, and Sunday school teaching. We all enjoyed Pastor Art’s sermons because it was almost a guarantee that there’d be a sing along. Bonus! Pastor Art’s wife, Carol was also active in the Sunday school, and their daughter, Michelle was Sunday school superintendent for an extended period of time. Pastor Krause was with us until his passing in 2006.

The Ministry Center

Construction began in 1999, on the ministry center building, on the hillside next to the old T&G right of way, above the sanctuary. But first, we had to deal with other distractions - like the fire. Oh, didn’t I mention that earlier? The years 1998-1999 were some the driest years on record and the threat of fire was very real. Some of wooded areas in the camp were affected by fire, but fortunately, the fire fighters and volunteers kept it away from any structures and everyone was OK, but it did get close - a reminder that God can give and God can take.

Whew... OK - Back to the building - it was originally conceived as a 3300 square foot classroom building but grew to over 9000 square feet to include a meeting area, warming kitchen and office spaces for the staff and teachers. Thanks to a favorable market and low construction prices, the building was affordable. The building committee members, Debbie Bradshaw, Roy Olsen, Joe Battle, Dr. Al Woodcock, and Heather Olsen, pared the budget to meet the goals of the available funds to give President Bob Beaver and Vice President Ted Gardner the green light to sign the loan agreement so construction could start. The loan was obtained from the Lutheran Church Extension Fund for $400,000, while the remainder of the $230000 was financed through the giving of the congregation – and all this while the congregation was also paying on the sanctuary and preschool! Construction commenced in late summer. Oft times, finding the right kind of labor was difficult, as many Central Florida area
projects were underway at the time and sometimes, laborers were hard to find in a given trade.

Groundbreaking! Always a great day at Woodlands because Pastor gets to wear his special hat

Our “on-site” owners’ representative, Dr. Al Woodcock made a discovery shortly after the construction started – the building was too low! Soon the problem was resolved with the engineer (remember that survey monument destroyed by the highway?). By February 2000, the Ministry Center was complete, thanks in no small part to the donations of the congregation and some “sweat equity” (as was with the sanctuary), including paint, irrigation, communications lines, and landscaping. Now the congregation had room to expand its school and other ministries. The youth now could have the former preschool building as their own meeting area, while up to 4 classes could be accommodated in the ministry center.

Many other things happened in 1999 and 2000. In the year before the center was built, Bill and Denise Price left Woodlands due to a job opportunity up north for Bill. This left a need for an elder and a new church office secretary. Terri Beaver stepped in to replace Denise.

That winter, the youth participated in the largest representation Woodlands Lutheran Church had to date at the Clermont Christmas Parade - more exposure for Living Nativity and youth programs!

The Elders added a contemporary worship service to the worship program at Woodlands. Dave Everson, our recently installed DCE, was with us only a short while, but in that time helped establish the
contemporary service format and what would become “In God We Trust”.

The growth of the congregation was continuing to show. Attendance at the preschool reached 66. The annual Grandparents Day event had an attendance of 150. The congregation membership had also grown to 639 communicant and 790 overall members. A new concept to Woodlands, called Stephen Ministries, was also primed to begin in 2001.

“Got carrots?”

Walls going up at the Ministry Center

Pastor Kneser and Dr Al Woodcock

Picnic at the Depot- The Smith Bros. auctioning desserts for fund raising

The roof is up
Dedication of Disciples Hall

Christmas in the Barn 1999

The Christmas tree in the chancel

Whose office is this?
Chapter 5

Christianity is not a Spectator Sport

Completion of the Ministry Center in 2000, opened new doors for worship and fellowship opportunities. The Early Learning Center, as it became known, opened that fall with 66 preschoolers and 27 three year olds. The new space enabled the school to add a second 4 year old class. With Jim Fulton presiding over the council, 3 more Elders positions were added, for a total of eleven.

Pastor Kneser was also now leading a Bible study in one of the retirement communities near Clermont. Woodlands also made a pivotal decision to participate in the “Concordia House of Studies” program as a way of making more pastors. As a result of this program, Woodlands would eventually send two of its “sons,” to seminary, where they would become pastors with their own congregations.

Forward in Faith presented a new ministry opportunity for Woodlands, which became a vehicle for the congregation to help the District, which played so prominently in the formation of the congregation, and also pay down our ministry center mortgage. The effort was led by Pastor Weerts, who came back from Janesville, Wisconsin, to be the camp administrator after Pastor vonWerder went to Hope - Orlando. Forward in Faith, provided funding to assist the Florida-Georgia District with its missions while paying off our mortgage early. Eventually, the efforts of FIF would result in paying off the Ministry Center mortgage after only ten years.

Reverend Dr. Milan Weerts

The events of September 11, 2001, weighed heavily on everyone, but the congregation responded with support for families and ministries impacted by the tragic events. The year 2001 ended on a positive note for the congregation; however, with the ministry being financially stable in spite of uncertain times, an unstable economy, and recent world events. The total baptized membership was 692, including 546 communicant members. Worship attendance was at an all time high of 461 on average for the year, up from 435 in 2000 and 374 in 1999

New Directions for Music Ministry

Music in worship has always held a very special place to the congregants at Woodlands. Praise in Motion, the Joy Bells, Adult Choir (Joyful Sounds), Men’s’ Quartet, Youth Choir, Children’s’ Choir, Cherub Choir, Brass Quartet, and “In God We Trust” are some of the examples of our members
lending their talents in musical worship. In the beginning, Woodlands had Pastor Storm on the melodica, with Mel Schott on the trumpet, Margie McQuaig as our organist and others pitching in with whatever they had. But the pipe organ was beginning to show its age, having been built somewhere around 1910, it was a rare item. So rare in fact that, by 2001, the question was asked, just how much longer it could last. It was held together in some places (quite literally) with ropes and wires. The room that held the organ had to be rearranged so President James Ennd and some volunteers could fit the “In God We Trust” praise band in part of the space. But it was getting difficult to find parts for the venerable old instrument. A few years later, we would be saying “Good-bye” to the pipe organ and “Hello” to a new Johannes unit.

Upon Dave Everson’s departure, Charlie Crownover stepped in and took In God We Trust to a new level, and Charlie became the mainstay of our music ministry ever since, assisting the choirs, developing the sound system, scheduling music for events and even writing some of our music as well as performing at the regular contemporary service every Sunday. Today, Charlie is the Director of Music Ministry. His wife, Teri, is a member of the praise band as well as a former council member.

President Paul Lane appointed a planning committee in 2002, when it became apparent that some new direction was needed. Paul Lesle, a member of the Stewardship Committee and the Constitution Review Committee, stated “Christianity is not a spectator sport!” to emphasize the fact that while faith comes through hearing God’s word – doing something about it is the expression of that faith. A new Planning Committee was formed and began a series of workshops with members to search for Woodlands’ strengths and challenges. The Planning Committee recommended a long term strategy for how to use the assets we now had, including a called position to replace David Everson and more emphasis on Outreach beyond the parking lot of Woodlands.

The Forward in Faith campaign resulted in $171,000 in pledges, sent $11,200 to the District in support of missions, and helped
reduce the Ministry Center mortgage further by 2002. Many off campus non-profit organizations were also using the Ministry Center, the Girl Scouts, South Lake Home Schools, 4-H Club and the supervisor of elections of Lake County, who saw it as the perfect place as a polling station for the electorate in the Montverde area.

Paul Lane’s planning committee got to work on concepts for expansion again – this time, what if we developed the school to an elementary school? That following year, a new building committee was formed to start looking into a school expansion that would also accommodate all the other ministry missions planned. The school expanded into Kindergarten, with the intent of adding one grade each year. To kick off interest in the expansion and observe Reformation Day, we held an event - What else? – a Reformation Day Picnic, at the cul-de-sac next to the Ministry Center.

With no Director of Christian Education, we explored the idea of calling another, but one of our members took on the challenge of guiding the youth groups. Brent Hartwig took charge and developed a schedule with which any adult would find difficult to keep up. The senior youth schedule included advent dinner planning and serving, cookie coordination and packaging, living nativity rehearsal, dry run, and presentation, a Christmas party, and an “American Bandstand” event for the youth, all between December 3 and 27. The junior youth were right there with them also, with a packed schedule.

Brent Hartwig

More transformation came to the sanctuary in 2003, as many members expressed interest in a library. Modifications were made to the church to allow a larger nursery area and provide for a library/meeting room.

2004 was the “Year of the Hurricanes.” Many still remember what almost seemed

Pastor and Debbie Kneser in appropriate attire for Reformation Day Picnic
to become a regular routine, as we braced for Charlie, Jean, and Francis. The youth at the early learning center would remember this the following year when they donated their chapel offering to a church in need in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, that had been damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

Other changes were taking place at the camp. In 2005, Pastor Weernts, stepped down from administration duties at the camp and going into “semi-retirement” as he took interim pastoral duties at a sister congregation in Winter Haven. Tammy Ennd was developing new Outreach opportunities through Woodlands’ involvement at Clermont events such as “Pig on the Pond” and “First Friday.” Heather Olsen, our first preschool director, was awarded the “District School Administrator of the Year Award” for the Florida-Georgia District at the District Educator Conference in November.

Finally, in early 2005, the congregation voted to change its call for a DCE to that for a full time pastor. Elder Kevin Ratliff and Pastor Kneser travelled to St Louis to interview candidates who were ready to graduate from seminary and preparing to take a call. We would have to wait – almost until May, to hear of the results. By that time, Charlie Crownover would be our full-time minister of music. Harold Underwood, our Head Elder, was working on developing a men’s prayer group. In August, Pastor Garret Knudson accepted a call to a congregation in New Jersey at the close of the mission plant attempt at Four Corners.

Expanding the School

The school was considering adding a first grade come the 2005-6 school year. A meeting was held to call a teacher and a call was issued but was declined. One of our members, Kay Krueger would step in to assist. When the new school year started in the fall of 2005, the call was answered by James Essig for the grade school principal / teacher position. Principal Essig would begin later in July 2006. James Essig formerly taught middle school at Trinity Lutheran Scholl in Delray Beach for over 10 years, and then served as principal and teacher at Epiphany Lutheran in Tallahassee for 11 years, then as principal at St Mark’s in Hollywood. His father and brothers were pastors. He considered being a pastor, but decided to become a teacher when he saw how everyone else struggled with Greek and Hebrew! Mr. Essig has a wife, Dianne and a son Jordan. He looked forward to sharing the good news of salvation through Christ in the school ministry and helping parents and grandparents of students.
The Building Committee, composed of AJ Barto, Charlie Crownover, Heather and Roy Olsen and others, came up with a plan to develop the church property next to the Ministry Center. An architect began working on preliminary estimates, while the Trustees began to look warily at the “Termite Tower” next to the sanctuary and wonder how much longer we could save it. The second expansion of the school might have to be scaled back, some thought – or maybe done differently.

But bigger news that would have a more immediate impact to Woodlands Lutheran Church was just coming around the corner.
Don’t get Pastor Weerts’ goat

Ted Smith – our custodian and “sound” man

Children’s Message

Easter

Reformation Day Observance...
...the band is here...

Senior Staff Luncheon with Nancy Jo Davidson and Pastor Art

... and so is the congregation

Fred and Marge Kellner, Ralph and Charlotte Gums, Ginny Donaghue

Reformation Day Picnic was a knee slapping good time
Chapter 6

Legacy

We waited patiently to see if assistance would come in the form of an assistant to Pastor Kneser. Surely enough, a pastor was found! Christopher Decker would arrive in July 2005, and would provide the assistance for our youth and other ministries. He went right to work. Late that summer, the youth traveled with him to perform a servant event for Holy Cross in Riverdale, Georgia.

The Closure of the Camp

The news came that October – many had suspected it, but no one thought it would really happen. Due to shrinking demand and ever rising costs, the Florida – Georgia District Board of Directors reluctantly decided to close the camp and end Woodlands Lutheran Ministries - the “cradle” where Woodlands Lutheran Church was born. What would our campers do? What would we do if they leave? Many of our members, volunteers and friends lived there. The camp was often a focal point of activity that overflowed to the congregation. The congregation had grown to partner with the camp on so many activities and each was there for each other when the need arose. By December, a task force headed by President Bill Lehndorf, Al Rodemann, Patricia Kubicek, Bill Krueger, Duane Skagg, and Darlena Russo began working on a plan to ease the impact to the congregation and help the residents of the camp.

Pastor Kneser spent many hours meeting with affected members and President Gerhard Michael of the Florida-Georgia District office. He and other members worked with affected residents to find places to live, and arrange for their transition to “post camp” life. In May of 2006, Florida – Georgia LCMS President Michael came to talk to the congregation about the closing of the camp and its impact. We lost many members, friends – and in some cases – leaders of our congregation. Deon Hull, who managed many camp programs and Debra, his wife, a teacher at the school, would leave for other opportunities. Many others would leave, but some would stay, having found a place to live near to Woodlands.

It was a challenging time to continue the ministry, because the perception in the community was that ALL of Woodlands was closing. How would we let the community know the congregation was still here, although the camp was closing? We
engaged in a campaign to rent billboards on Highway 50 and Highway 27 to let people in the Clermont area know we were still there. There was even debate as to whether the congregation should relocate elsewhere in the Clermont area, but the decision was firm in remaining. Still, the school experienced a temporary decline in enrollment because many families thought all of Woodlands was closing. Aside from the human impact, the sanctuary and ministry center were also losing their water service. The congregation was still obtaining its drinking water from the camp. The Trustees under Lou Adams worked to rebuild and certify a well on sanctuary property. Early in 2006, Pastor Kneser reminded everyone in an issue of Wood Chips, about the story of Job, and how to look at the recent events in the life of Woodlands and respond in a positive way.

Pastor Storm came to visit early in 2006, and provided another message one Sunday that struck a clear note. He knew many members of the congregation were still feeling hurt because of the camp closure. Many of their friends and neighbors had moved – but he encouraged all to press on with the ministry. “The camp was a preaching station”, he said. “YOU are the legacy of that ministry’s beginning and it is up to you to carry on.”

Spurred on by the school’s recent work to expand and the task ahead, plans were made to hire new teachers and to go forward with plans to become a grade school. Heather Olsen, the originator of Woodlands preschool, stepped down after 13 years of service to direct the formation of the preschool at the brand new Zion - New Life Lutheran Church in nearby Winter Garden. The School’s Parent teacher League (PTL) was involved with purchasing new playground equipment and fund raising for additional space. The congregation also began envisioning an expanded fellowship area in front of the sanctuary, an idea started by our Outreach committee, because the area used for serving coffee after service simply was no longer large enough – or visible enough to passers-by.

As Pastor Kneser asserted, some good can come from what seems like loss. Woodlands negotiated for one of the double wide units at the camp that had been used as a classroom. In 2007, the congregation was presented with what used to be the “Creation Station”, as it was called, and converted it to use as a classroom for needed expansion at the sanctuary. The classroom is located halfway between the Youth Center and the Ministry Center.
Another new ministry had begun at Woodlands, not new to all, but it was to Woodlands – Stephen Ministries. Did you know it takes 50 hours of training to become a Stephen Minister? Stephen ministers are special care givers for those in need, suffering personal loss, or are lonely. Among those who picked up the challenge to become our first Stephen Ministers were Betty Enlow, Kathy Keene, Harold Underwood, Janet Adams, Beverly Oyler, and Florence and Anton Graff. Several of our members would go on to become Stephen Ministers through this program. The first program started in 2001, but grew from that nucleus to include other members interested in helping in times of need.

Outreach Chair, Pat Kubicek had some advice on witnessing in the Wood Chips newsletter one month in 2006, “When witnessing, some helpful passages are – John 3:16 (of course), Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 3:23, 28, 6:23, and 10:9. Know what you plan to say by relating to your own experiences and then meeting someone who needs the hope you have, but don’t use theological talk, just say it in your own words. Pray for opportunities, and trust the Holy Spirit, - don’t worry about what
you are going to say – let the spirit do the talking.”

Pastor Decker, in the meantime, had continued to develop the Woodlands youth ministries. The senior youth adopted the name “Ammunition,” derived from the parable of the sower. Our time with Pastor Decker was short lived, however, as he would take a call later in 2007, to be pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Cisna Park, Illinois. Before he departed, he left us with some wisdom about what congregations really are in an edition of Wood Chips that in some ways echoed what Pastor Storm had said the prior year:

1. You have to go outside your walls to reach people.
2. Churches don’t have to have buildings and besides, it’s cheaper.
3. Lay led churches live more fully to the principle of “a priesthood of all believers”
4. Jesus will teach us as we go.
5. Our “survival” isn’t the point.

Kathy Keene took the reins of the youth (for the second time!) after Pastor Decker departed for Cisna Park. However, Eric Carlson along with David Kneser, Julie Ratliff, and Emma Loughrey also were there to work with the youth. Soon, Eric would also feel called to attend the Concordia House of Studies program and go on to seminary. Eric, his wife, Korie and their young family would leave for St Louis in 2008. Richard and Lisa Ferris would take the youth as Kathy went on to take a position as assistant to the District Administrator at the Florida-Georgia District Headquarters of the LCMS in Orlando. Richard would become our new Youth Coordinator with Lisa assisting. Pastor Decker’s departure also resulted in our need for an Outreach coordinator and an assistant to Pastor Kneser.

The Living Nativity was gaining in popularity and was the chief event for the youth groups each year. In 2007, they began a “walking tour” format pioneered by Pastor Decker, and had over 400 attendees with 80 members participating in the event. Also, in 2007, the national youth gathering came to Orlando, or more specifically, the Orange County Convention Center. An estimated 27,000 youth were in attendance. Woodlands had the distinction of being a focus for some of the volunteer service events offered by the youth from that event.

**Changing Course on Expansion**

The expansion plans AJ Barto and others developed were placed on hold when the termites began holding their own services in the Tower. Instead of an entirely new building, the expansion would involve rebuilding the tower and the narthex areas, so as to handle a future classroom expansion behind the sanctuary. The new “Creation Station” classroom was in hand for the school. There were more critical needs for funds, namely support of the school operations and the remainder of the ministries. Norman Rein was involved in
fund raising for the revised expansion, with the help of Cornerstone Stewardship Ministries. Jim Arrington, our Head Trustee, showed everyone the options available. Jim would oversee the construction of the beautiful new narthex and tower.

The Return of Pastor Weerts

In January 2008, an old friend came back to Woodlands. Pastor Weerts was back, and he had an interesting journey on his way back! After leaving Woodlands camp in 2004, he served as interim pastor at Grace Lutheran in Winter Haven, Florida, Trinity Lutheran in Jefferson City Mo., and Faith Lutheran in Eustis, Florida. Pastor Weerts became our “Assistant to the Pastor.” The following month, Woodlands had a “Winterfest.” Winterfest was an idea to help support the school; the parent-teacher league sponsored the event, with lots of help from our music ministry and many others. We had a new council with lots of new ideas. Norman Rein as president, who had previously been chair of Stewardship, and Emma Loughrey, vice president would help kick start new opportunities for membership to advance the ministries.

There were also staff changes in 2008. Dave Durling succeeded Roy Olsen as our maintenance superintendent. Teaching staff were added at the school, to help with the grade expansion. Barbara Clark also became
our first full time bookkeeper and secretary of the school.

Woodlands had its “Second Tenth” anniversary in 2008. To observe it, a new outdoor gathering area at the front of the church (where passers-by could see that Lutherans do know how to have fun) was dedicated.

Also, the congregation welcomed the new organ. The old pipe organ had faithfully served the congregation since the building of the sanctuary, but had a tendency to “wheeze” and “whistle.” Finding parts was becoming very difficult. Marge Weerts and Charlie Crownover found a Johannes organ that was perfect. Finally, the area behind the pulpit could be fully opened to make more room for “In God We Trust” and the sound system.

In October, Eric Carlson sent a “letter home” to us at Woodlands to let us know how he was doing at seminary. Korie and Eric were celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary! Much of his studies at the time were focused on the Lutheran “Book of Concord”. Between classes, he was engaged in different work experiences, including visiting hospice patients. He was looking forward to classes in doctrine, worship, and synoptic gospels, and New Testament lectionary readings (yes - in Greek of course!).

Even though the congregation was having financial challenges, and difficult economic times persisted, the congregation voted to stay the course, and do whatever could be done to keep the school and other ministries going. By the end of the school year, it was looking clear that expansion of the school to higher grades was not going to continue. Attendance at elementary grades was beginning to decline. We did not have enough students for some of the grade classes for which we had teachers. On the reluctant recommendation of the Council, the congregation voted to discontinue the elementary school and realign back to a preschool. We would be saying goodbye to many of our teachers. Jim Essig stepped down from his position but not before making sure certain provisions were made for all his teachers. At this writing, Jim is now the principal at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Stuart,
Florida. But he and his wife, Dianne can be seen Sundays worshipping at Woodlands.

Dave Herbst reflected on his first year at Woodlands and his new work as editor of Wood Chips. Stating “I don’t come to Woodlands for lemonade and cookies anymore,… I’m hungry for The Word, to celebrate, and for the fellowship.” Using another food analogy, he stated. “The pastors deliver, and it’s much better than Dominos!” Dave took the Wood Chips “online” so members no longer had to wait on the U.S. Mail to get their news.

If you want an example of a “little” ministry that makes a big impact, then Operation Christmas Child would fit as an example. Originally promoted by the Reverend Franklin Graham, in 2008, it was in its third year at Woodlands. Wendy Snider was busier than ever. Over 100 children benefited by the “shoebox gifts” that also presented the gospel. Woodlands’ program was coordinated and collected by Wendy. This program would continue to grow.

As of that date 156 people had participated in Alpha. Plans were also underway to start an Alpha class at Royal Highlands. Alpha is a ministry for those wishing to learn more and to share, spiritually, with fellow Christians. Lois was the “champion” of Alpha at Woodlands, and recently recalled how she brought it here from their congregation in New York, where they learned about it from a pastor from England,

“After Norm and I joined Woodlands church, in 2006, I asked Pastor Kneser if he had ever heard about Alpha; and he had not. Pastor took the Alpha tapes to watch during his morning devotions. He liked them, and he gave me permission to begin Alpha at Woodlands... I began by asking Debbie Kneser for names of some members that might possibly be interested. The first Alpha group was conducted at our home as a small group study. My husband Norm and I cooked the dinners and Norm served.

When we finished our Alpha course they were very excited to bring it to our congregation at Woodlands. We began in the Spring of 2007, with 7 very special ladies: Debbie Kneser, Dianne Essig, Joan Schkolenko, Carol Day, Heather Olsen, Teri Crownover, and Rena Gardner.

...Our first class had 62 Woodlands members. After that first class we were so blessed with members who also loved the Alpha course that we now had a list of members who would cook, and serve, and otherwise help so that others could take the
course. That blessing still continues today. It is a special kitchen ministry”.

So what was happening at Seminary? Eric Carlson and family were celebrating the birth of a baby girl, Elizabeth. Eric was taking more classes at Seminary and beginning his Old Testament Lectionary readings. Brent Hartwig and family returned to Woodlands in June 2009, to say “Farewell” as Brent was preparing for ordination and installation at Iowa City, Iowa.

In the late summer of 2009, we placed Ann-Marie Boyd as preschool director and Debra Armas as a teacher. Other ministries were making a comeback that fall. One such ministry was the children’s choir, resurrected once more by Debbie Kneser, with help from Charlie Crownover. In October, we placed Mary Jo Hoard as team member for Lutheran Counseling Services.

Early in the spring of 2009, we had a “Mortgage Burning” – we had paid off the mortgage on the Ministry Center after only ten years!
Woodlands School children sing at Winterfest 2009

Charlie Crownover at Octoberfest 2008

Someone has to peel the potatoes for Octoberfest

Trunk or Treat!

Norm gets face painted for Trunk or Treat

Trunk or Treater
Winterfest

Jim Essig with the Woodlands School Booth

Erin Brecheen at Winterfest

Hot dogs, soda and crafts at Winterfest

Back to Octoberfest /Groundbreaking for the tower
Chapter 7

Make a Joyful Noise

In early 2010, Our minister of music, Charlie Crownover reflected in an article for the Wood Chips, on the previous year - the introduction of the new organ, the talents of our organists, Alberta Brethauer, Marlene Wilhelm, and Marge Weerts, along with Marlene’s direction of the Adult Choir and Joy Bells, Debbie Kneser and Children’s Choir, Kathy Keene’s Praise in Motion and of course the In God We Trust band and Youth Band. Wow! a lot of musical talent - Music is and always has been a major portion of the ministry at Woodlands.

Early in 2011, Kristine Stout, a noted handbell soloist, came to Woodlands to give us a special performance with our Joy Bells Choir, led by Marlene Wilhelm. Later, that year, Marlene retired from her duties as choir and bell choir director. Marlene was one of the longest serving members of our music ministry, having begun with the choir in 1997. Betty Myers now stepped in to direct the choir.

The Wide World of Sports and Fellowship

Who is Steve Pisarkiewicz – also known as “Zark”? The men found that out at the fellowship dinner on Super Bowl Eve in 2010. Steve was a quarterback for THE Green Bay Packers, and our keynote speaker at the Disciples Hall event. Steve had great stories to tell and the men had a wonderful time in Christian fellowship.
The Fall and Rise of the Tower

The capital campaign in the previous year bore fruit for expanding the church building with the new tower and narthex, thanks to the efforts of our building chairman, Jim Arrington and past president Norman Rein. The construction took place through 2010, and topping out of the new narthex and tower took place in July, with dedication in October, just in time for the Reformation observance.

The new narthex was designed to be expanded to the backside of the sanctuary, so that in the future more classrooms and meeting space can be added. The tower includes a new greeting area, storage, and an interesting feature, a “hole in the wall” or niche in the hallway of the narthex. There, Eros Zeckser has donated her time and talents to bringing artistic displays for the delight of members and as reminders of God’s creation and our response to God’s grace.

One tug and down goes the old tower!

Opening the new narthex - Pastor and Jim Arrington

Early in 2010, the congregation made permanent, the new position for a church administrator. We now had so many ministries, that we needed a person just to “direct traffic,” and make sure the Council was kept up to date on what was happening. Emma Loughrey stepped forward to take on this role.

Debt Free

That August, we had another mortgage burning. This time it was for the youth center and the sanctuary! We were now completely debt free! These mortgages dated back to the days of the camp loans to
build the sanctuary and the fellowship hall in the camp.

The Early Learning Center added to its staff later that fall. A task force was also created to examine the future of school enrollment and recommended day care, 2K, 3K, VPK, and 4K. As there was an increase in student enrollment, membership in the congregation also began to pick up. Over 2010, Woodlands added 67 new members!

Return of the Camp

Since its closing, the camp property looked sad and lonely. Rumors circulated from time to time about what it might become – a shopping center? - a residential development? - a park? In November 2010, the answer came. A group called YWAM, which stands for “Youth with a Mission,” established by Loren Cunningham in 1960, was expanding and needed a training ground for Christian missionaries – and found the right fit within the camp facilities. YWAM now partners with Woodlands when the opportunity arises, for events and we see their members from time to time at our worship services.

Sending Our Best

Lisa and Richard Ferris had our youth as active as ever. Ammunition was up to 14-16 members and Sola (the Junior Youth) had 16-18 participants on a regular basis. Woodlands was represented at the national Youth gathering in 2010 by 17 youth.

During the summer of 2011, the children of the Sunday school collected their pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters and purchased enough to buy a cow! The cow in question went to a village in need overseas through Lutheran World Relief. In 2012, the students would do it again, only this time, it was an alpaca, a chicken and a pig they were able to purchase for a needy community overseas! Pretty soon, they’ll have enough for an entire farm.

We bade farewell in June 2012, to then Pastor – Elect Eric Carlson and his family as he prepared for ordination and installation at Our Savior in Chicago Illinois, where he is now serving as Pastor. As mentioned
earlier, Eric was very involved with our youth ministry prior to receiving his calling to attend seminary. Two for two!

The Carlsons

**Growth of Living Nativity**

The trustees provided more space for storage early in 2012, with the construction of a new – more secure storage shed, located near the Ministry Center. And it was a good thing, because we were starting to run out of room to store all the sets and props needed for the Living Nativity, which is now becoming a signature feature of the Woodlands ministry. That December, over 770 people visited the Living Nativity. We had over two hundred volunteers. Over 7000 DOZEN cookies were baked (and consumed). On top of that, Operation Christmas Child under the guidance of Wendy Snider, helped 192 children with shoebox gifts, and Woodlands was now a collection center, where over 1400 shoe box gifts were collected for shipment to the regional collection center.

Kirk Klemash, former council member, brass quartet member and past coordinator of the Living Nativity had some thoughts and reflections on the annual Christmas season ministry and his experiences at Woodlands in general:

*I found Woodlands when we moved our family out to Clermont from Apopka in the late 1990’s. I had been baptized and raised in the LCMS, so wherever I have lived I have always tried to find an LCMS church to attend and worship. The first time I attended Woodlands I knew it was the right place...*  

*Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. I also like the theater arts and music. When I saw Pastor Decker working so hard to expand the youth Christmas Service at Woodlands... I was drawn to the opportunity. I saw the theater part of it and since both Callie and Jacob were in the youth ministry at the time, I knew I needed to support the effort...*  

*I loved watching the kids come out every year and do their roles. I enjoyed putting together the whole production and all the people I worked with and got to know so much better by doing the Living Nativity.... I was a small part of an overall team and larger church body that came together (for) a great event. I am amazed at how Living Nativity has become such a loved ministry at Woodlands and the community at large.*

*Some memories ...Never running out of cookies ...Ted Gardner showing up with more plants each year... Lucas Gardner in the bushes running the light ....Son Jacob as the angel Gabriel ...Rene Varga taking on the pre-walk / worship ....and of course,*
Pastor Weerts behind the shrubs as the voice of God ....Charlie, Emma, Wayne, Debbie, Dave Durling and especially Kathy Keene, all of whose ideas and help were so important.

In June there were recognition events for over one hundred youth at Woodlands. First, nine young people were confirmed on May 27th. Then, on Recognition Sunday, June 3rd, a spring musical presentation by the youth of the Sunday school (102 of them) was delivered. Finally, June 5 marked the end of the school year for the Early Learning Center and thirteen children clad in green and gold caps, graduated from 4k/VPK to Kindergarten. The school may have less grades but was back to nearly full strength.

New Paths

We had new opportunities in 2012. “New Beginnings” a resource for homeless families in Central Florida, founded a center in Clermont. Woodlands supports New Beginnings with donations, and other assistance along with other congregations in the Clermont/Minneola area. In addition, Woodlands also is now providing assistance to this ministry by providing food and volunteer support on selected Saturdays, along with other area congregations, for those in need. This included cooking and serving meals and providing children of the homeless and less fortunate with games and toys while their parents filled out forms for services.

That summer Pastor Kneser was elected to a three year term as a Vice-President of the Florida-Georgia District of the LCMS, a very high honor. In addition, Pastor Weerts was elected as Circuit counselor for another term. Woodlands is fortunate to have leaders among its clergy.

Sometimes God acts in ways we do not understand. Such is the case with Dave Herbst, our Wood Chips editor, and the author of the beginning of this little book about Woodlands, and editor of much of the material used in this book, who passed away due to complications from surgery in late 2012. Dave was a wonderful inspiration to many of us, and was especially outgoing in expressing the blessings of the Lord.
through his work on the Wood Chips. But we are still here and continue the work he and others began. Dave is just one example, though, of many of the “saints of Woodlands,” our friends, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers who have gone on before us.

**Observance**

In the fall of 2012, we celebrated several ministry milestones as we honored the shepherds who have taken Woodlands through “thick and thin”- We observed 50 years of service by Pastor Milan and Marge Weerts and 30 years for Pastor Brian and Debbie Kneser. Pastor Weerts - former member of the Woodlands Ministries Board of Directors and later Woodlands Camp’s Administrator-Director. Pastor Brian Kneser - formerly Assistant Pastor-Director of the Camp, and now Senior Pastor of Woodlands Lutheran Church. Pastor Harold Storm, founder of Woodlands Ministries, and our first pastor, was also in attendance at a special dinner to observe this wonderful event. Pastors Storm, Weerts, and Kneser were recognized for their 142 years of combined service to Christian ministry! Pastor Milan Weerts was also recently presented with the Veteran of the Cross recognition. At that observance, Pastor Kneser said of him, “The Lord gave Milan the same attitude toward ministry that He gave to Isaiah, when he responded to the Lord’s call for service by declaring: Here I am, send me!”

Twenty five years– it sounds like a big number but it really isn’t. In 2013, Woodlands Lutheran Church and Early Learning Center observed its 25th year as an “organized ministry.”

A lot of “restructuring” happened along the way. But it merely changed to fit the ministry - this is what Pastor Harold Storm once had to say about structure, “... As I received members and confirmed adults and baptized children, the District...didn’t know what to do with the membership. At the time, there were 85 (of us)...because nothing conformed to their structure. I paid little attention to structure. We simply added (to the) membership...”
Reflection

We pause here to consider the past 25 years and anticipate what we do next. Only when we reflect on what was before Woodlands Lutheran Church and what is now, do we see the change and give thanks for everything that has been done. In 1988, there was no Sanctuary, no Ministry Center, no Early Learning Center, no Youth Center and no classrooms. As for ministries at Woodlands? There was no Alpha, no Stephens Ministers, no Living Nativity, no Pairs and Spares, no Ammunition nor Sola nor Faith Builders. No Praise in Motion, no Chime Choir, no Children’s’ Choir, and few to support the community outreach. It was just an idea. Eighty-five souls became over seven hundred. Not all are here now. But were they not all here and did they not all hear God’s word? Some of us thought we didn’t have enough resources or time to do ALL these things! But if we’ve learned anything, ministry often starts as a one-on-one exchange - an idea, just as did the camp, and grows from there.

Recently, the pastors gave us a taste of what we have at Woodlands, with a flyer summarizing all the “small group” ministries that are available, such as S.H.A.P.E…. Small Catechism… Questions you’ve always wanted to ask… Women of Woodlands… Men’s Mid Week Bible Study… Witnessing… The Book of Hebrews… God is in the Laundry Room… Pairs and Spares… Alpha… The Teaching of the Twelve Disciples… Ammunition… Sola… and Faith Builders… the Living Nativity… Joyful Sounds Adult Choir… In God We Trust… Joy Bells… Mens’ Choir… Faith Neighborhood Center… New Beginnings… Kairos… Angel Tree… Operation Christmas Child… Senior Lunches… Woodlands Lutheran Early Learning Center… Concordia House of Studies (developing future pastors)… Quilting and Sewing…the list goes on and on! And the opportunities to serve are still growing. What is important is not so much a building, or the structure, or the size. It is making the Word come alive. Or as Pastor Art Krause used to say, “Work the Word, and the Word works!”

We pray and look forward with confidence to the next 25 years, and that we will grow in faith that will be more productive for this ministry that is the Woodlands Lutheran Congregation.
Music at Woodlands

Cherub Choir

Children’s Choir

Woodlands Joyful Sounds Choir

Adult Tone Chime Choir

In God We Trust
Alberta Brethauer – Organist

Marlene Wilhelm – organist & choir director

The Brass Quartet

Back to 1989 - Margie McQuaig

Youth Praise Band

Reformation Sunday 2013
The Living Nativity

“In the Village of Bethlehem

Narration

“Grandpa”

Menacing Guards

Narration

The Townsfolk and their Transportation
...the end?....

...No! Just the beginning!

More of our cast

Lighting techs

Refreshments for the tired and weary!...

...and cookies!!
Epilogue and Acknowledgements

I hope this “little history” of Woodlands is as inspirational to you, the reader, as it is informative. When I began this ministry assignment, I saw it as a chance to simply reflect on some past events. What I did not know was that it would take me on a trip through my own faith, and what I received was a picture far larger than I had imagined – and it is truly humbling to see what a single, small idea can do and how it can blossom into a wonderful tool for Christ’s Kingdom. What is left is for us is to press on with Christ as the leader. As Pastor Storm once said, “You are the legacy!”

I hope you enjoy this book and forgive the writer’s limited content, for there is far more that has happened and will happen in this ministry than can be contained within these pages. If you don’t see something you know of that was “ministry in action” that was not contained in this book, you know our Lord does.

I would like to thank Al and Lillian Matz for their work, research and collections and their contacts, those who were able to provide “first hand” accounts and recollections, our interviewees, and others for providing the material and of course Pastors Kneser and Weerts, who have provided a guiding hand and additional material. I would be remiss in not acknowledging the Church Secretary for her patience as I would call out from my study, while writing, at 10:30 PM, with questions that would confound Alex Trebek.

Thank you for this opportunity to serve!

Your fellow Servant in Christ

Bob Beaver
Appendix A – Past and Present Pastors at Woodlands

## PAST PASTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harold Storm (Founding Pastor)*</td>
<td>1988-1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul vonWerder (Assistant Pastor)*</td>
<td>1994-1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrett Knudson (Missionary – Four Corners)</td>
<td>2000-2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan Weerts (Camp Director / Guest Preacher)</td>
<td>1999-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Decker (Assistant Pastor)*</td>
<td>2005-2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Schroeder (Guest Preacher)</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Those With Jesus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl Brummè</td>
<td>1995-2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arthur Krause (Assistant to the Pastor)*</td>
<td>1998-2006</td>
</tr>
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## PRESENT PASTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brian Kneser*</td>
<td>1991-Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan Weerts (Assistant to the Pastor)*</td>
<td>2008- Present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## FUTURE PASTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastor</th>
<th>Graduated from Seminary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brent Hartwig</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Carlson</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Photos in Tower Hallway
Appendix B – History of Congregational Presidents at Woodlands

Raymond Hansen 1988- 1989

Carl Kuhnle 1990

Paul Klump 1991- 1992

Kent Swanson 1993


Brian Smith 1996

Bob Beaver 1997 – 1999

Jim Fulton 2000 – 2001

Paul Lane 2002

James Ennd 2003- 2005

Bill Lehndorf 2006

Bill Krueger 2007

Norman Rein 2008 – 2010

Al Goebel 2011

Chris Hopkins 2012 - 13