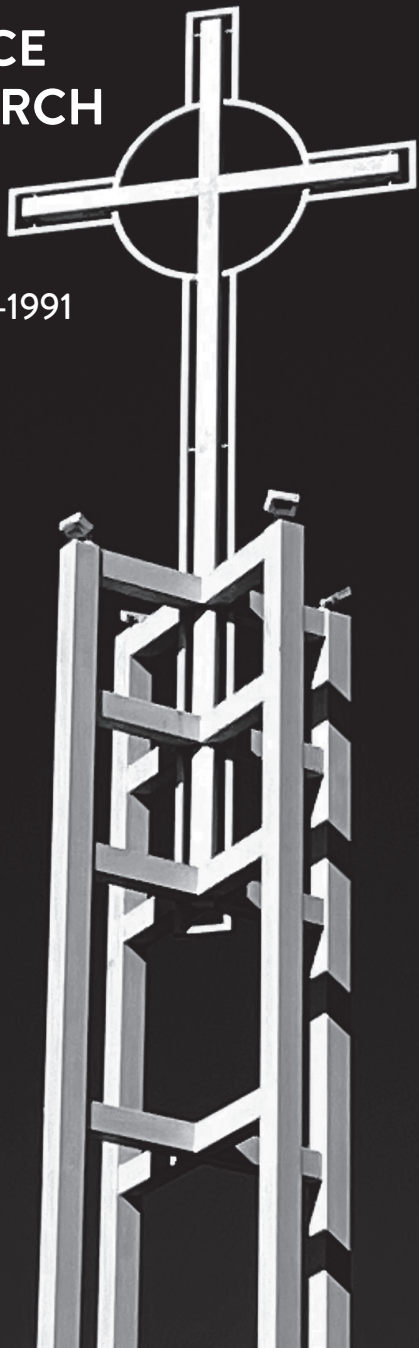


HISTORY OF PRINCE OF PEACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

FIRST 28 YEARS | 1963-1991

*Celebrating
50 years since the
move to the Ridges*

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PRINCE OF PEACE

Love God. Love People.

The History of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, MN

How can we best describe the first quarter-century of Prince of Peace?

- A congregation which grew from 0 to 10,000 members, the largest church in the American Lutheran Church at the time of the formation of the ELCA in 1988.
- A congregation which grew from 0 to 3,000 in average worship attendance.
- A congregation which made a transformational move from a 4.5 acre site on the corner of Nicollet Avenue and Burnsville Crosstown to an 120-acre site called the Ridges.
- A congregation which began in a primarily rural county of 7,500, but reinvented itself to minister in a metropolis of some 260,000 residents.
- A congregation which faced the shift to declining religious affiliation by offering an experiment in a changing church.
- A congregation which transitioned from 16th century classical music to 20th century contemporary Christian music.
- A congregation which responded to the “God is Dead” assertion by declaring in word and deed that “Jesus is alive, and we are his people.”

**“The farther backward you can look, the farther forward
you are likely to see.” – Winston Churchill**

Most historians agree that writing history immediately after the analyzed events is not the best way to understand history. Only after sufficient time has elapsed are we able to understand the wide sweep of the past. Only after 25 or 50 years or more can we see trends and patterns and nuances.

In terms of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, so much of what has been forgotten or underappreciated suddenly comes to the fore when examined again much later. This will be the attempt of this text: to accurately remember the earliest days of the congregation and how God orchestrated a constant refrain of transformational moments.

The Name “Prince of Peace”

We will never truly know the power and breadth of the congregation’s name, or even who chose it. In the first half of the 20th century, most churches were given names like First Lutheran (nobody chose Second Lutheran), or traditional names such as Faith, Trinity, Holy Cross, St Paul’s or St. James. Sometimes the name came from the location; my home congregation was St. Anthony Park Lutheran, and our neighboring congregation was Como Park Lutheran.

However, when the American Lutheran Church established a new congregation in Burnsville, it turned to one of the most powerful and familiar passages in Scripture Isaiah 9:6.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

This God-inspired name would give us a powerful vision. This congregation was planted in Burnsville to be all about Jesus, the one born as a child, who lived and died and rose again, the one called “the Prince of Peace.” This congregation was never designated just to be a Lutheran church, a Burnsville church, a (name the pastor) church, it was to be a church created and empowered by the “Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

Frederick Buechner describes vocation as being when *“our deepest gladness connects with the world’s deepest need.”* For Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, our vocation was found in Luke: *“Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people.”* Prince of Peace felt called to meet the world’s deepest need for a savior and a living hope.

Congregations are always a work in progress – rising and falling, succeeding and failing – but at its best Prince of Peace experienced the iconic Acts 2 description of the early church where it was *“praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

Something much deeper also undergirded the work and ministry of the congregation: the conviction that the planting of this church was no accident. In fact, God had been working for decades in the community and the wider world to prepare the way for this congregation and countless others to thrive, creating waves and energy which propelled us beyond our imagination.

We never had to generate the power and motivation and passion for the work we were entrusted to do, all we had to do was just ride the wave which was already breaching, to be caught up by the powerful wind of the spirit.

The Fullness of Time

In announcing the arrival of Jesus on this earth, Theologian James Stewart uses the descriptive term “fullness of time.”

“So the Redeemer came. Somewhere in the mind and heart of God from the very foundation of the earth the Christ had been waiting, hidden in the counsels of eternity until the great bell of the ages should strike: and when at last everything in the world and in the souls of people were ready and prepared, he came, the Word of God made flesh, not a moment early and not a moment late, but exactly on the stroke of the hour. It was the Day of the Lord.”

Looking back at the birth of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church some 50 years hence, it would seem that it was also the “fullness of time” for the congregation. It felt like the “Day of the Lord.” Somehow, in the mind and heart of God, the Prince of Peace had been preparing for this moment, this new reformation.

As we will unpack, the Holy Spirit had been creating multiple movements which would all deeply impact the new congregation. In addition, State of Minnesota and Dakota County officials were preparing the way for thousands and tens of thousands of new residents to show up in the near future.

Western Dakota Country growth beginning in 1960

Post-war home building soared in the United States, but nowhere as fast as in newly-created suburbs. During the 1950s, for example, more than 13 million homes were constructed nationwide. In the Twin Cities, the inner ring suburbs quickly filled up, and developers and families began to look further out from the central cities.

The south metro of Minneapolis and St Paul soon crossed the Minnesota River to focus on the communities of Burnsville, Apple Valley, Lakeville and Eagan. The following census figures demonstrate the explosive growth.

CENSUS	1960	1970	1980	1990	2025
Burnsville	2,718	19,940	35,674	51,288	63,936
Apple Valley	585	8,502	21,818	34,598	55,272
Lakeville	924	7,556	14,790	24,854	74,553
Eagan	3,382	10,398	20,700	47,409	67,534

Not surprisingly, church planters looked to these burgeoning suburbs as perfect places to establish new congregations. Much of the time the strategy was predictable: purchase 4.5 acres of rather inexpensive land on a roadway which would some day become a major thoroughfare. A mission pastor was selected by the governing body and sent into the community to knock on doors and find some charter members.

After some organizational meetings, the national church would then begin construction on the original building, usually bare bones, with a 200-seat worship center, several classrooms, a couple of offices, bathrooms, a tiny kitchen and a makeshift parking lot. Presto! Instant church.

The assumption of most denominational leaders was that a “rising tide lifted all boats.” In other words, all of the church plants should eventually grow to be rather substantial congregations, or “full-service churches.” The inherent problem, of course, was that if a church did grow, it would no longer fit on the original site. The only options were to keep the church the same size as the original organizational membership, to try and purchase adjacent land, or to move. It was easier to stay the same size, even in a fast-growing community.

Writing history so far into the future allows us to see clearly what actually did happen with all of the mission starts in the four communities listed above. Only four Lutheran congregations would gain mega-church status, which is roughly defined as churches with worship attendance averaging 1,800 to 2,000 people on a weekend. Even if we revise the mega-church criteria down to average attendance of 1,000 members, still only four qualify:

Burnsville:	Prince of Peace Lutheran Church
Apple Valley:	Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church
Lakeville:	Hosanna Lutheran Church
Eagan:	Easter Lutheran Church

From other denominations, Mary, Mother of the Church and Berean Baptist would also join the group.

One inescapable conclusion from studying the history of these congregations is that a rising tide does not lift all boats. It usually takes a “great commission” mentality in pastors, staff and lay leadership for a church to grow. In addition, it takes larger acreage, multi-million-dollar facilities, extraordinary staff members, and usually some God-sized surprises. Prince of Peace was blessed with a myriad of surprises that no one could ever have anticipated.

The Holy Spirit Moved

The 1,500-year period in which the church dominated culture ended in the 1960s. Post-Christendom ripped away most of the entitlements and protections from white Anglo-Saxon protestants (WASPs). On April 8, 1966, *Time* Magazine – perhaps the best-read periodical of the times – emblazoned this question on its cover: “Is God Dead?” This happened at the very time when Prince of Peace was trying to become a viable church. Of course, if God is dead, why bother?

What we can see by looking back from a distance is how God was raising up new movements of the Holy Spirit – found inside the church and outside, in mainline, Roman Catholic and evangelical denominations, among young and old, black and white, urban and rural – that would eventually transform the world. In the short term, these movements would help launch Prince of Peace into “great commission” mode.

Spiritual awakenings were flourishing in Southern California, in the Evangelism Departments of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (then after 1960 in the American Lutheran Church). They were also inspiring independent groups such as Lutheran Youth Encounter, Lutheran Evangelistic Movement, Lutheran Bible Institutes, and Lutheran Alive on many college campuses. Bible camps were equipping hundreds of young adults every year to share the message of Jesus Christ.

In addition, the charismatic movement centered at times at Notre Dame University among Roman Catholics. A Billy Graham Evangelistic Association crusade in New York City in the late 1950s drew millions of attendees, in Young Life, Campus Crusade and Bible Study Fellowship.

The Civil Rights Movement, led by Baptist minister Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., introduced Black gospel to white Christians. This would change the beat of church music, and the quote in his “I Have A Dream” speech from Amos 5:24 would expand the church from the great commission to the great commandment: “Let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

Who could have ever imagined that all of these God-led movements would coalesce at exactly the time that Prince of Peace was being conceived in the church offices of the ALC? The leaders of this new congregation just had to catch the wave of the spirit, which had been powerfully moving in the world long before the first mission pastor arrived. In essence, 1963 was the perfect time to plant a church in Burnsville.

The Beginning Years of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church: 1963-1970

Early in 1963, construction began on the first unit of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, located on the corner of Nicollet Avenue and Burnsville Crosstown (later renamed Burnsville Parkway). Pastor Gerald Allen, a mission pastor, arrived to lead the organizational efforts. At the same time, representatives of the American Lutheran Church launched a huge visitation blitz, knocking on hundreds of doors and assessing interest in a new congregation.

The first worship service at the new church was held on October 13, 1963, even before the paint was on the wall and the furniture was in place. The church was dedicated, and Pastor Allen installed a month later. The original choir singing at the first worship service included Ed Benson, Chet and Marian Engquist, Stan Nordstrom, Dick and Marlene Krause, Lyle Haugen, Mavis Thorsland, Barb Halvorson, Ken and Marilyn Nordaune, Al Leipnitz, Lowell and Myrtle Qualley.

The congregation was officially organized on January 19, 1964. By this time there were already 261 baptized members, 103 confirmed members, and 73 family units. Within one year, a two-story educational wing was added with several classes, offices, and additional restrooms. A major problem was that the main storage room was located in the back of the men's restroom, making it awkward for the women to access supplies.

Parking was a problem from day one. As the highway department widened both Nicollet Avenue and the Burnsville Parkway, it would slice off more and more parking spaces. In addition, the soil in the parking lot reminded people of quicksand, and each spring when the ice and snow melted, the parking lot would become a huge mud hole.

In the midst of all this activity, Pastor Allen's resignation in 1967 created a fair amount of chaos. Usually, the founding pastor helps a congregation get on its feet, makes decisions about the future, develops the organizational structure and becomes a public figure in the community. Pastor Allen's departure would leave a gap in all those areas.

The ALC quickly sent in an interim pastor, Robert Kompelien, but it was not a good time to change leadership. Pastor Kompelien followed the example of Pastor Allen by staying for only two years, resigning in the spring of 1970 to become an assistant to the president of Luther Seminary.

So here was a congregation of around 1,000 members, with regular worship attendance of about 300, but with no permanent pastor. Several part-time staff members attempted to keep things going and supply pastors were brought in to preach. But the church, which had begun with such promise, was now literally stuck in the mud. Another short-term pastor might just be the end of it.

Thankfully, Prince of Peace was blessed with wonderfully faithful lay leaders during these six years, exemplified by the elected presidents of the congregation. These included Robert Brower (1964); Chet Enquist (1965); William Westerberg (1966); Lyle Haugen (1967); Larry Maroney (1968); Phil Peterson (1969); and Dave Anderson (1970).

The Pastoral Search

Everyone in leadership at Prince of Peace realized how important this decision would be, with no room for error. The congregation was out of room, the site was too small, the staff was overwhelmed, and there was no clear vision going forward. Proverbs 29 warns about such situations: “Without a vision the people perish.” Or, using a play on words, “without a vision, people will go to another parish.”

The tendency was to look for a seasoned veteran to lead the congregation during this transition. Many other congregations in the area were doing just that – finding a pastor around the age of 45 to 50 who might decide to spend the second half of his ministry at a church like Prince of Peace.

But the call committee recognized that such a pastor would be 15 – 20 years older than the average new member at Prince of Peace. Typical Burnsville residents at the time were described as about 30 years of age with 2.2 children, working in education or the computer industry, and hailing from southern Minnesota or northern Iowa. How effective would a much older pastor be in connecting with so many young families?

The Absolutely Impossible Journey of Pastor Merv Thompson to Prince of Peace

The same month that Prince of Peace held its first worship service, Merv Thompson was a first-year student at Luther Seminary. After finishing the first year, a series of serendipitous events led Merv and his wife Jackie, a 5th grade teacher in the Mound's View School District, to take a year-long leave.

The two of them had been offered a position with a national ministry program called "A Christian Ministry in the National Parks," which enlisted seminary students and other young adults to provide ministry and pastoral care in national parks. Participants worked full-time jobs as park service or concessionaires, and then hosted worship services on weekends. The Thompsons would spend 15 months in four different parks: Grand Canyon, Shenandoah, Everglades and Glacier.

As soon as Merv returned to the seminary for his second year, he was hired as the Youth Director at Victory Lutheran Church on 43rd and Thomas Avenue North in Minneapolis. Their first child, Deanna, was born in December of 1966. Fortunately – both for the Thompsons and for Prince of Peace – Merv's expected internship during the third year of seminary was waived because of his experience in the national parks. This meant he was available for a call in the summer of 1967. One year later would have made it impossible for Prince of Peace to call him.

So when Merv graduated from Luther Seminary in June of 1967, he was immediately called to be the associate pastor at Victory, where he had already been working for more than a year. He was ordained in July, 1967. The senior pastor had given notice that he was planning to move to Washington state as soon as he could find a call in order to be closer to family.

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye. Just three months after Pastor Merv accepted the associate pastor position, the senior pastor position opened up. In a move that shocked just about everyone in the congregation, which had a long history of older pastors, the bishop recommended that they extend a call to Pastor Merv for the senior pastor role. The vote was unanimous. Suddenly, at 26 years old, he became the senior pastor of a 1,200 member congregation, unheard of in Lutheran circles. Everyone expected him to remain at Victory for a long time.

A Most Fortuitous Meeting

In the spring of 1968, the Minneapolis Conference invited all its pastors to a meeting about Bible camps, explaining the options available for the upcoming summer. Pastor Merv arrived late and happened to sit next to Pastor Bob Kompelien from Prince of Peace. The two pastors were acquainted, as Pastor Kompelien had been a pastor at a nearby church in north Minneapolis before moving to Burnsville.

During a pause in the meeting, Pastor Kompelien leaned over to Pastor Merv and said to him, “Merv, I am looking for a youth director. Do you know anyone who might be interested?” Pastor Merv replied, “No, but if someone comes to mind I will let you know.”

A couple days later Pastor Merv’s younger brother, Mark Thompson, called him to complain about the church where he was a youth director. “They are so conservative here, I can’t stand it.”

Pastor Merv told him about his conversation with Pastor Kompelien and encouraged him to give the pastor a call. Two weeks went by and Mark called Pastor Merv again, even more unhappy about his current church.

So Pastor Merv asked him again, “Why don’t you call the pastor in Burnsville?” Mark responded, “Where is Burnsville?” Pastor Merv replied, “I’m not sure. I think it’s south of Bloomington somewhere.”

A couple days later Mark called back with the exciting news, “I am the new youth director at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.” This decision would change the lives of the Thompson family and Prince of Peace for decades to come.

Mark Thompson was not just any youth director. He had been an all-state hockey player in high school and was awarded a four-year all-expense-paid scholarship to the University of Michigan to play hockey. A person does not generally play hockey at that level without being assertive and extroverted. He soon had a large number of students involved in the youth program, and he got to know many of the parents. He made a significant impact in a short period of time.

But when his second year of seminary education was completed, he was assigned an internship in southern California. While on internship there he got married and decided to continue doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate School, which kept him out west for several years. This development also was crucial for the future of Prince of Peace.

Call Committee, 1970

As soon as Pastor Kompelien announced his resignation in the spring of 1970, a call committee was elected by the congregation to begin the search for a new senior pastor. Call committee members were Howard Knutson, Chair, Kathy Peterson, Bob Hoff, Jerry Larson and Lowell Qualley. One of the first questions the committee addressed was about Mark Thompson. Was he available? It was quickly determined that he still had some schooling ahead of him.

Then came the transformational moment when someone asked, “Doesn’t he have a brother?” So Pastor Merv’s phone rang at Victory Lutheran Church in north Minneapolis. “Hello, this is Bob Hoff, representing the call committee of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. We are searching for a new senior pastor. Would you be willing to talk with us about this position?”

Pastor Merv responded that he was happy at Victory, hadn’t been there long, and still had a lot to do there. It wouldn’t be a good time for him to move.

Seemingly oblivious to this response, Bob told Pastor Merv that he and the call committee would be visiting Victory the next Sunday to hear him preach, and would like to have a short conversation after the service.

Within two weeks a letter of call was extended from Prince of Peace to Pastor Merv Thompson, offering him the position of senior pastor. This truly upset the apple cart for the Thompson family and for the congregation.

By September 1, the family (which now included Noel, born in May) had moved into the Prince of Peace parsonage. Neither the congregation nor Pastor Merv had any idea what an adventuresome journey they were now undertaking.

10,000 Hours

When a congregation calls a new pastor, it has almost no knowledge of what that person brings to the table: personal and professional history, gifts and talents, weaknesses and strengths. The congregation trusts that God is in the midst of the call and that everything will work out in the end. Everyone hopes that the pastor's vocation will connect with the needs and aspirations of the congregation.

Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book, *Outliers*, asserts that in order for someone to be truly proficient in any given field of endeavor, that person needs have 10,000 hours of experience. Unless the leader has had that amount of experience, they will spend far too much of their time and energy making it up as they go along. This is hardly a recipe for effective ministry.

What no one realized was that Pastor Merv had completed roughly the equivalent of 10,000 hours in three different experiences, all of which would have a critical bearing on the future of Prince of Peace. None of this was articulated at the time, but in retrospect it is clear how all of this contributed to the growth and development of Prince of Peace from 1970 to 1991.

1. Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Paul, Minnesota

When Pastor Merv was three years old, his father, Conrad Thompson, became the senior pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in St. Paul, right across the street from Macalester College. The congregation had fallen on hard times during WWII, and less than 50 people showed up for worship on an average Sunday in a worship space seating about 250. Some of Pastor Conrad's friends told him to turn down the call, because it could be a dead end.

But when Pastor Conrad showed up, just as the war was ending, he saw great potential in reaching veterans who were returning from military service to attend the University of Minnesota or the eight colleges in St. Paul. Because he had majored in music at St. Olaf College and taught music in Iowa for three years, he saw music as the key to growth. As a mentee of F. Melius Christiansen, he began organizing Christmas festivals which became so large they had to be moved across the street to the Macalester auditorium.

He organized several choirs and enlisted volunteers to go door-to-door in the neighborhoods inviting people to church. The church suddenly exploded in growth. Conrad was an evangelist, with a primary outreach to those identifying as “unchurched” or “dechurched.” In just five years, from 1944 to 1949, worship attendance grew tenfold, with more than 500 people attending worship on an average Sunday. Of course, at Christmas and Easter, additional services had to be added.

Young Mervin saw all of this happening – the growing church, the dynamic music, the effective preaching, the visitation – and it all became a part of his DNA, which he would bring to Prince of Peace. It was no accident that Prince of Peace grew also by tenfold during his tenure: from 1,000 members to 10,000, from worship attendance of 300 to 3,000. The only difference is that it took 20 years to do what his father had done in five.

(As Dan Fogelberg once sang, “I am just a poor attempt to imitate the man.” Or more accurately, as the song concludes, “I am a living legacy to the leader of the band.”)

Nobody at Prince of Peace had any idea that Pastor Merv had these 10,000 hours of indelible experience in a growing church. And Pastor Merv had no idea his childhood would be formative in leading a congregation like Prince of Peace.

2. A Christian Ministry In the National Parks, 1964-1965

Then there’s Pastor Merv’s stint in the national parks. Student ministers and student workers were enlisted to provide spiritual resources to both employees and tourists, including weekend worship services.

What began as one summer was extended to 15 months, as the Thompsons ended up serving in the Grand Canyon, Shenandoah, the Florida Everglades, and Glacier National Parks. This experience couldn’t be replicated in a classroom, and provided a very unique 10,000 hours. Pastor Merv gleaned essential lessons from this program, and each of them would have significant bearing at Prince of Peace:

Worship and Music. There were almost no resources on which to draw. Everything had to be made up along the way. All of the usual accoutrements of Lutheran worship – stained-glass windows, hymnbooks, pipe organs, pews, pulpits, microphones, choirs, liturgy – were not present. Even receiving an offering was a challenge.

Since the offering was necessary to fund the ministry program, it was an essential part of the service. Pastor Merv initially collected offering after the sermon, where it fits liturgically as a response to the spoken word. However, one Sunday it started to rain just as the sermon began. Then it poured, and everyone in the campground scattered. That washout taught him to receive the offering at the beginning of the service in case the rains came.

Worship in the national parks had to be ecumenical, and there were very few Lutherans in attendance. Music had to be singable, accessible to even the least musically trained. Some of the worshippers returned again and again, but for most it was “one and done.” The only way to prepare for such worship was to accept the fact that people were coming from a wide range of religious traditions and from no tradition at all. Worship had to be planned for all (truly ALL) people, rather than becoming a holy huddle for life-long church goers.

Preaching. There is probably nothing quite as frightening for a rookie preacher than standing up in front of a bunch of strangers and trying to say something coherent. In one locale, the presiding Lutheran bishop would attend the park headquarters service with his family and spend the entire time looking out the window. Either he did not want to intimidate the young preacher, or he was bored out of his mind. And the preacher was totally intimidated.

But the only way to learn how to preach is to preach. No matter how bad the sermons are at the start, pastors have to be confident that they will get better. By the fourth national park, Pastor Merv could sense far more confidence in his preaching. (It was encouraging that his wife, Jackie, did not nod off.)

One lesson Pastor Merv learned was to do series preaching. He preached a series of sermons on the parables of Jesus, another on the miracles, another on the Sermon on the Mount. Even though the congregation changed dramatically week to week, series preaching kept Pastor Merv on task and created discipline in his study and preparation. Preaching 3- 4 sermons per week for 15 months felt like 10,000 hours!

Campground Calling. At the training session for those working in the parks' ministry, it was made very clear that unless the student ministry staff went out campground calling, very few people would show up for worship. Signs were not effective.

This meant that every Saturday afternoon Pastor Merv and Jackie would walk through the campgrounds, inviting people to church the next day. Not surprisingly, some people really did not want to see them, and some had huge dogs which threatened life and limb. Still others wanted to argue theology, or give testimony to bad experiences in churches.

Pastor Merv never forgot this lesson. During the first ten years at Prince of Peace, he would visit the majority of members and prospective new members in their homes. When the emergency calls came, he made it clear that the only proper response is to go, day or night, to visit. Eventually Pastor Richard Nelson took over much of that visitation.

One of the privileges and great responsibilities of being a pastor is access to people's home. Nobody else – government, schools, law enforcement, medical personnel – has that inherent opportunity. Most guests need an invitation. Pastors, on the other hand, can show up at a home when there is news of some kind of deep need: an illness, a death, a loss of job, etc. Calling in the campground were the 10,000 hours Pastor Merv needed to be ready to visit people in their homes and in hospitals and nursing homes.

Outdoor Worship. Most of the worship services in the national parks were held outdoors. There is just something about outdoor worship; it visually invokes the Creator God. Once a student minister has stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, or on the shores of Florida Bay gazing out at the Keys, or on the shores of McDonald Lake in Glacier looking up at the famed Garden Wall and Going-to-the-Sun Road, nothing ever will compare.

Winston Churchill once said, "People shape buildings, but ever after the buildings shape the people." Applying that statement to the outdoors, God has created the whole earth, and God shapes the people through nature. It is such a privilege to go outside for worship and say, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

It's no accident that as the Thompsons drove into Burnsville on Highway 13 for the first time in July, 1970, they went right past the imposing marquee of the Lucky-Twin Drive In Theater. This potential for outdoor worship was envisioned right from the beginning. Pastor Thompson's 10,000 hours of outdoor worship prepared the way for one of the most transformational moments in the history of Prince of Peace.

Victory Lutheran Church, 1966-1970. Pastor Merv served at Victory for 18 months as a youth director and pastoral assistant, three months as an associate pastor, and then almost three years as the senior pastor. The experience in those years was indispensable for effective leadership at Prince of Peace. It was truly a 10,000 hour marathon, learning the thousands of details, nuances and pitfalls that face ministry in a large congregation.

For example, in his first year of ministry, Pastor Merv had to officiate at 25 funerals, some of which were excruciatingly difficult. He had to participate in a building program, run stewardship campaigns, navigate the very difficult political waters of 1968 (including preaching the Sunday after Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, and when 4 students were killed at Kent State University.) He moved on from rookie status very quickly.

Soon after becoming senior pastor, Pastor Merv met with the worship committee to plan the next summer schedule. The leaders of the group had already decided that the church would cut back from three services to two in the summer and move the worship times earlier. The rationale for this was that everyone is gone in the summer, and those who are still home go on picnics.

Not surprisingly, attendance that summer dropped by half, and the only people at the 8:00 am worship service were the ushers, the organist, the pastor and a few elderly people who lived down the block. Those who went on picnics must have left early in the morning, because they were not in church.

Pastor Merv learned a lesson that he brought to Prince of Peace: Never cut back the number of worship services in the summer. Never move the times unless absolutely necessary; it can take up to two years to get used to new start times. Not everyone is out of town in the summer; people just don't like to put on Sunday clothes and sit inside on a beautiful day. Also, summer is the time when many new residents are visiting potential church homes. Why not show them your best, instead of an empty worship center?

Summary. Pastor Merv had no idea he was being prepared for this place or this ministry, but God is at work long before we are aware of it. By no means did Pastor Merv have it all together. He was a work in progress with a tendency to speak twice before thinking, and he helped create a small trickle of people who left the congregation to find more traditional churches.

But from the first Sunday of his ministry in the fall of 1970, Prince of Peace began a new trajectory that would continue for 20 years. All of the 10,000-hour experiences in his past were directly applicable to the vision and ministry of Prince of Peace. The Holy Spirit opened doors for the congregation no one had ever expected, and it certainly caught the wave.

The Holy Spirit Was Showing Up in Popular Culture

One of the advantages of looking back at the story of Prince of Peace 50 years later is that we can see how God was transforming the culture and the church. Remember that a seismic change happened in the late 1960s: the idea of Christianity as a dominant cultural center ended.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in that blaring heading on the cover of *Time* Magazine in 1966 which read “Is God Dead?” Was our particular way of being religious actually dead? Many people predicted the demise of the Christian church, predicted that the United States would follow Europe by turning churches into museums instead of worshipping communities. We were moving into a secularized America.

As Loren Mead described it, “clergy went from high status / low stress to high stress / low status.” Men studying for the Roman Catholic priesthood decreased from 60,000 to 6,000. Those who entered Luther Seminary in the early 1960s exited into a completely different world in the late 1960s. Almost no one was calling this period of history “the Day of the Lord.”

But during this time, four very powerful movements were at work demonstrating that God was very much alive:

1. The Evangelical Lutheran Church decides to embrace its name.

In 1947, in its post-war haste to become relevant in the newly emerging social order, the ELC decided to establish a Commission on Evangelism. The word “evangel” is a Greek word meaning “good news.” Evangelism is the method by which the good news of Jesus Christ is shared.

The chair of this commission was a professor at Luther Seminary named Dr. George Aus (remember that name). One of the goals of this ELC department was to give birth to hundreds of new congregations. Prince of Peace was one of these. At the same time, the department issued a challenge to the wider church to “raise up 50,000 evangelists” to carry out the great commission of making disciples.

In 1952 the department called the person who it believed could do the best job of raising these 50,000 evangelists and spreading the gospel of Jesus. His name was Conrad Thompson, Pastor Merv’s father, who you’ve read about already. Pastor Conrad was only 35 years old, much younger than his contemporaries, with only seven years of parish experience. But he had demonstrated an amazing gift for growing churches and he had a passion for evangelism that was contagious.

As described in the two-volume work entitled *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans*, written by Professor E. Clifford Nelson, Conrad Thompson took the Evangelical Lutheran Church by storm with a new program entitled “Preaching-Teaching-Reaching,” or PTR. One of the most outstanding evangelistic efforts of the commission, PTR was a congregation-centered, church-wide attempt to expand parish evangelism.

The plan required that congregations from three to 300, in a given area, unite in a simultaneous mission of preaching, teaching and reaching (visitation evangelism). Each participating congregation invited a guest preacher to conduct a preaching mission from Sunday to Thursday night for the purpose of deepening the spiritual life of believers and general evangelizing.

Some of the tangible fruits of the program have been a reexamination of the theology of evangelism, the establishing of the year-round programs of parish visitations, the enrollment of thousands of new members, and the growth of the Sunday schools and catechism classes.

As we've learned, Prince of Peace was a direct recipient of the Commission on Evangelism's attempt to give birth to hundreds of new congregations right after the war, leading the mission department of the ELC to purchase five acres of land in Burnsville and install a mission pastor. Without the abundant resources and evangelistic vision of the ELC, Prince of Peace would never have been given life. It was no accident that the two key figures here, Dr. George Aus and Dr. Conrad Thompson, would eventually be a part of the pastoral staff of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.

2. Elvis Presley appeared on the Ed Sullivan show in September of 1956. About 85% of all the TV sets in America were tuned in.

Noted author David Halberstam describes the impact of Elvis by quoting the words of Leonard Bernstein, the famous composer and conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra: *"Elvis Presley changed the beat of America. He is the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century. He introduced the beat to everything and he changed everything: music, language, clothes. It's a whole new social revolution."*

Once again, it's very helpful to study history decades later, when it becomes clear that the musical revolution was not initiated by Elvis Presley, but by countless numbers of African American artists, dating back to the blues and the music of the Black church. Elvis himself admitted that what he was doing was primarily singing Black music.

It took many years for the changing beat of music to make it into the churches, but one of the most poignant responses to post-Christendom was the transformation of church music.

Donald Miller, Professor of Religion at the University of Southern California, documents in his book, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, how new religious movements throughout history have often been accompanied by new musical traditions.

For instance, during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, people were introduced to congregational singing for the first time. Martin Luther led the way in changing the musical style used in worship. Luther was so radical that he used music which had been previously identified with secular

society. In fact, it was Luther who coined the memorable phrase, “If music is the handmaiden of theology, why should the devil have all the good tunes?”

Historian Nathan Hatch describes how musical tastes changed almost overnight during the Great Awakening in the early 19th century. A whole groundswell of self-made songwriters, indifferent to authorized hymnody, created their own simple verses and set them to rousing popular tunes. This was especially popular within Methodism, led by John and Charles Wesley, who adapted everyday language and music that was accessible to all social classes.

Hatch said the new music came from camp meetings, where the music tended to be more expressive than traditional church music. Except for the content of the lyrics, Hatch writes, worshippers might have easily thought that these songs were coming from a tavern.

Hatch went on to write that *“Methodist revivalism removed elitist constraints on music by accepting spontaneous songs, exuberant shouting and unrestrained music enthusiasm as natural to a vibrant spiritual community. Indigenous music seemed to break out in the most unlikely places, the most important words and songs for worship no longer came from theologians or educated clergy.”*

Likewise, during the advent of post-Christendom in the 1960s and 1970s, new Christian music was created. It was now literally marching to a different drummer. One commentator summed up the change this way: *“The new music became the drumbeat of social liberation and unfettered joy, neither of which were much valued in the edifices of Christendom.”* This kind of music would appear early in the 1970s at Prince of Peace.

The first signs of the change in Christian music came with folk music. The second folk revival took place in the late 1950s, led by the Kingston Trio, and eventually peaking with Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, and Simon and Garfunkel. Churches wanting to change the beat of worship started with folk music. It was mostly white music, mostly without drums, easily led by someone playing a guitar. Early favorite songs included *Kum Ba Ya*, *Pass It On*, and *They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love*.

The peak of folk music in the Lutheran church happened in 1970 during the National Youth Convention held at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

More than 15,000 students rolled into the city from Lutheran churches all over the nation humming the strains of the conference theme song, *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*. They were inspired by the appearances of folk music royalty, Pete Seeger and Lutheran John Ylvisaker.

During the school year of 1970-1971, Prince of Peace offered folk music at the 11:00 am service, led by teenagers Karen Haglof and Sara McDonald. While it was out of some peoples' comfort zones, it still had no electric guitars, keyboards or drums. While the music was labeled "contemporary," it would have a very short shelf life. But it provided a transition from singing out of the hymnbook to the coming musical revolution.

3. The Jesus People Revolution.

The Jesus People Revolution was a counter-cultural religious movement that blended Christian faith with elements of youth culture, marked by a rejection of the status quo and a desire for a society based in peace and justice. It began in the late 1960s and early 1970s in southern California.

Some of the leaders of the new movement were among the youth culture which "did not trust anyone over the age of 30." This movement was focused on challenging young people to reject vices and accept Jesus as a personal savior outside of religious structures.

This movement did not embrace folk music. Instead, it took rock and roll music and added Christian words. The influencers of this new music were not the folk music artists such as Seeger and Ylvisaker, but rhythm and blues singers such as Mahalia Jackson, Chuck Berry, Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin.

The defining moment for the Jesus People musical revolution took place in an event called Explo 72, held in Dallas, Texas, in July. Temps were 100 degrees, but close to 100,000 people flocked to the event anyway, including future Prince of Peace organist Kathy Hanson. The music was very different from a folk music concert. It was all-out rock and roll, led by Love Song. Johnny Cash was a soloist, and the event featured Billy Graham as preacher. The people at this rally were proclaiming that God was very much alive.

This new musical style would become foundational at Prince of Peace beginning with the outdoor services in 1972.

4. *Concordia College Revival.*

Sometime during the 1960s, just about the time that people were questioning whether God was dead, a revival started on Lutheran college campuses. There seemed to be no national leader, no particular emphasis on the newly-merged American Lutheran Church, no coordinated movement among college leaders. It just happened; the Holy Spirit showed up.

The most visible form of the movement was found in the dozens of gospel groups which went out to nearby Lutheran congregations to share the good news. Much of the presentation was focused on contemporary music and testimonies from students. Of course, the best way to grow in faith is to share it, and many students found a passion for evangelism and new music.

This student movement was extremely popular at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. By the early 1970s there were more than 200 students involved in evangelistic outreach through gospel teams. On campus, Bible study and prayer groups were ubiquitous.

According to the book, *Fifty Thousand Evangelists: Lutheran Youth in the Jesus Revolution*, the two most important leaders of this Holy Spirit revival were religion professor Pastor Art Grimstad and student Walt Kallestad (remember that name).

During his first year at Concordia, 1966-67, Walt Kallestad organized a group to go out and share the gospel with local congregations and youth gatherings. During the summer of 1967, he was invited by Lutheran Youth Encounter to lead a traveling gospel group. Returning to Concordia for his sophomore and junior years, he helped Grimstad organize more outreach teams.

During the following school year, Walt organized a “supergroup” called the Earthrise Singers, which was enlisted by the evangelism department of the ALC, led by (you guessed it!) Conrad Thompson. They traveled the world, appearing at local congregations, conferences, rallies, and conventions.

Of course Pastor Conrad encouraged his son, Pastor Merv, to invite the Earthrise Singers to lead a Sunday morning worship at his congregation in north Minneapolis. This introduction of Walt Kallestad and Pastor Merv would have profound implications for the future of Prince of Peace.

When Walt returned to Concordia for his senior year, he partnered with another musical group called “The Real Thing,” led by a young man named Handt Hanson. (Remember that name!)

Eventually, the stirrings of the Holy Spirit at Concordia during the 1960s and the 1970s would touch the lives of many future staff members of Prince of Peace, including Pastor Merv Thompson, Walt Kallestad, Handt and Kathy Hanson, Paul Murakami, Wayne and Arlene Skaff, and Terri Martinson Elton.

It would also flow through Mike and Sally Householder, now leading the largest Lutheran church in the country, Lutheran Church of Hope in West Des Moines, where Pastor Merv has served as a Teaching Pastor from 2003 to 2026. All of this was a direct result of the Holy Spirit revival at Concordia College.

5. The Mega-Church Movement.

As the country entered into a period of decreasing religion, bigger became popular. We had bigger stores, bigger malls, bigger stadiums, bigger schools, and, incidentally, larger congregations. At the beginning of the 1970s there were only about a dozen very large congregations in America. That would mushroom to over 1,300 in 40 years.

A mega-church is usually defined as a congregation which has a worship attendance average of 1,800 to 2,000 people on a weekend. At one time the definition centered around membership statistics, but since congregations have a wide variety of ways of counting members, those numbers became increasingly unreliable. The only certain measurement of the size of a congregation is the number of people who show up for worship. All of this counting would change as online opportunities opened up.

Two mega-churches dominated the Twin Cities during the 1950s and 1960s. One of these was an evangelical church, First Covenant, in downtown Minneapolis. During this period it was the gathering point for large numbers of evangelicals and many mainline adherents, as well. The senior pastor, Dr. Paul Rees, was a powerful voice for evangelism. He was the President of the National Association of Evangelicals and a close associate of Billy Graham.

The other mega-church was Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church, located on 50th Street in south Minneapolis. The Mt. Olivet senior pastor, Dr. Rueben Youngdahl, had a passion for reaching the “unchurched” and grew the congregation from just a few members to more than 10,000. Mt. Olivet gained notoriety by offering seven or eight worship services at Christmas and Easter. In addition, they owned the very influential Cathedral of the Pines Bible Camp on the north shore of Minnesota, where thousands of young people were inspired.

Within Lutheranism, congregations reporting more than 1,000 people regularly in worship were often described as mega-churches. A report in the 2012 ELCA Yearbook shows Prince of Peace as one of these:

Name of Congregation	Location	Worship Attendance	Baptized Members
Lutheran Church of Hope	West Des Moines, IA	8,742	12,240
Mt. Olivet	Minneapolis, MN	5,900	14,652
Hope Lutheran	Fargo, ND	2,289	11,152
Shepherd of Valley	Apple Valley, MN	2,039	9,198
Lord of Life	Maple Grove, MN	1,926	7,829
St. Andrews	Mahtomedi, MN	1,894	8,578
St. Phillip the Deacon	Plymouth, MN	1,820	4,929
Bethlehem Lutheran	Minneapolis, MN	1,651	3,776
Sheridan Lutheran	Lincoln, NE	1,516	3,940
Our Saviors Lutheran	Mesa, AZ	1,464	1,767
Good Shepherd	Naperville, IL	1,450	4,080
Prince of Peace	Burnsville, MN	1437	7,022

Of course, covid has changed everything. Often the numbers worshipping online may equal the numbers of those worshipping in person, but it is almost impossible to tell. We may have to find different ways to identify megachurches in the future.

Prince of Peace – A 1970 Snapshot

After six years of ministry, Prince of Peace was at a crossroads. It had just experienced the rather traumatic disruption of having two senior pastors come and leave in six years. It had a warehouse-style building with a leaky roof, and a parking lot which was getting more dangerous to access and depart all the time due to increased traffic.

The leadership had no clear idea about what to do next. A recent pact between all Lutheran denominations had agreed that no congregation would move unless agreed on by all the Lutheran congregations in the area. The American Lutheran Church was consistent in telling church leaders that they could not move. There was a Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod congregation on County Road 42, and any move by Prince of Peace would undoubtedly mean moving closer to Redeemer Lutheran.

But then one day the ALC mission director called Pastor Merv and said that if Prince of Peace defied the wishes of the ALC and moved, the ALC would like to purchase the church and five-acre lot that Prince of Peace would be vacating. It was an incredibly shocking request.

Pastor Merv, speaking on behalf of the church council, pointed out two serious problems with this proposal. The first was that Prince of Peace needed to sell the building and land at market value in order to finance the new church, which would be many times the original price paid for the site.

Second, it would be foolhardy for the ALC to plant a new congregation just a few blocks from one of the fastest-growing churches in the denomination. Maybe this new mission could advertise itself as a return to traditional Lutheranism, compared to Prince of Peace's new worship and music, but there were already several traditional Lutheran congregations in the community.

In the end, it took just one Sunday experience to prove that a move was necessary. Just as the early service was ending, there were long lines of people waiting in the eight-foot-wide hallways to attend the next service. Suddenly, people could not move forward or backwards, anyone who was claustrophobic would have been traumatized. With the expectation of significant growth on the horizon, this situation was no longer tolerable. Prince of Peace simply had to move, ALC opposition or not.

There were many questions. What was scripture telling us to do? Where do we believe God is leading us? Who makes the decision about whether or not we move? Why is this so difficult? Maybe some people were whispering, “We brought in this new senior pastor, why can’t he figure this out?”

We needed a new vision. We needed a miracle. We needed to discover God’s preferred vision.

Someone once said, “We are just one new idea away from transformation.” Five new ideas might just change the world.

And suddenly, without warning, without anticipation, without any actions on our part, the Spirit moved. Five new visions came to us in a very short time, and these would be among the most transformational ideas ever to be incorporated into a congregation.

Vision One: High School Performing Group.

Early in 1971, the phone rang in Pastor Merv’s office. The voice at the other end of the line said, “Hi, Merv. You have never met me, but my name is Ernie Mancini.” Mancini, a pastor in Benson, MN, went on to explain that he had created a high school singing group of 120 kids called the Koinonia Singers. He asked if Prince of Peace would host a concert of his group. The answer: “Of course, but we don’t have enough space. Let’s see if we can rent the auditorium in a junior high.”

The concert was fabulous. The kids sang mostly contemporary Christian music and included choreography, instrumentation, and tons of enthusiasm and movement. Pastor Merv kept thinking throughout the entire concert, “If Ernie could do that in Benson, why couldn’t we do it in Burnsville? We have far more kids in high school. All we would need is the right leader.”

This was a signature moment in the history of the congregation. Once we found the right leaders, our numbers would explode. More than 300 high school students participated in our First Light group. When it was incorporated into the Sounds Like Love weekends, the numbers swelled to beyond 1,000.

In his signature book entitled *Twelve Keys To An Effective Church*, Kennon Callahan wrote that one of the surest ways to increase worship attendance is to build up the music program. He wrote that every person engaged in music during the worship service tends to bring three more people with them. In other words, if a church wants to increase its worship attendance by 100, just involve about 33 people in music. Imagine what happens to a church if its high school singing group has 300 students!

Pastor Mancini was a part of that movement of the Holy Spirit at Concordia College described earlier. He experienced the gospel groups and the power of new music. Later, he would return to Concordia as campus pastor and director of alumni relations. When he died recently, Pastor Merv sent a letter to his family describing how Pastor Mancini changed the trajectory of Prince of Peace in 1971.

Vision Two: Prince of Peace Nursery School.

During the 1970-71 school year, the Burnsville school district rented space at Prince of Peace for kindergarten classes because they were not able to keep up with the rapid growth in student population. However, in the spring of 1971 the district no longer need these classrooms because several of their own new buildings would be opening that fall.

A few days after this announcement went public, Kathy Peterson, who had been a member of the call committee, had an idea. Since the classrooms would now be empty during the school week, she wanted to establish the Prince of Peace Nursery School for preschool children.

This request was quickly approved by the church council and everyone thought this idea was the perfect use of our facility and our name. We soon learned that there was a huge demand for nursery school classes in the community, including in the Thompson family. Kathy Peterson worked with a leadership team to develop a structure, curriculum, and calendar.

Her initial teaching roster was made up of all church members: Director Kathy Peterson, Teachers Pat Elton, Adele Eidsness, Carol Milbraith, Jackie Thompson, Shirley Nordin, Mary Kallestad. The first classes began in the fall of 1971 with forty students, quickly growing to sixty students.

Once the school was established, Kathy Peterson retired and Audrey Bergquist was selected to take her place, along with Bonnie Wedger Green and Kathy Anderson. The program quickly outgrew our tiny facility on the corner of Nicollet and Burnsville Crosstown and moved across the street to Diamondhead Mall. This initial nursery school would soon grow into the much-acclaimed Child Development and Learning Center (CDLC), eventually enrolling more than 300 students per year.

Most children who enrolled in CDLC were not members of Prince of Peace when they began. But when their families started looking for Sunday school, they chose the place where they already had positive experiences and a foundation of trust. Prince of Peace has never had a more effective evangelism program than CDLC.

On the first Monday in January each year, when enrollment would begin for the following fall, Pastor Merv could look out his window and see long lines of parents waiting to register their children. In January it was often bitterly cold, and every attempt was made to get those lines moved into the warmth of the building. Registration was all filled up by noon on that Monday, and a long waiting list was developed. CDLC caught the wave of thousands of preschool children moving into the community and found the perfect way to reach out to them with love. It was just one more transformational idea.

Vision Three: Bethel Bible Series.

Most new congregations offered little or no adult education. Almost all of the staff time and energy was devoted to children and youth ministry. Circles, organized by the American Lutheran Church Women, often included Bible studies, but there was nothing similar for men.

Into this void came a new transformational Bible study called the Bethel Bible Series, offered by Bethel Lutheran Church in Madison, Wisconsin. This major in-depth Bible study program, praised by both seminary professors and parish pastors, was developed by a single congregation. Leaders at Prince of Peace would emulate this later by developing several church-wide initiatives.

Prince of Peace committed early to the Bethel Bible Series, sending Pastor Merv to a two-week training session in Madison in June of 1971. A very intensive two-year program was launched.

The structure called for pastors to recruit around 15 highly-committed members of the congregation who would be willing to follow a rigid regimen of study, memorization, class attendance and accountability to each other. After the two years, these 15 now-Biblical-scholars would serve as teachers and mentors for hundreds of people in the congregation.

Pastor Merv and all of Prince of Peace were richly blessed by those who volunteered to be a part of the teacher phase, people who were willing to go far beyond the expected work to truly experience the width and depth and new life of the scriptures. This first group included Bob Nordin, Bob Hoff, Arlyn and Judy Kettner, Warren Eidsness, Bob and Amy Brower, Les Anderson, Dan Bocklund, Lowell Qualley, Judith Horst, Jackie Thompson, Marlys Shelton, Mary Kallestad, and Laurretta Anderson.

During the next phase, some 160 people registered to be a part of this study. Pastor Andy Jensen would then repeat process two years later, spending the time with a core group of about 15 and then opening it up to the congregation. Biblical literacy increased many-fold, and it helped Prince of Peace Lutheran Church grow not only larger, but also deeper.

Vision Four: Outdoor Worship.

When the idea of hosting an outdoor worship service in the summer was first raised at a church council meeting, it did not receive a standing ovation. Although the group was willing to give the new senior pastor some slack, this seemed like a bridge too far. The proposed site for the worship – the Lucky Twin Drive-In-Theater – did not have a sterling reputation, judging by the often racy movie titles that were displayed on the marquee.

But Pastor Merv had arguments in favor of this idea. First, the youth will love not having to dress up and sit in a hot worship center. Second, the theater charged only \$20 a week for someone to come and open up the projection booth and sound system. (Of course no one told them that Prince of Peace would be bringing in an entire band to lead the service.)

So with endorsement from the church council, the team set out to learn everything they could about other models of outdoor services. Two letters were sent to congregations in South Dakota and northern Minnesota who

advertised outdoor service, asking for advice and counsel. Both congregations responded very graciously with helpful hints.

A third letter was sent to a nationally-known church in California called Garden Grove Community Church, later known as the Crystal Cathedral, which was beginning to televise outdoor services. But instead of a letter, Pastor Merv received a brochure advertising a leadership conference at the church. He was less than enthused by this response, but the council leaders strongly encouraged him to attend.

Participating in that conference with its large outdoor worship service was very instructive. On one hand, Pastor Merv was not enthralled with the idea of setting up hundreds of folding chairs outside the church, filled with people wearing mostly Sunday clothes. He had memories of the national parks' outdoor services, where people brought lawn chairs and dressed very informally. But on the other hand, he could see the amazing possibilities of being outside on a beautiful summer day, truly celebrating God the Creator.

At the end of the day, the same challenge that faced the development of a high school singing group also faced the idea of outdoor worship: it was absolutely necessary to have someone on the staff to organize and lead this ministry. Whenever you are doing something that has never, or hardly ever, been done, you need to choose the leader with the utmost care. That was the challenge of 1971.

Vision Five: Relocation.

Prince of Peace was gathering ideas but still making no progress in determining the new location for the congregation. Nobody in leadership had ever moved a church before, and we had no premonition about where the best place would be. All we knew was that it was complicated. We could have used full-time staff just to coordinate the relocation efforts, but we had nobody.

Then Howard Knutson came to the rescue. Howard was a Minnesota State Representative, soon to be elected State Senator, who would become the most important person in navigating the next phase of the congregation development. In 1971 he recommended to the council that we hire a consulting firm to do the research needed to make a decision about moving.

He had worked with Gene Sylvester Associates before in his volunteer work, and believed they could do a very competent job for us. The church council approved the princely sum of \$6,000 to hire them.

We were just coming out of the 1960s, when the entire country's DNA had changed. While hundreds of churches in the 1950s had launched into a huge building programs, by now the emphasis had shifted to pouring money and energy into ministry to people who were disenfranchised and marginalized. Our project was more difficult to begin in this time.

The most famous book of the time was Gibson Winter's *The Suburban Captivity Of The Church*, which strongly argued that churches should get out of the building business. One idea floating around Prince of Peace was to somehow partner with the proposed Burnsville Center. The church could construct some office and classroom space adjacent to the center, then use the large mall on Sunday mornings for worship. Schmidt Music might even roll out an organ for us to use.

This idea was complicated. The congregation would be moving much closer to another Lutheran congregation, Holy Cross Lutheran. It would jump a freeway and move into a completely different community from where most of its members lived. But with multi-purpose space being the mantra of the day, this idea did have some appeal. At its best, it would avoid the need for huge fundraising campaigns.

But the consulting firm went in a completely different direction. They soon learned that Fairview Hospital was purchasing a 120-acre site just ten blocks south of Prince of Peace's location at a site called the Ridges. Future plans for that site included completing a half-finished nursing home in cooperation with Ebenezer, then also building a hospital, some medical clinics, housing for the elderly and a YMCA.

But the shocking news relayed to the congregation was that Fairview wanted to have a church in the middle of this development, and they were very interested in Prince of Peace being that church. We were stunned! Adding to the implausibility of this idea, Fairview was willing to give the church the best acreage on the entire site, right in the middle, on the highest hill. Everything a growing church could want: visibility, accessibility, surplus parking.

Some years later the congregation was considering future development and an architectural firm was hired to do site planning. Their report claimed without equivocation that the location of Prince of Peace was “the finest site for a church the firm had ever encountered.” Amen, and amen.

What makes this such a God-thing is that there was not one person at Prince of Peace who had envisioned such an idea, or had ever even thought about it. Of course, this meant that Prince of Peace was going to have construct bigger buildings than it ever envisioned, and raise far more money. We had no idea how we were going to be able to accomplish that. We prayed a lot.

Walt Kallestad – Youth Director

As Prince of Peace began to envision outdoor worship service and a high school singing group, the challenge was finding the right person to lead these new initiatives. Pastor Merv reached out to Walt Kallestad, who was now a recent graduate from Concordia College, to see if he might be interested.

Walt was ready to settle down in one locale and raise a family, so the Kallestads arrived in September of 1971. Walt took over youth ministry and his wife, Mary, taught part-time at the nursery school and became a part of the Bethel Bible Series teacher training.

Hiring Walt Kallestad was one of the signature events in the history of Prince of Peace. He brought to the congregation and community his extensive experience in evangelistic ministry – reflecting the Jesus People Revolution, the evangelism department’s goal of raising up 50,000 evangelists, and the gospel teams at Concordia College. Little did any of us anticipate the seismic impact he would have.

The Lucky Twin Drive-In Theater

Once Walt Kallestad was on board, planning began for outdoor worship services in the summer of 1972. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their book *Nudge* describe an effective leader as a “choice architect.” Such a choice

architect has to plan the social architecture, the spiritual architecture, the emotional architecture, and the physical architecture that will most enhance the stated goal.

Walt Kallestad had spent his 10,000 hours in orchestrating worship and musical venues, offering concerts in almost every type of venue. While the Lucky-Twin Drive-In had specific challenges, the idea of planning worship in such a setting was not a daunting task.

The first thing that Walt recommended was that we bring a band to lead the worship outdoors. He recommended a group he had performed with at Concordia College named The Real Thing, led by his good friend Handt Hanson. Pastor Merv pointed out repeatedly that the church did not have any funding for such a band.

But Walt had an indomitable spirit, he continued to insist that if we ask the congregation members to just give a little more during the summer, they would more than pay for the band. In addition, he would find The Real Thing other places to perform and earn money, as well. Pastor Merv was more than skeptical, as constant fund appeals often resulted in diminishing returns. Yet Walt prevailed, and the band was invited to spend the summer at Prince of Peace.

A month or so before the outdoor services were to begin, Pastor Merv wrote the following letter to the members of Prince of Peace. It was an attempt to get everyone on board for this radical new idea:

HELP! With summer approaching, dwindling worship attendance, and a general lack of interest seem to be in the forecast for every church or church-related organization. All across the nation we hear the cry, HELP! Out of a desire to try and eliminate the "summer slump," the Youth Committee of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Burnsville, Mn., has commissioned seven young men from Concordia College in Moorhead, Mn., to give a "shot in the arm" to Burnsville and the surrounding communities.

These seven men comprise a group called The Real Thing. Besides running a drive-in church at the Lucky Twin Drive In Theater, the group will also be involved with a camping program which brings together four churches in the Burnsville area. Hoping to involve all of Burnsville in some form or another,

the group has been challenged by the youth committee to seek out every new means to communicate the gospel to people in all walks of life; to the churchd as well as to the unchurched. An exciting summer is in store.

The group hails from Moorhead, Mn. where all of the young men attended Concordia College at one time or another. Four members of the group have completed their college education and hold their degrees. The other members are completing their education in their respective fields. Having earlier roots in the Christian Outreach Team movement at Concordia, the group has branched off into what has been found to be a very unique kind of ministry.

They combine the wealth of experience compiled over several years of youth work with a high caliber musical and verbal presentation. Their musical versatility has allowed them to perform in a great variety of settings, ranging from the local Fire Hall in Nebraska to a church in Melodyland in Los Angeles.

They performed at the Homecoming concert for Burnsville High School, the LEM convention in the Minneapolis Armory, the Rotary Club in Green Bay, WI, and numerous radio and TV appearances. From Wisconsin to California, The Real Thing has shared the hopes, joys and trials of their relationship to Jesus Christ. To put it plainly: MUSIC IS THEIR MEDIUM, CHRIST IS THEIR MESSAGE.

Choice Architecture of Outdoor Worship

The normal worship schedule at Prince of Peace in 1971-72 was two worship services: 9:00 and 11:00 am, with Sunday School in between. When we decided to add an outdoor worship service, the logical result was to drop one of the indoor services. But Pastor Merv remembered the picnic lesson from Victory Lutheran: never decrease the number of worship services. Only increase them.

So a schedule was devised for the summer of 1972, offering 9:00 and 11:00 am services indoors, and 10:00 am outdoors. This meant that the preaching pastor, who in those days was almost always Pastor Merv, would begin at the worship center on the corner of Burnsville Crosstown and Nicollet Avenue, dressed in his robe. As soon as the final hymn bag, he would hurry to his office, take off the robe, get in his car and drive the six blocks down Nicollet Avenue to the drive-in theater.

By then, the outdoor service had already started, with the opening music well underway. When the sermon time came, Pastor Merv climbed to the top of the projection booth and preached. As soon as the sermon was over, he got back into his car, hurried back to the church, put his robe back on and led the 11:00 service. This would prepare him for a later, crazier time when the church would have two services off-site.

Part of social architecture that the worship planners at Prince of Peace wanted was a “come as you are” atmosphere. Most people in that era had grown up in families and churches where “Sunday best” attire was expected. Saturday night was often bath night, and then Sunday morning the children and adults put on clean dress-up clothes. Worship planners hoped to relax that structure.

Worship planners also hoped to relax the mood of worship. At that time, people were generally expected to be quiet and reverent when they entered a worship space, sitting still and listening to the prelude. Loud exclamations were frowned upon. Could attendance have dropped off so precipitously in the summer because people did not feel like dressing up and sitting quietly when the sun was beckoning them – and their voices – outside?

We wanted people to wear whatever clothing was the most comfortable for them. We wanted people to greet each other enthusiastically, with shouts and hugs and laughter. This church has always been a place where God’s love is demonstrative, where we take seriously the words we say at the beginning of each worship service: “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Even in the rain. Because the existential question that everyone asked about outdoor worship was, of course, “What will do if it rains?” Indeed, weather is always unpredictable. We finally decided to borrow Bob Hoff’s truck, the same truck used to deliver kitchen cabinets, desks and other furniture during the week. It was at least 25-30 feet long.

Sure enough, when it did rain (more than once) that first summer, the seven members of The Real Thing crowded into the truck alongside Walt and Pastor Merv. The sound system carried the music and spoken words all the way to the speakers which hung on the windows of each car in the parking lot. This new way of worshipping worked surprisingly well, and everyone present had the feeling that they were part of history.

Opening Day, Drive-in Worship, June 4, 1972

The senior choir was asked to sing on opening day, as well as the children's choir, even though there was no capacity to adequately mic them. Choir members, council members and staff were all asked to drive separate cars so it would look like there was a substantial crowd. The need to do this was short-lived; there were soon much larger crowds outdoors than indoors.

The following is a summary of the first outdoor worship, written primarily by Walt Kallestad and Handt Hanson:

Music: *Little Country Church, The Real Thing*

(In some ways this song became the theme song for outdoor worship in the beginning. The words are especially illustrative of the tenor of the times.)

*Little country church on the edge of town, Doo-do-do-do-do-do.
People coming everyday from miles around,
for meetings and for Sunday School.
And its very plain to see, its not the way it used to be.*

*Preacher isn't talking about religion no more,
he just wants to praise the Lord.
People aren't as stuffy as they were before,
they just want to praise the Lord.
And its very plain to see, its not the way it used to be.*

*They're talking about revival and the need for love,
that little church has come alive,
working with each other for the common good,
putting all the past aside.*

*Long hair, short hair, some coats and ties,
people finally coming around,
looking past the hair and straight into the eyes.
People finally coming around,
and its very plain to see, its not the way it used to be.*

Leader: Today is the day the Lord has made. We invite you to join us, and one another, in rejoicing and being glad in it. Welcome to the first day of the rest of your life. Come! Celebrate! Rejoice!

Lord, open our hearts and our minds to receive life as full as possible. Let's let go of all inhibitions and formalities. We are gathered here to raise our voices in songs, speaking, and responses—to offer thanks and praise to our Lord.

People: O Lord, you set us free to be ourselves and that's what we offer right now—ourselves! As you see me now, Lord, this is me!

Music: *Day By Day*, The Real Thing and the congregation

*O dear Lord, three things I pray,
to see thee more clearly,
to love thee more dearly,
and to follow thee more nearly,
Day by day.*

Scripture Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Leader: Lord, help me to relate to the parable of the rich man and the poor man.

People: I don't want to make the mistake that the rich man did, but I must admit that I can't even begin to count the number of times I have done the same.

Leader: Christ, You, Yourself, said that if I wish to come after you, I must deny myself and take up my cross the follow you.

People: You even said that if I wanted to save my life then I have to lose it; and if I should happen to lose my life for your sake or for the gospel's, I shall have saved it.

Leader: I must agree with you Lord, that it would not be worth it to gain the whole world if I lose my soul in the process. (Mark 8:34-36)

Exaudi Choir: Come, Lord Jesus

Message: Pastor Thompson

Senior Choir: Come the Day

Leader: Father, I should be able to find you in this world at all times and in all places.

People: But sometimes, I can't even see past the end of my nose, or past the windshield of my car.

Leader: I am not isolated from this world, and neither are you.

People: God, You live among us and make Yourself quite apparent to us in our lives through your people, by your Word, and fulfillment of your Word.

Offering of Gifts: *Only Living Boy*, The Real Thing

Leader: Before I leave, Lord, let me review what has been said to me here this morning.

People: Let me look at my situation using your value system.

Leader: I asked God for strength that I might achieve.

People: I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

Leader: I asked for health that I might do greater things.

People: I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

Leader: I asked for riches that I might be happy.

People: I was given poverty that I might be wise.

Leader: I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.

People: I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God.

Leader: I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.

People: I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

Leader: I got nothing I asked for—but everything I had hoped for.

People: Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.

Leader and People: I am, among all peoples, most richly blessed.

Leader: I am really excited to realize that you're the one in command and have a better understanding of me that I never have had.

People: I can leave now, rejoicing because my life—my hopes, my plans, joys, sorrows, anxieties—everything, are in your hands. I'm not sure of what to do with them, but you've been taking care of them all along. Thank you, Lord. Thank you.

Benediction: *Day By Day*, The Real Thing

The outdoor worship services evolved over the first summer, as the staff and the musicians learned what was most effective. We discovered the best ways to serve Holy Communion, and to create fellowship opportunities. As the summer progressed, more and more people would get out of their cars, grab a lawn chair and come and sit on the grassy area. Soon a stage was built where the band could play, and people could sit closer to it.

This outdoor worship service began to create a buzz throughout the larger community. It seemed like everyone was talking about it. Neighborhood gatherings would often share stories of this service. Media outlets wanted to do features on this new idea, and a TV truck would sometimes show up on Sundays to film.

The following is a very positive review of the outdoor worship service by the local Sun Newspaper. (Churches rarely get positive reviews; the only time they generally make news is when there is some kind of scandal.)

UNIQUE SERVICE HELD AT DRIVE-IN THEATER

People of all faiths and all denominations have participated with enthusiasm in a new worship experience recently introduced to the Burnsville area. Sponsored by Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, the service begins each Sunday at 10 am at the Lucky Twin Drive-In Theater, led by a Christian musical group, The Real Thing.

The seven young men, who have taken up summer residence in the area, provide all the music and a portion of the message, along with Walt Kallestad and Pastor Merv Thompson. The atmosphere is casual, with worshippers seated in their cars or on the ground, but the services offer an up-to-date, respectful, and extremely exciting approach to worship and the Lord.

Although response to the invitation to worship outdoors has been outstanding, acres of parking are available at the Lucky Twin and many more can be accommodated. Residents of the entire Minnesota Valley area are urged to join their neighbors in this unique worship experience. The service begins each Sunday at 10 am. Try it ... you'll like it!"

In retrospect, Walt Kallestad was absolutely correct. Members and guests were more than willing to give “a little extra” during the summer to fund the leadership of The Real Thing. In fact, a final summary details how the congregation gave an extra \$3,000 designated toward the seven young men, which translates into about \$23,250 in 2025 dollars. Very generous!

On the final weekend of the summer, a special fundraiser for The Real Thing was held on the grounds of the Prince of Peace facility. Here was the advertisement:

WOULD YOU KNOW THE REAL THING IF YOU SAW IT?

Come to the Farewell Fair and see, meet and hear it.

At Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

Saturday, August 26, 1972 | 10:00 am to 5:00 pm

Concerts presented by The Real Thing at 11:00 am, 3:00 pm, 7:00 pm

Coffee Bar, BBQ, Popcorn, Car Wash, Bake Sale, Games for Young and Old

After all was said and done, another \$600 was raised for the group, which in 2025 dollars would be \$4,455. Quite a successful day.

By the end of the 1972 summer worship schedule, many people expressed the hope that Prince of Peace would continue to offer contemporary Christian worship, exuding joy and celebration and community. But due to the wind chill factor in Minnesota, outdoor worship would not thrive in November. It would take us another year to figure out how to extend the summer experience.

1972-1973 School Year

We moved back inside and decided to continue three services on Sundays, with a permanent schedule of 8:45, 10:00 and 11:15 am. We attempted to make the 11:15 service more contemporary, but it was mostly led by a couple of guitars played by high school students. We should have found a way to retain Handt Hanson during that period of time, even if the rest of The Real Thing moved on, but we did not have any money in the budget for this hire.

Handt and some others from the band relocated in Moorhead, where they connected with Trinity Lutheran Church, just down the street from Concordia. They proceeded to develop a youth choir with over 100 voices involved, exactly what we wanted to do at Prince of Peace. They also operated a coffee house at the church which welcomed hundreds of teenagers for music and community. In addition, they started a dozen or more Bible studies in local junior and senior high schools. Moorhead's gain, our loss.

When the outdoor service came around in 1973, Handt and his band were not available. Instead we hired a couple of musicians who played guitars and sang, and Walt led the services. The worship had almost none of the energy or fun quotient which had been present a year earlier, and we certainly took a step backwards. We continued to wonder if we could get Handt Hanson to come back again, but we had no budget for this.

1973-1974 School Year: Three World-Class Hires

A Church is only as effective as the quality of its staff. As we reached the middle of summer in 1973, we had no plans to hire anyone new and we had no money. But all of a sudden three world-class leaders were available for hire. Even though we had to scramble to find ways to pay for them, we thought they were absolutely essential to our vision. It is impossible to overestimate their impact on the congregation and the ALC at large – such huge personalities and ministries.

Handt Hanson.

Handt was the most important hire in the history of Prince of Peace. After a summer of floundering a bit, it became clear to Pastor Merv and to Walt Kallestad that only Handt could carry out the two transforming ideas we had been advocating, the high school singing group and the innovations of contemporary Christian worship. We discovered that Walt was more like the lead singer, and Handt was more like the leader of the band.

One week after Handt married Kathy, they were at Prince of Peace for an interview. Walt had just been offered a part-time job at Burnsville High School as activities director, he suggested we take the money he was to be paid and

direct it to Handt. Walt also lined up some junior high lunchroom duties, which paid a small amount. Handt also gave guitar lessons. All of this piecemeal. Then the church organist resigned, and Kathy was hired as his replacement.

Handt would continue on the staff of Prince of Peace for more than 40 years. A pivotal event happened several years later when he was named the Director of Worship and Music. He became the choice architect for the First Light Singing Group, the Sounds Like Love Extravaganza, the outdoor worship services and the Christmas festivals. A testimony to the width and breadth of Handt and Kathy's influence at Prince of Peace, their son-in-law Paul Dean was called to be the senior pastor in 2023.

Dr. George Aus.

George Aus was the most prominent evangelist in the history of the Lutheran Church. He served as a professor at Luther Seminary from 1939 – 1973, and even today the seminary has annual Aus Lectures, focusing on evangelism. As mentioned previously, when the Evangelical Lutheran Church established a commission on evangelism in 1947, Dr. Aus was the logical selection as chair. He was very influential in the hiring of Conrad Thompson, Pastor Merv's father, in 1952, to be the executive director of evangelism for the ALC.

Dr. Aus became the pastor of evangelism at Prince of Peace in the fall of 1973, working on a part-time basis. One of his favorite activities was visiting members and prospective members. He organized a group of men who were his chauffeurs, with Lowell Qualley as a favorite. Dr. Aus was a "wee little man," as we describe the tax collector in the bible, only about 5' 3", but he was a towering presence.

No one who was at Prince of Peace at the time would ever forget his famous jelly bean sermon. The text for that Sunday was Luke 6:8, which read, *"Give, and it will be given to you, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*

Dr. Aus then took a huge jar of jelly beans and started pouring them into a much smaller bowl. Instead of stopping when the bowl was full, he just kept on pouring. The jelly beans spilled out onto the table, then onto the floor, as he kept pouring. "This is like the grace of God," he repeated, "running

over.” At the end of each service, Pastor Merv had to help pick up all of those jelly beans scattered all over the floor so there were enough left for the third service.

Dr. Aus’ health began to fail, causing him to resign after two years. He did not get to move to the new building in the spring of 1976, but his impact was seismic. It felt like this great man had put his imprimatur on the congregation of Prince of Peace, affirming that our primary work was evangelism. His presence would pave the way for three of his students to minister at Prince of Peace: Pastor Merv Thompson, senior pastor; Pastor Richard Nelson, who had served as the Director of Evangelism for the Lutheran World Federation; and Pastor Conrad Thompson, who served as the executive director of evangelism for both the ELC and the ALC. His legacy was profound.

Pastor Andy Jensen.

If we had a glaring weakness in 1973, it was confirmation instruction. Confirmation became an essential part of Lutheran piety way back in the days of Martin Luther, based upon his Small Catechism. Adolescents were expected to spend countless hours in class and memorizing much of the catechism. Everything we were doing seemed so dated, so medieval, that we tried a new curriculum every year.

Compounding this difficulty, we were adding new students almost daily with all the rapid growth. Confirmation classes were often standing room only. We kept adding new classes, but there is only so far you can stretch the pastors and youth staff. It’s one thing to teach a class of twelve students; it’s quite another when 40 kids show up.

In late summer of 1973 a brochure arrived by mail, advertising a confirmation workshop at a nearby church. Pastor Merv signed up immediately. The workshop was led Andrew Jensen, a pastor from Mankato, and his wife Mary. The Jensens had turned confirmation instruction upside down. Instead of piling students into large classes and spending much of the time trying to keep the chaos down, students worked individually or in self-chosen small groups instead.

Much of the teaching took place through technology, as primitive as it was in those days: film strips, cassette tapes, videos. This avoided the inevitable

conflicts taking place around scheduling. Students who had hockey games, swim meets or music lessons every Wednesday night could come on Thursdays instead. Students could skip a week or two during a time of heavy schedules and make it up later.

After the seminar, a conversation between Pastor Merv and Pastor Andy revealed that the Jensens were hoping to move to the Twin Cities, and were open to a call. Two weeks later a call committee was formed and Pastor Andy was called to be the Pastor of Education. Confirmation instruction would never be the same.

The program was so successful that hundreds of new students were attracted to Wednesday and Thursday evenings, many coming from churches that did not have a confirmation program, or from no church at all. These evenings became a destination for junior high students, which would eventually lead many of them to continue on in the high school singing group, First Light.

Word began to spread about this revolutionary new idea in confirmation, and the Jensens began offering workshops on a regular basis for congregational leaders all over the country. Prince of Peace became the epicenter of confirmation reform. When Pastor Jensen left to become the senior pastor of North Hollywood Lutheran Church in California a few years later, he was eventually replaced by Terri Martinson Elton, and the buzz around confirmation continued.

Trail 4 Theater

Once again, at the end of the outdoor worship services in the summer of 1973, people were asking for this kind of contemporary Christian music to be offered throughout the year. Serendipitously, the Sioux Trail Mall opened four small theaters. With Handt Hanson on the staff, we felt we could start a Sunday morning worship service at the theater. The plan was to offer the same kind of music, informality and joy that had been present outdoors. Walt and Handt added 16-year-old Al Hreha as a bass player. The theater had very poor acoustics, so Handt had to bring along additional sound equipment. The order of worship was displayed on the large theater screen, perhaps the first time a church used a large screen for worship.

Scheduling this service was tricky, but we settled on the same worship services in the sanctuary (8:45, 10:00 and 11:15) plus a 10:30 am service at the Trail 4. This meant that the preaching pastor had to continue driving back and forth at least once during the morning. The theater was at least twice as far from the church as the Lucky Twin, so we needed to allow more time for the transition. There was also a train track to cross on the way, adding an element of suspense. Would the preaching pastor get stuck waiting for a train?

When the Trail 4 theater quickly filled up, we decided to add yet another service. The new schedule was 8:45, 10:00 and 11:15 at the church, and 9:00 and 10:30 at the theater. Now the preaching pastor was driving back and forth twice on Sunday morning. Walt and Handt would often have some kind of humorous surprise for the pastor when he showed up to preach. An average sermon in those days was about twenty minutes, and this meant the pastor was preaching a total of 100 minutes over five services.

It reminds me of the old joke about the pastor who dreamed one night that he was preaching in the pulpit, and woke up to find that it was real. But there was an excitement, a dynamism, a joy that increased as the church went through all of these phases of growth, getting closer to its move to the Ridges.

Partnering with Fairview

Once the congregation voted in late 1972 to sell its existing buildings and grounds at the corner of Nicollet and Burnsville Crosstown and move to the Ridges site, negotiations began with Fairview. Partnering usually implies some kind of parallel agency, with each of the partners bringing substantial assets and gravitas to the proceedings. That was not the case in these deliberations.

Fairview was a huge hospital corporation, with a battery of vice presidents, lawyers, land developers, consultants, and finance people. Prince of Peace was basically represented by Howard Knutson and a 31-year-old senior pastor who almost flunked economics in college. We had nothing to offer Fairview *except* that we were potentially going to be the fastest-growing Lutheran church on the planet, and Fairview wanted that growth to bring visibility and foot traffic to their institutions at the Ridges.

The most amazing realization came early when Carl Platou, the legendary President and CEO of Fairview, made it very clear that he wanted a church located right in the middle of the Ridges site. We were not going to be relegated to some far corner. We would be on the highest ground, where the church would have maximum visibility.

Eventually, it was determined that Prince of Peace would purchase seven acres of land on the present site and have permission to use the parking lots at the adjacent medical office building. When the price tag for this purchase was announced, the congregational leaders were not at all sure that it was attainable.

A pivotal meeting happened at this same time. Carl Platou invited Pastor Merv to meet him at the Lutheran Brotherhood offices in downtown Minneapolis, the first time Pastor Merv had ever been inside this building. Together they took the express elevator to the 16th floor, where only the top officials had access, looking out windows at the entire landscape of downtown. The President and CEO of Lutheran Brotherhood, Arly Bjella, welcomed them to his office suite.

The conversation which would determine the future of Prince of Peace went as follows: Carl Platou said to Mr. Bjella, “Arly, we want you to give Prince of Peace the largest church loan you have ever given.” The number was \$600,000. Apparently, this was triple the size of the next largest loan. It was an audacious ask, something no congregation would have been able to do.

But then Platou added the deal breaker: “Fairview will guarantee the loan.” Pastor Merv had no idea that was coming. Later we heard that some hospital board members were unhappy that Mr. Platou committed them to guarantee a loan for a church, but this was at the center of his vision for the Ridges. This was to be a Christian Care Center, including Fairview Hospital, Ebenezer nursing home, the YMCA, and Prince of Peace Lutheran Church. He envisioned a long and fruitful partnership.

1973 saw the establishment of a building committee, under the able leadership of Ken Nordaune. Countless meetings took place as the basic elements of the new church building took shape. By early 1974 construction began at the Ridges, which would take almost two years to complete.

Worship Wars

Perhaps the most important decision to be made when we moved into the new church building, in addition to the shape and size of the edifice, was what kind of worship and music we would offer. Worship wars were dominating the larger church at the time – debates between traditional Lutheran worship, folk music and contemporary Christian music. High church versus low church, pipe organs versus guitars and drums. There seemed to be little middle ground.

A task force was very carefully appointed (rather than elected), with eight people representing the traditional Lutheran advocates and eight people representing contemporary worship. Pastor Merv was very concerned about dividing the congregation up into two distinct small congregations, with those who worshipped in the old church building on the one side and those who worshipped at the Trail 4 theater on the other. Or those who loved liturgy, hymnbooks, vestments on one side and those who liked guitars, drums, keyboards and casual dress on the other.

Pastor Merv made what he believed to be a very creative and innovative recommendation. Why not hold two identical worship services on Sunday morning, both of them blended services? Begin the service with traditional hymns, the senior choir, a consistent liturgy, up to the sermon. Then the contemporary band would slip in and take it from there. The idea received almost no support, the final vote was sixteen to one against the proposal from Pastor Merv. Neither side was much interested in compromise.

Therefore, the decision quickly morphed into the proposal of holding two very different worship services each Sunday. The 9:00 service would be traditional, the 11:00 would be contemporary. The pastors would robe up for the early service, wear a suit for the second. The early service would be led by the organ, the hymnbooks would be utilized, liturgy would sometimes be chanted. The latter service would be led by a band, instruments such as guitars, drums, keyboards, synthesizers, and songs that Handt and others had written or discovered.

Several years later, when the church was again running out of room for worship, the decision was made to add a third service, at 10:00 am. Pastor Merv, who never quite got over losing by a 16 to 1 vote, suggested again that

this middle service be blended. Shockingly, it became the largest service of the three. That trend continued as long as Pastor Merv was senior pastor. He was never heard to echo the words “I told you so” except, as the old quote goes, “every day and twice on Sundays.”

1976: The Most Important Year in the History of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church

The year began with Prince of Peace being an innovative but rather average Lutheran congregation fueled by a growing suburb. There were other similar models around the Twin Cities at the time. Important anomalies of Prince of Peace were the worship services in the local movie theater, and the preschool renting space at a mall, plus those outdoor services in the summer. But it was never considered a large congregation when compared to churches like Mt. Olivet Lutheran in Minneapolis.

Best attendance estimates looking back suggest that the worship center had about 400 people in attendance each Sunday, and the Trail 4 had a similar number. On festive Sundays Prince of Peace could reach 1,000 people total in worship, but most of the time it was around 800 or so. No one had any idea how many would show up at the new place. That was the \$600,000 question. Would attendance remain at around 800 to 1,000, or would it grow? Could it actually decline? Some people don't like change involved with moving to a new place.

On Sunday, February 29, 1976, everything did change. People were invited to go to the original worship center for prayers, and then they were asked to grab a folding chair and bring it with them to the new facility at the Ridges. There was such a celebratory spirit among everyone who participated! It was like we were seeing the first day of the rest of our lives. In the end, more than 600 people showed up for the 9:00 traditional worship service. The organ was letting out all the stops and people were singing the hymns with extra gusto.

There was a coffee hour in between as we prepared for the 11:00 service. When people started showing up, the lines never quit. In the end, more than 1,000 people attended the first contemporary service at the new worship center. Since Prince of Peace was a pioneer in contemporary worship, it was

probably the largest attendance ever in a Lutheran church led by guitars and drums. As the weeks went by, sometimes the numbers would settle a bit, but over the span of year they stayed pretty consistent.

In essence, the attendance of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church doubled overnight. Rarely, if ever, has something like this happened in a church. We went from approximately 800 to 1,600 in worship. If a mega-church is defined by 1,800 – 2,000 in weekend worship, we almost moved from a mid-sized church to a mega-church in one week.

The question was always debated: Where did all these people come from? Were they all members of Prince of Peace who had stopped worshipping regularly in the old building because of the space crunch or the problematic parking lot? Did they not flock to the Trail 4 Theater because it was a so different from a church, with popcorn boxes on the floors, and terrible acoustics? Who knows? All we knew was that we had caught lightning in a bottle, and suddenly we were now one of the two or three largest ALC congregations in the country. All of our staff was overwhelmed. We were not ready for this kind of multiplication, and all we could do was just marvel at the numbers of people who just kept showing up.

The triangular worship center was divided into four sections by huge sliding doors. Two of them remained closed on Sunday morning so that Sunday School classes could be held during the 10 AM hour. We were able to squeeze about 1,000 chairs into the two sections, but eventually we would have to open a third section to accommodate all those coming to the contemporary worship. In fact, we ended up moving a lot of Sunday School to Wednesdays, because we simply could not accommodate all of the children at one time in the building.

When we began our first outdoor services at the new site, we had some growing pains. We thought initially that we could have indoor and outdoor worship taking place at the same time, with a balcony on the east side of the building so the pastor could stand there and preach to both indoor and outdoor services simultaneously. That turned out to be unworkable, and the idea was scratched after a couple of weeks. But attendance outdoors was very high at the new site, sometimes doubling the numbers from the Lucky Twin Drive-in Theater.

First Light Singing Group

Even though some attempts were made to organize a high school singing group while we were in the first building, the results were underwhelming. We had no space a concert, so there was little incentive to do much. In addition, Handt Hanson didn't come on the staff until almost 1974, and he turned out to be the one who would translate the vision into reality. But once we moved to the new site, the high school singing group took shape.

In fact, First Light was the most important group for the growth of Prince of Peace from a worshipping community of 300 in 1971 to one of 3,000 in 1991. Remember that, according to church analyst Kennon Callahan, every person a church involves in music tends to bring an average of three people with them. A church wanting to grow by 100 needs to put 33 people in new musical groups. With more than 300 singers in First Light, imagine the standing room only situation on Sunday mornings. Add the Sounds Like Love festivals with 1,200 or more kids up front singing, and the numbers were off the charts.

It takes a highly unusual partnership between the youth department and the music department to make this kind of singing group happen. Those who do this work know how unusual that kind of cooperation can be. With the addition of Hal Weldin as youth director, these two departments were completely in sync in the development and implementation of this ministry.

Wednesday nights became a carefully choreographed event. Young people would come to church for ninety minutes. Half of the time would be spent in small groups, Bible study and prayer led by the youth teams, and the other half of the time would be in rehearsal for that year's musical. One could never have happened without the other, and without incredible coordination and cooperation between departments.

Every year the singing group would take a tour to present their latest musical, much like a college choir or orchestra tour. It was a stretch to organize these tours. The high schools wanted students to participate in school activities during these same breaks, and so students had to make some tough decisions. This meant was that not all of the students who participated in the choir when it sang locally would travel with the group. But even so, the numbers were astounding.

Walt Kallested completed seminary in 1978 and went to Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, AZ. Many of these tours were hosted by Walt's congregation.

1976	POP Group (47)	Youth Gathering, New Orleans LA
1977	POP Group (33)	Bible Folk, Spring Tour, Amarillo TX
1977	POP Group (35)	Godspell/Bible Folk, Summer Tour, Midwest
1978	POP Group (42)	Bible Folk, Christmas Tour, Vail CO & Phoenix AZ
1979	POP Group (55)	The Witness, Phoenix AZ
1980	POP Group (40)	Waterlife, Christmas Tour, Phoenix AZ
1981	POP Group (88)	Special People, Seattle WA
1982	POP Group (133)	Lifemaker, Christmas Tour, Phoenix AZ
1983	Light Company (125)	Lightyears, Spring Tour, Iowa & Chicago IL
1984	Light Company (120)	Special People, Virginia, Maryland
1985	Light Company (120)	Heartstrings, Great Lakes Tour
1986	First Light (160)	ADTV, Loveland CO & Phoenix, AZ
1987	First Light (180)	Full Circle, San Francisco CA
1988	First Light (223)	Lightyears, New York NY
1989	First Light (152)	Heartstrings, Atlanta GA
1990	First Light (131)	Waterlife, Seattle WA
1991	First Light (198)	Big Wow, Gulf of Mexico
1992	First Light (210)	80 Degrees, Los Angeles CA
1993	First Light (194)	Full Circle, Clearwater FLA
1994	First Light (224)	Inside-Out, San Diego CA
1995	First Light (275)	City On A Hill, Phoenix AZ
1996	First Light (247)	Heartstrings, Clearwater FLA
1997	First Light (245)	Deep Spring, San Diego CA
1998	First Light (235)	Lightyears, Houston TX
1999	First Light (199)	A Bigger Wow, Seattle WA
2000	First Light (203)	180 Degrees, Clearwater FL
2001	First Light (190)	Vertical Reality, San Francisco CA
2002	First Light (152)	A Deep Spring, Phoenix AZ
2003	First Light (125)	Core, San Antonio TX
2004	First Light (125)	Illumination, Savannah GA

TOTAL: 29 TOURS with 4,506 STUDENTS. (For complete participation numbers, add 20% for adult leaders and students who were not able to tour.)

(Note: The group started out as POP Group, and then became Light Company. When they found that name was already in use, they changed to First Light.)

Sounds Like Love

During the 1980s, the youth choir movement expanded. An invitation went out to congregational youth choirs to convene together for a weekend festival entitled “Sounds Like Love.” The first one was held at Zion Lutheran Church in Anoka, MN, but for the next 20 years it took place at Prince of Peace. Most years averaged more than 1,000 youth participants, at one time even reaching 1,835 students. This necessitated relocating the final concert to the St. Paul Civic Center.

Typically, on Sunday morning of the Sounds Like Love festival, a mass choir would sing at the two later services, 10:00 and 11:15. Risers would be set up all across the front of the church, filled with singers. During the sermon all of the singers would be sitting on the risers, and the preaching pastor would be trying to preach to both the congregation and the choirs. Of course, singers’ parents and family members would flock to Prince of Peace, and we would have standing-room-only crowds. All of this would be duplicated on Sunday afternoons with a closing concert, again with overflowing crowds.

One of the major features of the weekend was that a nationally known vocal clinician, John Jacobson, would be enlisted to instruct the choir members. He became a huge draw for this event. In addition, popular Christian contemporary artists were invited to come and share their music. They would usually participate in the Sunday morning worship as well as the closing concerts. The energy and excitement generated by these weekends was off the charts.

Whoever Has Ears to Hear, Let Them Hear

When Handt Hanson was named Director of Worship and Music, one of his responsibilities was to arrange the worship center in a way where everyone could see and hear. He was in charge of the massive square footage in that worship space. The placement of the mics, the speakers, the banners, the chairs, the pulpit and lecterns, the choir, the musicians – all of it was of utmost importance.

Everything was designed so that people could hear and see. At a 1976 dedication service for the new space, a guest preacher was President of the American Lutheran Church, Dr. David Preus. It happened to snow that morning, and when Dr. Preus stood in front of the huge windows looking to the east, people could not see his face. Within two weeks we had installed some blinds on the windows to keep the worship leaders out of the shadows.

Sound was especially complicated in a triangular building. One of the festering problems in many churches today is that people cannot hear the spoken words, and often pastors and worship leaders are not adequately prepared to speak into microphones. If people who come to worship can't hear, then what's the point? Handt became an expert in sound systems, even helping other congregations find the solution to often intractable hearing issues.

This issue becomes acute when a majority of the congregational members are elderly, and many are wearing hearing aids. Hearing is infinitely more difficult at outdoor services, when there were several singers, many instruments, outside elements such as wind and sometimes rain, and many people listening on their car radios.

Because of the expertise that Handt and his team brought to sanctuary planning, and in spite of the difficulty dealing with a non-traditional building, people at Prince of Peace could hear and see. When large screens were installed in the front of the church, it became much easier for the worshippers to follow the service, to sing the songs, to follow along the scripture readings, even to see the pastor and musicians. If making sure people can see and hear is more of an art than a science, then Handt was the resident artist.

Adding a Third Service

Early in the 1980s Dr. Preus called again, this time to ask if Prince of Peace would be willing to host Kathryn Koob for a Sunday morning. He wanted her to preach in front of a large congregation. Koob was a former American Embassy employee who was held hostage in Iran for 444 days beginning in 1979. Koob had been initially deployed to Iran to serve as the director of a non-profit organized to foster ties between the two countries. She had a powerful story of faith and courage.

At this time we still had just two worship services on Sunday morning. The early service had remained pretty consistent with about 500- 600 people in worship, but the 11:00 service continued to grow: 1,000, to 1,100, to 1,200. Setting up more chairs on Sundays became a regular activity.

The news that Kathryn Koob was coming prompted us to add a third service to accommodate the metro-wide crowd we anticipated. As expected, all three services were filled to overflowing, and that third Sunday morning service was inevitable.

So this blended service we mentioned earlier was added at 10:00 am – prime time. It is remarkable how few churches have worship at this time. Many have an early service and a later service, but nothing in the middle of the morning. That is usually reserved for coffee time and Sunday School. But if our experience is any guide, a service at prime time is going to be the most popular service, even if the style might not be to everyone's taste.

For many, 8:30 is too early, requiring alarms set for as early as 6:30 am on a weekend. (In all of the years we were raising children, we never had a teenager or young adult get up voluntarily at 6:30 am.) So an 8:30 am service or earlier eliminates almost all families with children. On the other hand, a service starting 11:00 or after is just too late for many people. Ending after noon can feel like the day is gone. It's too late to go out to lunch, to catch whatever sports are on TV, or make plans for the rest of the day.

When we added that third service at the prime time of 10:00 am, our overall attendance jumped by almost a thousand. We went from 1,600 to 2,600 on an average Sunday. Again, this was a seismic change, transforming us into one of the largest churches in the country almost overnight. At the time, only Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis had a larger worship attendance on Sunday than Prince of Peace. We had come a long way from our average attendance of 300 just ten years earlier in 1972.

Staying consistent with what we'd learned, we added services in the summer rather than subtracting them. In fact, we had four outdoor worship services: 8:45, 10:00, 11:15 am on Sundays, plus a 5:00 on Saturday night. In addition, we had one indoor service on Sundays at 9:30 am. The preaching pastors would preach five times, but instead of having to drive back and forth, they could just walk from outside to indoors and back outside again.

We learned something else as the preaching pastor walked from car to car in the parking lot to greet the worshippers before the outdoor services. Many of them were dressed in hospital gowns or pajamas, wearing hats to cover the impacts of chemo. We learned that many people who came to these outdoor services and worshipped from their cars would never have come indoors, because they were dealing with serious medical issues. There was no online worship in those days, so in-person outdoor worship was very important to families facing medical and immunity issues.

Another powerful image from these outdoor worship services happened during Holy Communion. When it was time for communion, hundreds of people would leave their lawn chairs, their blankets on the grass, and their cars and stream forward to receive the bread and the wine. It was amazing to behold, people as far as the eye could see, all coming to receive the sacrament. We would send servers to all of the cars in the parking lot where people were not able to come forward while the band was playing songs like “Lord, let us break bread together,” or “Father, I adore you.”

Noel Paul Stookey

A couple years after we moved into the new worship center at the Ridges, we were able to bring Noel Paul Stookey to Prince of Peace for a concert. In his alternative life, Stookey was in the famous folk group “Peter, Paul, and Mary.” He used the “Noel” part of his name for specifically Christian concerts.

(When Pastor Merv introduced his son Noel to Stookey, the musician grabbed young Noel and put him on his shoulders. An iconic photo of that moment graces the Thompson scrapbooks.)

Stookey introduced a song to Prince of Peace which would become a standard at worship. In fact, the summer after he appeared, this song was used at almost every outdoor service for an entire season. It’s a folk song with a beat, and people loved singing it. The words are as follows:

*The building block (building block) that was rejected
became the cornerstone of the whole new world.*

*The building block (building block) that was rejected
became the cornerstone of a whole new world.*

*When I am down and unsuspected
with a burden that does not show,
I think what time has resurrected
and how the sun can make the water flow.*

*There is a man who has collected
all the sorrow in our eyes,
he gives us love as God directed
but is seldom recognized.*

*When all your dreams have been connected
and your vision has been returned,
remember, love, you are protected,
by the truth your heart has learned.*

Noel Paul Stookey also sang his most famous song, *The Wedding Song*, which was used at countless weddings at Prince of Peace and elsewhere:

*He is now to be among you at the calling of your hearts,
rest assured this troubadour is acting on His part.
The union of your spirits here has caused him to remain,
for wherever two or more of you are gathered in his name,
there is love, there is love.*

A Transformational Conference in Las Vegas

Wayne Skaff, who was president of the congregation and the book manager for the Billy Graham Association, informed Pastor Merv one day that he had just registered him at a Billy Graham School of Evangelism in Las Vegas and purchased airline tickets. In other words, there was no way out. Skaff also informed Pastor Merv that his old colleagues, Walt and Mary Kallestad, would be attending as well.

It turned out to be the most impactful conference Pastor Merv had ever attended. We're always just one new idea away from transformation, and this conference unpacked two ideas that would transform Prince of Peace for decades.

Starting Over Single.

The first new idea came from a seminar led by Pastor Ken Chafin, a Baptist pastor in Houston, Texas, who was also the chair of the conference. Chafin described how he had grown up in a family where his parents divorced, and this had given him a life-long desire to help people going through the breakup of their family.

So he started a ministry called “Beginning Again,” and over the previous eight years more than 8,000 people had participated. The numbers were stunning. There were really that many couples who were going through divorce, how could the church be helpful?

Pastor Merv thought immediately, “We could do this in Burnsville.” We had been hearing that the new townhouses and condos being constructed nearby were home to a growing number of single or divorced adults, many of them with children. Our CDLC, Sunday school and youth programs reflected that trend. In fact, our community was just primed for such a ministry.

A task force was created, led by Dee Bailey, which spent several months planning a four-week course to be held on Sunday evenings. There was already an organization for singles in Burnsville called “Singles Organized South,” so it was agreed that we would retain the same initials for our program, which we called “Starting Over Single.”

We publicized the program in both the church news and the community newspaper, hoping that maybe 20 people would show up for the first session. When 120 people flooded our room, we knew we had struck a nerve. Many who came admitted they had not been in church since their divorce, either because they felt the church had been judgmental rather than emphatic, or because their own sense of shame was too strong. About half of the participants were Roman Catholic, which was in a period of confusion about how to deal with divorce.

Remember the controversy over annulments in the Catholic church, when marriages could get annulled even when there were children? Even Lutherans in those days required clergy to resign if they went through a divorce, with a huge stigma attached. We wanted to be a grace-filled and welcoming community for all people, including those who were divorced or separated.

Starting Over Single went on to become one of the largest and most important ministries in the history of the congregation. Dee Bailey was hired to be the director of the program, and she brought in large numbers of volunteers. The course was soon expanded to six or seven Sunday evenings, and there were small groups organized for children of divorce. One heartwarming result was that quite a few of the participants found new spouses, and we as clergy were thrilled to be a part of those joyful weddings.

Leadership Development.

The second new idea at the Billy Graham School of Evangelism came from another Baptist pastor from Houston: Milton Cunningham. His presentation was about becoming the pastor of a church that suffered from a lack of experienced leadership, forcing him to scramble to find anyone who could serve on major boards or committees.

He decided that he needed to raise up new leaders. He recruited a group of about 30 young adults, ages 21-35, and offered to spend an entire year with them, training them to be leaders. Not only would this be of great benefit to the congregation, but it would also affect the careers of those young people. He made this program into almost a MA-level course, with lectures, readings, papers, homework. Within a few years, 80 out of 82 of his current leaders had graduated from this leadership course.

Again, Pastor Merv decided this was something he could do in Burnsville. He also recruited about 30 young adults and offered to spend a school year with them. He found the whole idea of teaching leadership far more difficult than he had assumed, sometimes wondering if leaders are born instead of made. He found the best moments came when he invited some of the successful leaders at Prince of Peace to come in and share what they had learned.

Pastor Merv organized two of these classes, and many of the future council and board leaders came from these groups. At the same time, Pastor Merv started to focus on leadership development for pastors and staff, which led to the idea of hosting a Changing Church Conference. What if we would bring in some of the very best leaders in the wider church to share their wisdom?

How Can We Best Build Up The Whole Church?

Led by Gail Steel, the Changing Church conferences became an integral part of the DNA of Prince of Peace. We featured some of the best examples of innovative ministry at Prince of Peace, and then invited pastors from other Twin Cities churches who were doing great work.

When we were planning the very first conference, Pastor Merv received a call from a member of the congregation who said that he was the producer of Joel Barker's videos. Barker was a nationally-known futurist whose book *Discovering The Future* had popularized the concept of paradigm shift. We had used some videos by Barker in our leadership development. While Barker usually charged \$10,000 a day in the business world, he gave us his time gratis, and his appearance launched Changing Church conferences in a powerful way.

At the peak, there were more 400 pastors and lay leaders attending the yearly conference, and we brought in such giants as Lyle Schaller, Kennon Callahan, Nancy Beech and Leith Anderson. Just like the Billy Graham School of Evangelism conference had so deeply impacted Pastor Merv, giving him two transformational ideas, Pastor Merv hoped that many who attended the conferences would also be so inspired.

One More Transformational Idea

For many years Pastor Walt Kallestad and Pastor Dick Hamlin would host an evangelism conference in Phoenix in January. It was tough to leave Minnesota in January and head to Phoenix, but we managed to talk ourselves into it! At one of these conferences, Dick Hamlin described an idea he was pursuing in his congregation.

He said that when there was a funeral, and the family members were around for weekend worship, he would invite the family forward to kneel with him at the altar rail during the prayers. It seemed like a good idea, although impractical, since most of the time bereaved family members did not hang around or return to church on the weekend.

One day in the early 80s we received news on a Saturday night that a college student from Prince of Peace had attempted suicide in her dorm, but had been discovered just in time to save her life. She was in critical condition and it could go either way. On Sunday morning, we informed the congregation of this situation, although many already knew.

Pastor Merv remembered Dick Hamlin's idea, and decided to make the following announcement. "We know that many of you are deeply saddened by the events of last night, and we want to acknowledge that pain. If you would like to come up and kneel at the altar rail during the prayers, you are invited to do so."

Prince of Peace had an altar rail that could handle up to 100 people at a time, a very rare architectural decision. It was used for confirmation services or first communion, when the numbers of young people were very large. However, on this particular Sunday morning, people came forward by the hundreds. Every kneeling spot was taken, and people were standing behind them. Many were weeping. We prayed for the young woman, her family, for all who were affected. We prayed for a miracle.

During the next week, the young woman began to recover. On the following Sunday it seemed appropriate to invite people forward to give thanks, and continue to pray for her healing. Again, the numbers were large. So we decided to do this every non-Communion Sunday. We usually had between 10 and 50 people coming forward for this meaningful practice.

The pastor kept the microphone, nobody was ever asked why they came forward, and the prayers went on as usual. It simply became a time of healing, giving the entire worship service a sense of being centered in prayer.

One More New Idea

Pastor Mark Thompson, who had been the youth director at Prince of Peace during the late 1960s, became a pastor at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Faribault. He took a group to Michigan to build a house through Habitat for Humanity. He gave his brother, Pastor Merv, a video from that week-long experience, who shared it with Prince of Peace staff and leaders. Everyone agreed that Prince of Peace should become involved with Habitat.

For several years Prince of Peace was at the center of the movement to build houses, especially in marginalized neighborhoods. Hundreds of people volunteered to participate. Richard Johnson agreed to be the chair of the event, he and his wife Twyla coordinated the multiple efforts.

Sometimes they were partnered with Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on 24th and Chicago in Minneapolis. One of those years, on the first day of building, the rains came. We were all drenched. Over the lunch hour we went to Our Saviour's to dry out. It so happened that they operate a shelter onsite, complete with laundry facilities, so many of the workers took off their wet shirts and threw them into the dryers.

One of the unforgettable images was a crew of people working together, often stymied by some construction issue. They would turn to Pastor Merv for advice, but he was clueless. Then Chuck Houge or John England showed up, professional builders, and everyone treated them like royalty. "Can you show us how to solve this problem?" "Can you correct something we did wrong?" "Here comes Chuck!" "Here comes John!" "Praise God!"

One year congregations throughout the Twin Cities banded together to build eight homes on one block in St. Paul. The beauty of this plan was that when the hundreds of volunteers showed up, there was always something at one of the homes to do. And we were all working together for a common goal, churches united, reflecting Jesus words in Matthew 28: "Whatever you do for the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you do it for me."

Then came the amazing moment when a family who had moved into the new house in south Minneapolis came to Prince of Peace on a Sunday morning to share what owning a house meant to them. Tears were abundant, both for the family and for the congregation.

Christian Life Center

Early in the 1980s it was clear that we still needed more room. Space was lacking for education, childcare, youth ministry, and parking. Amazingly, Fairview Hospital decided to sell the medical office building located just across the parking lot from Prince of Peace, and negotiations began immediately.

So the Christian Life Center became a part of the church campus, including an additional 55 classrooms, a chapel, a youth center, a media center, a library, meeting rooms, administrative offices and increased parking spaces. After completing a remodeling process, the new building was dedicated in 1987.

Pastor Conrad Thompson

Pastor Conrad Thompson joined the staff later in the 1980s and served as the Pastor of Evangelism. Dr. Thompson had been the executive director of the Department of Evangelism for both the Evangelical Lutheran Church (1952-1960), and for the American Lutheran Church (1960-1972). He was also the speaker on the popular Lutheran Vesper's program, offered every Sunday night on WCCO Radio.

The continuum was complete. Remember again the integral connections between evangelism and Prince of Peace Lutheran Church? It began long before Prince of Peace even existed, and continued throughout the 1980s. It was no accident that the congregation grew tenfold.

Here is a summary:

- 1947** The ELC names evangelism as its top priority, the goal to raise up 50,000 evangelists. Dr. George Aus named Chair of the Commission on Evangelism.
- 1952** Pastor Conrad Thompson, a student of Dr. Aus', called to lead his evangelism effort in the ELC.
- 1968** Mark Thompson, son of Pastor Conrad Thompson, hired as youth director at Prince of Peace.
- 1969** Walt Kallestad hired by Thompson to expand evangelical outreach through music.
- 1969** Pastor Merv Thompson, a son of Pastor Conrad Thompson, a student of Dr. Aus', invites Kallestad to lead a worship service at his congregation in north Minneapolis.
- 1970** Pastor Merv called to Prince of Peace.
- 1971** Walt Kallestad hired as the youth director at Prince of Peace.

- 1972** Handt Hanson hired as the director of worship and music.
- 1973** Dr. George Aus called as the Pastor of Evangelism at POP.
- 1980** Pastor Richard Nelson, a student of Dr Aus' who had been the Director of Evangelism for the Lutheran World Federation, called to POP as the Pastor of Evangelism
- 1987** Pastor Conrad Thompson called to be a second Pastor of Evangelism.

All of the staff members listed above embraced an attitude of evangelism. How can the congregation reach out beyond its walls and welcome the everyone? The evangelical line which began in 1947 lasted all the way through the 1980s at Prince of Peace. All of this was God's doing, as Jeremiah reminds us:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

The apostle Paul said it best in I Corinthians 9:22b. *"I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I share in its blessings."*

25th Anniversary Extravaganza

In 1989, Prince of Peace decided to return to the days of the early 1970s and, for one Sunday, move its worship and education to another location. This time it was St. Olaf College, the exact same place where the iconic St. Olaf Christmas festivals were held each December. The entire congregation was invited to drive the 30 miles south to Northfield to participate in a 25th anniversary party for the congregation.

The guest speaker was Bishop Lowell Erdahl. In keeping with the evangelistic focus on the congregation over the first quarter-century, he issued a specific challenge. Since the ELCA had just been formed in 1988, he described how the new Presiding Bishop, Herb Chilstrom, had issued a challenge to the entire church. "I would like to see us start 500 new congregations in the near future." Bishop Erdahl suggested that Prince of Peace, as a large church in this new denomination, should be empowered to start new congregations.

Congregational Presidents

During the 1970s and 1980s Prince of Peace was blessed with an abundance of elected leadership. Nowhere was this more evident in the women and men chosen to be president of the congregation. These faithful leaders helped steer the congregation through the vicissitudes of transformational change and demonstrated the best of servant leadership. We remain ever grateful.

1971	Dirk Cotton	1982	Bill Stone
1972	Dan Peterson	1983	Wayne Skaff/Gail Steel
1973	Howard Knutson	1984	Jack Fenton
1974	Bernie Wagnild	1985	Lois Helvick
1975	Ben Flood	1986	Mike Elton
1976	Hal Olson	1987	Marilyn Tubbs
1977	Harris Bouman	1988	Paul Frederickson
1978	Judy Gilje	1989	Diane Dahl
1979	Bob Wilson	1990	John Steel
1980	Judith Horst	1991	Lynde Sorenson
1981	Charlie Rohrer		

Conclusion

When Pastor Merv Thompson resigned in late 1991 to be the new Executive Director of the Lutheran Leadership Institute, located at Luther Seminary, the congregation was poised to be a light to the world and to the new denomination. Buoyed by the Changing Church Conferences, the First Light tours, the dynamic CDLC, the ongoing outdoor worship services and its commitment to love its neighbors as itself, the future looked bright.

As one of the two largest churches in the ELCA, along with Mt. Olivet in Minneapolis, everyone had the sense that the congregation had been so truly blessed in order to be a blessing. When Pastor Thompson preached his final sermon, he emphasized most strongly that the best was yet to come. Or as the Bible declares:

*“No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him.”*





**PRINCE
OF PEACE**

Love God. Love People.

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