

UNITED BY THE SPIRIT

(The Merging of Three Congregations Into One)

By Warren C. Johnson

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FORWARD

The purpose of this writing is two-fold: first, to give an historical account of events leading to the merger of three local congregations into one, the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Manistee, MI.; and second, to acknowledge the little-known efforts of the Rev. Ronald F. Fuller, which precipitated the actual merger negotiations.

Twenty-seven years have passed since this event occurred. Memories are fading, some participants have gone on to meet their Lord, another generation is gradually taking on leadership within the church. It is time to record this unique event before it is beyond retrieving.

Chapter 1 Resources:

Messiah Church Council Minutes.  
Conversations with Pastor Ronald Fuller. -  
May 5, 1996 Letter from Fuller To Author.  
Two Interviews with Howard Fenton & Doug Jensen.  
The Author's Participation on Merger Comm. &  
Messiah Church Council.

Chapter 2 Resources:

Manistee Lutheran Merger Study Comm. Minutes.  
Messiah Lutheran Church Council Minutes.  
St. Peter's Lutheran Church Council Minutes.

Chapter 3 Resources:

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Council Minutes.  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Annual Reports.  
Marge Johnson's written account of the Chu story.

This merger, which happened within a period of nine months, while Messiah church was being served by a supply pastor, could only have happened with the Holy Spirit working through people. It was not pre-planned. Once the process started, it just seemed to evolve. It was an exciting experience to be a part of the process. It was also both humbling and uplifting to recognize, after the congregations had responded, that it wasn't so much our efforts as the work of the Holy Spirit which determined the outcome.

## Ch. 1: THE CATALYST FOR MERGER

In the 1960's, the city of Manistee's population, including surrounding townships, was approximately 10,000 people. The community was served by 5 Lutheran churches within the city: Messiah (LCA), Our Saviour's (LCA), St. Peter's (ALC), Trinity (Missouri Synod), and St. Paul's (Wisconsin Synod). It was long felt by many this was too many churches of the same denomination to serve this size community.

In the early 1950's there was an attempt spearheaded by Pastor Leon Appel of St. Peter's, along with Pastor J. Kenneth Edwins of Messiah, to merge the two churches. This attempt just barely failed with Messiah passing the issue by a good majority, but St. Peter's falling one vote short.

Some years later Our Saviour's and St. Peter's started a dialogue on merging the two, but this did not progress to a congregational vote stage before it died.

In September, 1965, the Reverend Ronald F. Fuller began his ministry at Messiah church. Fuller, an excellent preacher and especially well liked by his congregation, was a deeply spiritual person, but practical also, with interest in and knowledge of the world around him and his parishioners.

Fuller also felt there were an excessive number of Lutheran churches in Manistee, and soon after arriving began conversations of possible unification with Pastor Gudman Petersen of Our Saviour's and Pastor Willard Wagner of St. Peter's. Wagner served the Norwalk church also, 10 miles north of town. Pastor Petersen was comfortable with his present congregation and was lukewarm to the subject. Pastor Wagner appeared open to the idea.

In the spring of 1966, however, Pastor Wagner accepted a call to a ministry in Chicago. Pastor James Hughes followed Wagner at the St. Peter and Norwalk churches. This was Pastor Hughes' first parish after seminary, so his not being too enthused about the possibility of ending his first ministerial call prematurely is understandable.

Fuller had good personal relations with both Petersen and Hughes, but his efforts to seriously talk unification with these two colleagues were not fruitful. Fuller remained convinced, however, throughout his ministry in Manistee, that merger was the only route to an effective witness and growth in the community, and persistently resurrected the subject whenever he felt it could be done without straining relations and creating offense.

It was Pastor Fuller's custom, weather permitting, to take long daily walks with his prayer book, and always included prayers toward unification of the LCA and ALC congregations in the area. He was consistent in this, at times feeling quite frustrated, but never losing heart. Two reoccurring thoughts developed from this concerted contemplation: First, if it was left up to the lay people, he believed there could be a merger; and second, it would take something quite dramatic to bring a merger about.

One occasion in which Fuller resurrected the subject was at the centennial anniversary of Our Saviour's church in July, 1968. Fuller, one of the speakers, was very emphatic in the "sin" of the three churches of common doctrine continuing to remain separated when their ministry could be so much more effective if united.

Howard and Hilda Marie Fenton, from Messiah, attended the centennial celebration as members of a sister church and Howard as mayor of the city of Manistee. Fullers message-weighed on the Fentons' hearts and minds for some time, until sometime in March, 1969, Howard invited Doug Jensen of Our Saviour's to lunch to get his thoughts on the possibility of the two churches getting together. Jensen was receptive to the idea. Fenton reported of this amicable meeting to Messiah's church council.

Late in 1968, Pastor Fuller put in a request to the LCA synod office for another Call. Much to Messiah's disappointment, he submitted his resignation from Messiah, Manistee, and accepted the Call to Messiah Church, Bay City, effective April 15, 1969.

The exact date of Fenton's reporting to Messiah Church Council of his meeting with Jensen is unclear, but it probably was at the special council meeting called by Dr. Matson, LCA President, on Thur., March 13, 1969, to discuss procedures for calling a pastor for Messiah, as the minutes of that meeting indicate discussion was held on having Messiah's and Our Saviour's church council meet to discuss the future of the two churches.

At Fuller's last meeting with Messiah's church council, Mon., March 17, 1969, he suggested this would be an opportune time for our council to suggest to Our Saviour's council that we get together to discuss the future of our two churches. This suggestion resonated well with the council members present.

It was an ideal time to consider talking about unification! With Messiah church being the larger of the two, there was the possibility of Our Saviour's feeling the larger church might dominate discussions by sheer numbers. But Messiah being without a pastor would be an equalizing factor, if this was a concern.

Mel Baumgartner made the motion, seconded by Howard Fenton, that a Resolution be drawn and submitted to Our Saviour's church council for a joint meeting of church councils to "study the future of both churches". The motion was carried.

The Messiah Church Council at this time consisted of the following people:

Bert Anderson	Richard Freer	Carl Johnson
Mel Baumgartner	Louis Gehopolos	Warren Johnson (V.Chair)
Donald Brown	Ed Hokanson	Russel Larson (Treasurer)
Leonard Collins	Nels Holmgren	Clifton Smith (Secretary)
Doyle Drury	Joe Janicki	Dean Thompson (Fin. Sec.)
Howard Fenton	Richard Freer	Karl Wagner

The council sent the letter drafted by Pastor Fuller, signed by the Vice Chairman, requesting a joint meeting of our councils to "study the future of our two churches". The letter was sent to Our Saviour's president, Norman Mathison, with copies to Pastor Peterson and to Dr. Frank P. Madsen, LCA President.

The process had begun!

## Chapter 2: Negotiations & Congregational Votes

A letter dated April 17, 1969, signed by President Norman Mathison, Our Saviour's council accepted the offer to explore the future of our two congregations together and suggested April 29th at Messiah church for the meeting.

Our Saviour's church council members at this time were:

Eugene Anderson, V.P.	Pres. Russel Melin,
Merlyn Ballard	Roger Miller,
Lois Hansen, Treas.	Russell
Jane Jensen, Sec.	Peterson,
Leonard Madson,	Bart Petoskey, Fin. Sec.
Norman Mathison,	

The April 29th meeting of the two church councils resulted in deciding to expand the scope of discussions to include St. Peter's and Norwalk churches. It was also decided each church council would appoint six people as their representatives to the Study Committee, and set June 4th as the next meeting date of the committee.

**St. Peter's church council members at this time were:**

Beryl Amburgey, V. Pres.	James MacGregor, Pres.
Les Bowling, Treas.	George McCardell
Glen Hayden	Hanna Morey, Sect.
Don Jankiewitz	Charles Neitzke
Frank Kruska	Dave Peterson
Richard Linke, Sr.	Larry Ryder

The following were appointed as members of the Study Committee by their respective councils:

<u>Our Saviour's</u>	<u>t. Peter's</u>
Clayton Andreson	Dorr Johnson
Dean DePeel	Ed Knaffle
Lois Hansen	August Miehlike
Doug Jensen	Walter Schultz
Dane Krueger	Walter Piellusch
Norm Mathison	Walter Zimmermann

<u>Norwalk</u>	<u>Messiah</u>
Ed Hilliard	Mel Baumgartner
Bob Hilliard	Howard Fenton
Laverne Iverson	Richard Freer
Bob Johnson	Ed Hokanson
Art Peters	Warren Johnson
	Marilyn Larson

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The June 4th meeting was a general discussion as to the pros and cons of possible unification of the four churches. The potential advantages seemed to far outweigh the disadvantages so the committee decided to organize itself and explore the merger question in a determined manner.

The committee was named "The Manistee Lutheran Merger Study Committee" (MLMSC). It was decided to have the next meeting on July 23rd, and to request the ALC and LCA synod presidents to have a representative at the meeting. Pastors Huges and Peterson were also to be invited to the meetings.

The officers elected were: Dorr Johnson, Chairman  
Doug Jensen, V. Chairman  
Dick Freer, Secretary

The LCA Michigan Synod President, Dr. Frank P. Madsen, or Harold A. Nielson, Assistant to the President, and ALC Michigan District President, Robert Wietelmann, or his assistant, Mr. E. Webber, were in attendance at each meeting from July 23rd on. Each one-brought a certain emphasis to our study. Dr. Madsen making sure our procedures were correct and within the rules of the church-at-large as well as our local churches and other legal entities. Dr. Wietelman and Harold Nielson emphasized the spiritual dynamics that a unified church could mean to our ministry in Manistee. All were helpful from their individual strengths, supportive of the movement, but stressed it would have to be a local effort and local self-determination.

The lay people on the committee were varied in their outlook also. A few were even reluctant to support a merger concept, but the great majority were enthusiastically+ in support of it, mainly because of the financial advantages and the expectation of a more effective ministry in our community. Because of geographical differences, it was understood that the Norwalk congregation probably would have less advantages than the city churches.

The Study Committee was divided into three sub-committees: Resolutions; Ministry; and Statistics & Information. These committees were to meet separately as often as necessary so as to have their report ready for consideration and adoption by the whole MLMS Committee on Sept. 17th.

On Sept. 3rd, a uniform letter went out to each member of the four churches from the MLMS Committee to inform the parishioners of the ongoing study, preparing them for a statement in the near future as to our recommendation for their action.

The Sept. 17th meeting consisted of the reading, discussion, and adoption of the reports of the Resolution Committee, the Ministry Committee, and the Statistical Committee. These three reports constituted the basis for recommending the four churches merge into one. A Time Schedule was set up to inform the church councils and congregations.

On Oct. 5th, all four church councils met at Messiah church for an Education and Information session. The recommendations, the statistical report, and the report on the ministry were presented for their consideration. No vote was called for at this meeting. Oct. 9th was set as the date for all four councils to meet individually and vote on whether or not to recommend adoption of these reports by their respective congregations.

On Oct. 9th, all four church councils met separately and voted to recommend the MLMS Committee's Recommendations, Resolutions, and Statistical Report be brought to each congregation on Nov. 9th, for a vote.

On Nov. 9th, each congregation held a special meeting after their regular worship service. The Synod President's reported that each synod board had previously approved the proposed merger. Motions were duly made and seconded and each congregation voted on whether or not to adopt the Resolutions to merge the four churches. The meetings were then recessed to a date to be determined by the respective church councils.

The MLMS Committee met at 7:30 PM on Nov. 9th to assess the voting results, which were as follows:

Our Saviour's	45 Yes	9 No	Passed
St. Peter's	79 yes	36 No	Passed
Norwalk	21 Yes	58 No	Defeated
Messiah	156 Yes	12 No	Passed

It was decided to proceed with a 3-church merger being that Norwalk rejected the affiliation. A new time table was approved to bring up the revised Recommendations to the council and the congregations, which were the same as previously approved, except for a three-church merger in lieu of a four-church one.



Each church council held a special meeting on Nov. 11th to vote on revised MLMS Committee Resolutions to merge Our Saviour's, St. Peter's, and Messiah Lutheran churches. Each council approved the Resolutions and set Sunday Nov. 23rd, for re-opening their recessed meeting of Nov. 9th to vote on the subject. Each council also nominated 3 persons for the New-Church nominating committee.

On Nov. 23, 1969, the three congregations passed the revised 3-church merger. The vote was as follows:

Our Saviour's	35 Yes	13 No		
St. Peter's	91 Yes	33 No		
Messiah	127 Yes	6 No	2 Abstained	

The MLMS Committee met for the last time at 7:30PM, Nov. 23rd, to review the results of the congregational voting and to set up the following time schedule for organizing the new church:

Nov. 24th: Nominating committee to nominate new council members. Nominating Committee consisted of the following:

Our Saviour's:	Lois Hansen
	Rita Norden
	Eugene Anderson
St. Peter's:	Walter Piellusch
	Joe May
	Crystal Peterson
Messiah:	Mel Baumgartner
	Russ Larson
	Sylvia Groves

Nov. 24th: A news release to the local newspaper and radio station informing the public of the merger agreement.

Nov. 25th: A letter to all members informing them of the Nov. 30th meeting and listing the candidates for church council.

Nov. 30, 1969, 3:30 PM: The first congregational meeting of the new church to elect the first church council.

### Chapter 3: The Melding of Three Into One

The first congregational meeting of the newly formed church was held Sunday afternoon, Nov. 30, 1969, with Dr. Robert Wietelmann, President of the Michigan District, American Lutheran Church, and Dr. Frank P. Madsen, President of Michigan Synod, Lutheran Church in America as temporary co-chairmen. The following 18-member church council was elected:

<u>Our Saviour's</u>	<u>St. Peter</u>	<u>Messiah</u>
Clayton Andresen	Beryl Amburgey	Howard Fenton
Dean DePeel	Glen Hayden	Richard Freer
Douglas Jensen	Richard Linke, Jr.	Warren Johnson
Irving Jolly	George Mccardell	Marilyn Larson
Dane Krueger	August Miehle	Dean Thompson
Kenneth Petoskey	Charles Nietzsche	Robert Tobey

The first meeting of the newly formed church council was held immediately following the congregational meeting. Howard Fenton was given the responsibility for overseeing and administering the organization of the new church by being elected it's first president. Marilyn Larson was elected secretary, Doug Jensen vice president, Les Bowling treasurer, and Russ Larson financial secretary.

December and January were busy months, with many lengthy special-called church council meetings and with several special congregational meetings. Committees immediately got underway and functioning, making sure there was representation from all three former churches on each committee. President Fenton made a determined effort to draw out opinions from those who tended to be more timid in expressing their thoughts.

There were many decisions to be made within a short period of time. Fenton was successful in keeping things rolling without ruffling too many feathers of parishioners who were used to doing things differently in their former church. There was a spirit of cooperation and determination by the council and committee members to make this venture work.

The different practices of the three congregations led to some strange compromises. Hymn singing is an example. One church stood for their hymn singing, another church sat, and a third stood for some and sat for others. Our compromise was to sit for all hymns except to stand for the last verse. It was humorous to see the startled look on visitors faces when the congregation would suddenly stand for last verse. After a number of years, when the practices of the former churches were fainter memories, more conventional practices would evolve. In this case, we now stand for all hymn singing.

Some of the early major decisions of the council and congregation were: to affiliate with the Lutheran Church in America synod; to pick "Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church of Manistee, MI" as our official name; to decide Jan. 4, 1970 to be our legal starting date; to determine Jan. 11, 1970 as our first worship together in one building; to hold services in the old Messiah church as it was the largest and with the most parking of the three facilities; to appoint Mrs. Harry Thompson and Quentin Jorgensen as organists, and Ed Knaffle as choir director; to continue with Pastors Hughes and Petersen until such time as we receive our new pastor or they receive a call to another parish; and transferring Our Saviour's church building to Our Saviour's Historical Society, an independent non-profit corporation established to preserve this historic building.

The members of Good Shepherd will always be grateful to the late Dr. Frank Madsen for his recommendation of Pastor Chris Laursen as our first "called pastor". Dr. Madsen, obviously having thought of this pastoral need as the merger was - developing, acted quickly in recommending Pastor Laursen. President Fenton led the pulpit committee of George Mccardell, Clayton Andresen, and Warren Johnson to Battle Creek to hear him preach in December. The Council then invited Pastor and Mrs. Laursen to visit us on Fri., Jan. 23rd thru Sun. Jan. 25th. The congregation called Pastor Laursen after the worship services on Sunday and he accepted the call.

There are few who would disagree that there could not have been a better choice of a pastor to meld our congregation together. To merge three churches which still had strong ethnic heritages, Germans, Danes, and Swedes, would be a challenge for anyone, but Laursen's congenial personality was just right for the situation. He did not arrive at Good Shepherd with preset ideas as to how the congregation should operate, but rather listened and subtly either guided or calmly submitted to strongly held lay expressions. I always marveled at his flexibility in this regard.

His ready smile and pleasant personality are tremendous assets. His unique ability to negotiate a consensus solution from differing opinions not only served our congregation well, but the community at large also. He is much in demand for various local human service boards, school boards, Synodical boards, and a leader in local ecumenical activity.

Laurson's much appreciated adult classes are bible oriented and in depth, relating the written Word to our lives in our world. Likewise, his preaching is gospel based, well thought out and interestingly delivered, and relating to our lives in our time. We have been blessed to have him as our spiritual leader.

Opportunities to serve abound at Good Shepherd, with strong and active standing committees: Worship & Music, Outreach, Properties, Social Ministry, Youth, Christian Education, Finance, and Stewardship, as well as Altar Guild, Choirs, Fellowship, etc. •

Women play a prominent role in Good Shepherd's leadership, serving in all facets of the congregation. The council elected a female president, Marge Johnson, for the first time in 1980. This is no longer an out of the ordinary occurrence.

Worship opportunities have expanded with a contemporary service on Saturday evenings and two services on Sunday mornings. Sunday Church School is between services on Sunday at the same time as the Adult Bible Class and the Young Adult Bible Class. There is also a Thursday evening Bible Class.

Our combined baptized membership in 1969, before the merger, was 1,092, with confirmed membership 790. In 1997 the baptized membership is 1,313, with the confirmed membership 881. Considering our community has lost population from people moving out of town after 5 of our major industries either left town or went out of business, these numbers are pretty good.

Our operating budgets have increased from the combined 3-church budgets in 1969 of \$68,599 to 1997's budget of \$279,930, a 14% increase per confirmed member, adjusted for inflation. Our stewardship emphasis of returning a proportion of our income to the Lord as we individually have been blessed, combined with our very competent and conscientious treasurer, Russ Larson, financial secretary Shirley Jankowiak, and finance committee, has resulted in Good Shepherd not having a struggle to balance the books and still keep up our share of benevolence contributions to the synod and to support the church staff and physical facilities adequately.

Major capital improvements have been: the building of an educational and administrative office wing in 1973; installation of an elevator in 1993, which with other remodeling makes our facility basically barrier-free; and developing additional parking. No debt remains on capital improvements.

An interesting project of the congregation in 1975 was the sponsoring of a Vietnam refugee family, Thuy and Nguyen Chu, and children Lam and Vu. The congregation pitched in with Marge Johnson as chairwoman, to gather necessary clothing and furniture for the family, with the church paying their rent until Thuy became self-sufficient, which was almost immediately. Parishioner Florence Mason had taken a course in "teaching English as a second language when you don't know the first" and volunteered to see the family got the necessary tutoring. She became so close to the family that Nguyen asked her if she would be her American mother. So, Florence became grandma and her husband Art, grandpa, to the Chu children. This family, which was increased by twin girls a couple years later, has especially enriched our congregation with their participation and their many talents. It has been a win-win experience for both the congregation and the Chu's.

Another unusual and successful development at Good Shepherd is the puppets used during "childrens' time" at worship services. Pastor Laursen started the program with puppeteer Mike Tillotson some years ago and it quickly became a success. The kids relate to the puppets which makes the lessons both interesting and entertaining for them. The program has now expanded with Katie Wood and sometimes Pastor Scott as puppeteers, each with different puppets to give variety.

At various times our lay leadership pressed for hiring a deaconess or lay associate to build up our youth program as well as to help with general pastoral work. These dedicated non-ordained professionals were successful, but for various legitimate reasons left our community after too short a time, leaving no continuity in the youth program.

In 1995, after an extensive committee study of our church needs, and upon Bishop Reginald Holle's recommendation, the congregation called Pastor Scott Sessler as our Associate Pastor. As with Pastor Laursen, we couldn't have found a better person for the position. Pastor Scott has been received with warmth and appreciation by the whole congregation, and is making his imprint on both youth and adult programs.

Throughout the 27-year history of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Manistee, including events that occurred in the years leading up to it's inception, the Holy Spirit has been guiding both lay and clergy. Our ministry has expanded over what we could have done as three separate congregations, but there is still much opportunity for increasing our witness to our Lord. As we continue our second quarter century as a congregation, we, at Good Shepherd, are still challenged to listen to the Voice of Guidance as we strive to carry out our Mission: "To share with people the love of God, to encourage commitment to Jesus Christ and to show concern for human needs in the church and in the community".