

**King of Kings Lutheran
1970-2002**

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Two traits that have characterized the members of WELS congregations are their strong love and faithful loyalty to our conservative, confessional church body. These traits have often been the impetus for starting new mission congregations. This was the case for King of Kings Lutheran Church in Kennewick, Washington. Strong love and faithful loyalty were the foundation and have been the enduring characteristics of this congregation.

The congregation's origins began with two families, the LeRoy Millers and the Robert Auchumpachs. These two families moved from Yakima to Kennewick in 1968 and as members of Grace Lutheran Church in Yakima, they wondered if the Wisconsin Synod would be willing to start a new congregation in Kennewick. After a written request for services in the Tri-Cities (Kennewick, Richland and Pasco) was sent to the Mission Board of the Pacific Northwest District, Pastor Arthur Valerio of Zillah was authorized and encouraged to look into the matter, in October, 1968. After several trips to Kennewick, a room in the old YMCA building was secured and the first service was conducted on November 17, 1968. By the end of the year there was a nucleus of four families, the Millers, Auchumpachs, the James Mulvihills, who had also recently moved into the area, and the Gordon Chichs, who were already residents of Kennewick. Interestingly enough, only the Chichs would play an instrumental role in establishing the congregation.

1969

The congregation continued to reach milestones in 1969. On February 9, 1969 they started Sunday school with an attendance of four. In a meeting on March 30, the name "King of Kings Lutheran" was chosen for their congregation. In June, Vicar Ronald Gosdeck came to work for the summer. On June 17-18, 771 homes were canvassed which resulted in 39 prospects. The next Sunday showed a record attendance of twenty-seven.

Things were progressing so well that on July 27 Pastor Valerio discontinued his work and district missionary Warren Widmann was sent to Kennewick. At this time it was the practice of the Wisconsin Synod that before a full time pastor was sent to a new congregation, a district missionary would be assigned for a year or two to organize the congregation and equip them to reach out to others, somewhat similar to the practice of the apostle Paul. Pastor Widmann was finishing up work at a new congregation in Kelowna, British Columbia, and soon after arriving in Kennewick was asked to help start a new congregation in Bend, Oregon as well.

Though Pastor Widmann's time was split between these three congregations, he was still able to accomplish much at King of Kings. Worship in the YMCA was becoming too much of a hassle since they had to clean up the mess children had made the night before. Therefore, in October they began renting an office building at 317 W. Kennewick Ave. in downtown Kennewick. Sunday school was held at 9:30 am and worship at 10:30 am. Though they often had to compete with a Pentecostal group that was worshipping in the storefront next to them, the office building was a very visible and accommodating place, and served well as their worship facility for the next five years.

During this year, two families, the Leeland Besels and the Maury Whites joined the congregation and became dedicated members. The circumstances that brought them to King of Kings are good examples of the love and loyalty for WELS that existed in King of Kings congregation. The Besels had been WELS members in California and had been visiting different churches. Though they sometimes wondered if more could be offered to them and their children in a larger congregation, their loyalty to the WELS compelled them to help this small congregation. The Whites came to King of Kings in a more unique way. One week Pastor Widmann accidentally received the Whites' copy of *The Lutheran News* in his mailbox.

Recognizing an opportunity, Pastor Widmann delivered the copy to the Whites and introduced himself. It just so happened that the Whites had been looking for a more conservative church, and they soon became members of King of Kings.

The Chichs also offer a good example of the love and loyalty WELS members show to their synod. The Chichs had been living in Kennewick and attending Bethlehem Lutheran, a Missouri Synod congregation, for some time. As children, however, both grew up in a WELS congregations in Wisconsin, and so when they read in the newspaper that a WELS church was beginning to hold services, they decided to visit. Though they were very happy at Bethlehem, their love for the Wisconsin Synod motivated them to join King of Kings and use much of their time and skills in support of the congregation. Gordon Chich built the altar, pulpit, lectern, baptismal font, hymnboard, and candleholders for their worship services.¹ Having received benches from Grace Lutheran in Yakima and Bethesda Lutheran in Portland, and a piano from Miss Anna Soll of Grace Lutheran in Yakima,² King of Kings was blessed with a wonderful facility for worship.

1970

The year started with 14 members. Having secured a worship facility, Pastor Widmann and the congregation began to focus their efforts on reaching out to others. Four members from the congregation attended three evangelism workshops at Grace Lutheran in Zillah in January and February. From these workshops, a seven-week plan was adopted for inviting friends, neighbors and relatives to worship, especially to their Easter service at the end of the seven weeks. The plan was as follows:

Week 1 – Evangelism begins in the home. Encourage all members to attend every week.

¹ The hymnboard and candleholders are still used in the church today. The altar, pulpit, lectern and baptismal font are currently being used at our WELS congregation in Pullman, Washington.

Week 2 – Invite friends and relatives

Week 3 – Invite neighbors and fellow workers

Week 4 – Visit those on the prospect list

Week 5 – Encourage children to invite their friends to Sunday school

Week 6 – Do some canvassing with Easter invitations

Week 7 – Visit all those you have contacted in the last six weeks and invite to Easter

From these efforts, the Dale Johnson family began attending, and on May 3, King of Kings had their first baptisms as the Johnsons' three children were baptized.

The members also reached out in other ways. They held a two-week Vacation Bible School in June and had 32 attend. They took part in the Washington summer camp, with 7 attending from King of Kings, including 4 prospects from their Vacation Bible School. Through these projects the Lord brought great blessings upon the congregation. At the end of August, the Miller family moved back to Yakima, and so in less than two years, three of the four original families were no longer members. Yet despite these losses, the Lord had so blessed the work at Kings of Kings that their membership had increased to 36 by the end of the year.

Things had been progressing so well, it was obvious that Kennewick was a viable place to start a new congregation, and so King of Kings began calling for a full time pastor in May. Pastor Valerio, who had begun the work in Kennewick, was called first, but he returned it. Two other pastors received and declined the call during the summer. Finally, Pastor Elden Bode of North St. Paul, Minnesota was called at the end of September. On November 1, the congregation was formally organized and its constitution accepted. Gordon Chich was elected president, Leland Besel secretary, and Maurice White treasurer. One week later they received

² The paino is also still used in the church today.

word that Pastor Bode accepted the call. Pastor Widmann moved on to Bend, Oregon to continue his work there, and Pastor Bode was installed on December 13.

1971

The congregation became officially incorporated in the State of Washington on April 28 and in August they were officially received into membership of the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod at their biennial convention. King of Kings celebrated their first youth confirmation class of five in June, and at the end of the year membership had increased to 45.

1972

In May Pastor Bode took a three-month leave of absence to receive treatment for cancer on his vocal chords. Though the treatment was successful, Pastor Bode was no longer able to sing and he constantly had to suck on hard candy to provide relief for his throat. At the end of December, surgery was required, and so Pastor Bode was absent for another five weeks. Because of his absence, there was no confirmation or Vacation Bible School that year. The congregation spent much time looking at various parcels of land for future church property. In November, the General Board for Home Missions and the Board of Trustees granted the congregation a \$25,000 loan to purchase land.

1973

Pastor Bode returned the third week in January, and King of Kings continued to look for property to build a church. In March, a building committee was elected and they chose a piece of land on W. 4th Ave. Although an agreement was signed to purchase the land in June, there were still questions about the land. It was a long narrow property, and though it seemed best to only use part of the land and sell the rest, the Synod did not want to be involved in selling land. Furthermore, some were concerned because the land was under some power lines. Remarkably,

even though a down payment had been made, in August it was returned since the covenants against it could not be removed. This actually worked out for the best, for a couple weeks later the church found a better piece of property a few blocks from the first property at W. 5th Ave. and Edison and on September 9, this property was purchased.

Other exciting things were happening in the congregation. A youth group was started Sunday evenings. This group met on and off through 1977. Also for the first time a choir was started. Finally, a number of large families moved into the Kennewick area and transferred into the congregation. The Hasbargen family moved from an ELS church in Sutherlin, Oregon. The Julson family moved from Chicago. The Pietrusiewicz family moved from Kansas City. These families became strong members of the congregation and brought many of their relatives and friends into the congregation over the years. Because of these families, membership rose to 66 and average attendance rose to 44.

Though things seemed to be going well, King of Kings struggled with presenting a welcome and friendly atmosphere, an all too often common characteristic of WELS congregations. John Pietrusiewicz recalled the first time he visited King of Kings and had to stand by the door and wait for someone to come and talk to him. But here again is another good example of the love and loyalty of WELS members. Despite the less than friendly welcome, John Pietrusiewicz and his family still became members and as a member of the board of Evangelism he worked hard at changing this atmosphere in the congregation.

1974

Again much of the congregation's work centered on their building project. The property at 5th and Edison was dedicated on February 17, and on April 24, construction began on the parsonage. The congregation voted to do the shingling, painting, floor covering, and electrical

work, with Gordon Chich directing and doing much of the work. Pastor Bode moved into the parsonage on September 13, and it was dedicated with prayer and an open house on November 3.

Soon after the parsonage was finished, the congregation was unexpectedly asked to leave the storefront they had been worshipping for the last five years. On November 17, they moved their place of worship to a large room at the Cosmo Angus Motel. Despite this setback, the congregation saw another rise in membership (80) and average attendance (53).

1975

Work now focused on the church. The building committee worked feverishly with architect Champ Sanford of Yakima and on March 13, the congregation accepted a bid of \$143,375 from Walker Young Construction Co. for the building of the church and education wing. Ground was broken on April 6 and the cornerstone was laid on July 20. The congregation put in the floor tile and carpeting and on September 7 conducted the first service in their new building. The dedication of the new church and educational-fellowship wing took place the following week, September 14. Pastor Widmann preached at the forenoon service, Pastor Valerio preached at the afternoon services, and a choir from Grace and Redeemer congregations in Yakima offered their praises in the services. A total of 193 people attended both services. It was truly a joyful day of thanksgiving to God.

1976

In the spring the congregation began working on the landscaping at the church. Members seeded the lawn, planted shrubs and flowers, hauled in beauty bark, and installed underground irrigation. Sue White directed much of this work. The congregation celebrated its first two weddings in the summer. Curtis Nichols was married to Lois Grohs on June 26, and Bill Hatfield was married to Sue Crippe on July 18. In November, King of Kings held their first

meeting for the Lutheran Boy Pioneers. Membership (109) and average attendance (70) again increased.

1977

With things well established in Kennewick, in March Pastor Bode began holding Sunday evening services with a small group in Moses Lake. On May 15, Moses Lake was granted exploratory status. Also in March, King of Kings held their first meeting of the Lutheran Girl Pioneers. On August 21, the congregation celebrated Pastor and Mrs. Bode's 40th wedding anniversary. On September 8, the Ladies Guild was formally organized, though they had been meeting for bible study and had been serving the congregation since 1971.

1978

As the congregation continued to grow, more programs were initiated for the family. King of Kings began having regular Family Nights, the youth group began to meet regularly, and they also started a Couple's Club. On July 22 new pews were installed into the church (beforehand they had been using folding chairs). On September 2 the first burial service was conducted for Mr. Howard Tarr.

1979

The congregation expanded their organizational structure to four new boards – Elders, Education, Evangelism, and Stewardship. In February King of Kings began to seriously discuss opening a Christian Day School. After a survey in April, however, it was determined that though their seemed to be strong support for a school, it wasn't feasible at the present time. Though they did not start a school, the congregation was happy to have two of their members, Jody and Linda Hasbargen, graduate from DMLC and enter the teaching ministry.

Because of increased trouble with his voice and the inability to do work in the ever-increasing population in the area, Pastor Bode announced his retirement in September. A farewell service was held for Pastor Bode on the evening of September 23, and he preached his final sermon on September 30. Soon after, the congregation was delighted to hear that Pastor Ron Baerbock from New Berlin, Wisconsin had accepted the call as their next pastor.

1980

Pastor Baerbock was installed on January 20, and not long after he came in contact with another flock that King of Kings would serve for years to come. A Missouri Synod congregation in Pendleton, Oregon had split because of a liberal, charismatic pastor and a group of about 30 from that congregation got in touch with Pastor Baerbock, wondering if the WELS could serve them. Things looked promising, so in June two Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary students were sent there for a week and canvassed about 1000 homes. The next week Pastor Baerbock began Bible Information Classes with the group on Thursday nights. On September 14, Pastor Baerbock and the congregation met with the district mission board, and on September 28 they were granted exploratory status. On December 7 Pastor Baerbock began conducting weekly Sunday evening services in Pendleton, a practice that has continued to the present. On January 5, 1981, the group from Pendleton was accepted as members of Kings of Kings Lutheran and of the WELS.

One mystery that remains is if this was the first contact that King of Kings had with Pendleton. Many of the members at Kennewick clearly recall Pastor Bode going down to Pendleton for Sunday evening worship services. However the two founding families at Pendleton, the Uhlrichs and the Hutchisons, had never been in contact with Pastor Bode. Though the members at Kennewick insist that Pastor Bode had made trips down there, no

mention is made of it in the congregation's minutes or bulletins.³ Furthermore, Pastor Bode never mentioned any contacts in Pendleton to Pastor Baerbock when he took over. Apparently, there must have been a different Lutheran group in Pendleton that Pastor Bode had visited but nothing materialized from his visits. Who this group was and why Pastor Bode's visits with them were not recorded remains a mystery.

One other milestone during 1980 was the formal organization of the youth group under the new name of E.P.I.C., Every Person In Christ, a name they have continued to use up to the present time.

1981-1983

As 1981 began, Kings of Kings was full of excitement and expectation. On November 9, 1980, the church had celebrated its 10th anniversary. Membership (151) and average attendance (85) had increased dramatically. Vacation Bible School, which had an attendance of about 20 for last six years, jumped up to 52. There was the hope that a daughter congregation would be started soon in Pendleton, and so a summer vicar was sent to the area and canvassed over 2000 homes. Finally, the congregation in Kennewick was working hard toward starting a Christian Day School.

As it turned out, King of Kings would have to wait two years before the school was started. At the end of 1981, they had submitted a request to the district mission board to supply them a teacher, but that request was turned down at the beginning of 1982. In the fall of 1982, the congregation had to decide whether to send another request to the district mission board, support a teacher on their own, or to wait another year (fall of 1984). In a meeting on December 14, the board of education and the church council decided to wait another year. Amazingly, when the plan was put before the voters on December 26, they overturned it. One of the

³ This is especially strange because Pastor Bode's trips to Moses Lake are recorded.

members got up and made a rousing speech that with God's help they could support a teacher, and the voters voted unanimously to call a teacher and start a Christian Day in the fall of 1983.

Looking back on it now, many of the members realize that it might not have been wise to make such a quick emotional decision. Even though the vote was unanimous, the fact of the matter was that not everyone in the congregation was totally behind starting the school. This was why the church council and board of education had decided to wait another year in order to gain more support. Though the congregation seemed united at this meeting, the lack of full support would become evident in the years to come.

Having decided to start the school in the fall of 1983, there was much work to be done. On February 27, 1983, Roger Holtz was called to be principal. On April 17 he accepted and was installed on July 10. In April a playground was installed on the grounds, with Gordon Chich again doing much of the work. There was discussion of hiring a kindergarten teacher as well, but it was decided that parents could volunteer their help when needed. In order to better carry out this task, a committee called F.O.C.E. (Friends Of Christian Education) was formed. Members of F.O.C.E. assisted the principal in teaching, helped organize field trips, and provided financial support for equipment that was needed.

With things all in place, King of Kings Christian Day School began in the fall of 1983 with an enrollment of 19.

1984-1987

During this time period there was again much to be excited about at King of Kings. Soul membership had risen to an all time high of 256. The congregation had its largest confirmation class of seven, and its first graduating class of six from King of Kings Lutheran School. The

future also looked bright, as there were now more than 100 children under confirmation age in the congregation.

Yet there were challenges as well. Only about forty percent of the congregation attended church every Sunday, and right from the start the congregation struggled in supporting the Christian Day School. Already after the first year, the congregation was in the red and had to make budget cuts for the 1984-85 school year. In fact, a generous loan given by one of the members was needed in order to pay the principal's salary during the second school year.

The problems eventually came to a head during the 1985-86 school year. Enrollment remained low at 16, the congregation was going further in debt, and some parents were unhappy with the principal and threatened to pull their children out of school. A meeting in February cooled tensions, but Mr. Holtz' health was deteriorating and in April he asked for a two year medical leave of absence. Also in April it was decided after much debate that in order to maintain the school, parents would have to pay tuition. After two calls were returned, the congregation turned to the special assignment committee and Mark Williams was assigned as their new principal.

Enrollment for the 1986-87 school was 12, and in May Pastor Baerbock accepted a call to Puerto Rico. The congregation called Pastor Tom Gumm from New York in July and he accepted and was installed on August 16.

1998-1991

Not long after Pastor Gumm arrived, King of Kings began working at getting their entire congregation focused on outreach. The congregation worked together on a mission statement to remind them why they exist. Cottage meetings were held to discuss ways of making King of Kings a more visitor-friendly place of worship. As a result of these meetings, a number of

changes were made. They began using the New International Version in worship. Ushers took on the added responsibility of greeter, giving direction to first time visitors. The congregation added two worship services on Sunday. They held two Friendship Sundays in 1988, both of which were very well received. Members began to be trained to use God's Great Exchange. The congregation also began using individual cups along with the common cup, and they started using *The Sampler* in worship as well.

The congregation also worked hard at keeping their Christian Day School going. A separate mission statement was drawn up for the school. Mrs. Gumm was hired as a kindergarten teacher for the 1988-89 school year. In the spring of 1989, King of Kings handed out 2000 invitations to an open house for the school, and the result was a doubling in enrollment to 29 students for the coming school year. Because of the dramatic increase, King of Kings called Debbie Huston, a member of the congregation, to serve as half time teacher. With the school's enrollment projected to increase to 35 for the 1990-91 school year, the board of education discussed adding movable rooms to the property and perhaps even building a new school. Finally, the stewardship committee presented a long-range plan to the congregation to enable them to become financially sound.

Unfortunately, the congregation's financial situation did not improve. They continued to go further and further in debt, and at the April voters meeting in 1990 they decided to close the school temporarily until the congregation was financially sound. Numerous tensions had caused the school to struggle from the beginning –whether to open the school in the first place, whether to have tuition or not, tensions between parents and teacher, members and pastor. These tensions ultimately led to the school closure, and sadly it never reopened.

Some members were very upset that the school had closed. Others had personality conflicts with the pastor. Sadly, at the October voters meeting a few members made a request for Pastor Gumm's resignation. At subsequent church council meetings, it was determined that most of the members strongly supported Pastor Gumm, but for the good of the congregation they decided that Pastor Gumm would take a three month leave of absence for counseling. The congregation would also participate in six counseling sessions with district president Warren Widmann. Retired pastor Norman Berg served the congregation during the leave of absence.

1991-1994

The leave of absence brought some healing to the congregation and for the next two years things were doing well. Unfortunately, another matter arose in 1993 that brought more friction into the congregation. Some of the Sunday School teachers had been attending bible studies with Christians with whom they were not in fellowship. As a result, these members were no longer allowed to teach Sunday School. Though the congregations went through a bible class on the doctrine of fellowship, some felt that the pastor had been too quick to discipline the Sunday School teachers. This issue reopened old wounds and began to divide the congregation. Some were totally supportive of the pastor. Some were not supportive. Others were indifferent. Sadly, members began to leave King of Kings.

Despite the tensions, the outreach at King of Kings continued. In 1994 a travel-canvass-witness team came for a week in March and canvassed 2000 homes. That summer, King of Kings called summer vicar Gary Bode to do evangelism work in the area. As a result of their work, 45 prospects were uncovered.

In November of 1994, Pastor Gumm received and accepted a call to Grace Lutheran in Seattle. In December, the congregation called Pastor Vaughn Vogel from Zion, Illinois. Pastor Vogel accepted the call at the end of January and arrived at the end of March, 1995.

1995-Present

Two highlights marked Pastor Vogel's first year at King of Kings. The congregation adopted *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* for use in its worship service. In November, the congregation celebrated its 25th anniversary. Despite the difficulties in recent years, King of Kings thanked the Lord for his grace.

In 1996 King of Kings received a family into membership from an unlikely source. The Moe family was living in North Powder, Oregon, 90 miles east of Pendleton. They had become unhappy at the Missouri Synod congregation they had been attending, and so they phoned Pastor Vogel, the nearest WELS pastor, though 150 miles away. After visiting with them, the Moes joined the Pendleton congregation and have faithfully traveled the 90 miles every Sunday for Pendleton's evening worship service.

In 1997, King of Kings built a new playground on their property. Knowing that they would pay off their mortgage in a year, the congregation formed the Expansion/Growth committee and began forming plans for outreach and growth. Their recommendations included hiring a part time secretary, expanding their church facilities to include more seating in the chapel and a larger fellowship area, working to help the Pendleton congregation grow by calling a second pastor, and research opening a preschool program.

After burning the mortgage in March, 1998, the congregation began working wholeheartedly at the Expansion/Growth committee's recommendations. In 1998 they hired a part time secretary. In 1999 they decided to focus their efforts on Pendleton, and called Pastor's

son Michael to serve as summer vicar over the next two years and do evangelism work in the Pendleton area. After two summers, three-fourths of Pendleton had been canvassed and two families had joined the Pendleton congregation. After the vicar left for the summer, the pastor and evangelism committee of King of Kings in Kennewick continued to do monthly follow-ups on the prospects in Pendleton. The fact that a congregation would focus its efforts to help another congregation shows the great love that the members at Kennewick have for their brothers in sisters in Pendleton, and their love for the work of the synod.

In 1999 and 2000 King of Kings did extensive research on expanding their building and opening a preschool. After much deliberation, they decided against these projects at the present time, and instead came to the conclusion that the best way for the congregation to grow and reach out to the community would be to call a second pastor. They continue working toward this goal.

Pastor Vogel and his family have endured numerous physical difficulties in their years at Kings of Kings. In 1998, Pastor had quadruple bypass surgery, and over the next year and a half continued to have problems with arrhythmia. In 1999, Pastor's wife Judy was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. After receiving chemotherapy that year, the cancer went into remission in 2000, but returned again in 2001.

Yet despite these physical difficulties, King of Kings congregation has grown spiritually. Pastor Vogel brought stability back to the congregation, and many of the members that had left King of Kings returned. With their great love and faithful loyalty to their church, their synod and their Lord, King of Kings expects God to work great things among them in the years to come.