

# The History and Development of Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church

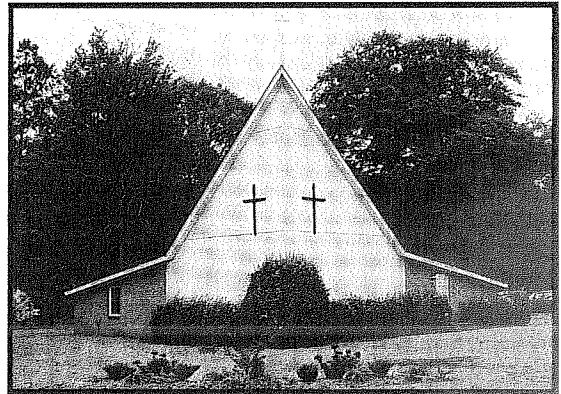
Virginia Beach, Virginia  
1967-2005

*From...*



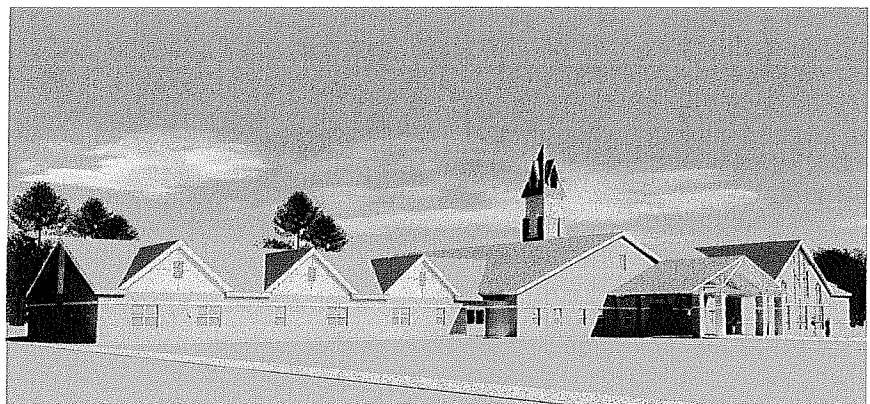
Original worship site at Norfolk Academy

*To...*



Current site of Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran  
Church on Providence Road in Virginia Beach, VA

*To...*



Computer drafted image of future site soon to be built

Church History CH3031  
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The opportunity to write a church history paper on any event in the history of the WELS is both a wonderful opportunity and an overwhelming decision to make. The question arises, "What do you write about?" Early considerations were the history and development of the role of women in the church. Another consideration was to follow the various views on the divine call through the past 150 years. Both held promise. Neither addressed the need I felt to grow in an understanding of my own roots. I was born and raised in a WELS church on the geographical outskirts of this synod's Midwestern center. It is now eight years since I attended that church. What memories I have quickly fade. Add to that the fact that while I attended, I wasn't so much interested in my church's history. It was simply taken for granted that this church existed and that in it I and so many others received a healthy dose of God's truths. Eight years later I hope to answer that question concerning the history of Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church (hereafter RELC). In this paper I will cover two issues. Where did RELC come from and where is it going?

*25 Years of God's Grace*, a publication put out by RELC in 1993 commemorating its twenty-fifth anniversary includes many articles and reprints concerning the early years and continued growth of the congregation. It opens with a wonderful article entitled "A Seed Grows in Virginia" by Barbara Bumbalough, a member since 1971 and the church's historian. Much of what follows is a summary of her original article with insights added from additional sources. This paper concludes with a summary of a presentation given to the members of RELC in 2004 pointing ahead to where the church is going.

It all began in the summer of 1964. Pastor Walter F. Beckmann of Falls church, Virginia, recognized a very real need to serve the WELS military personnel in the Tidewater area. The Tidewater area is home to countless military bases and the world's largest naval base in Norfolk.

An article written by Pastor Beckmann for the *Northwestern Lutheran*, December 1972, mentions that he would travel the 200 miles south from Falls Church, VA each month to hold communion services in the area. It soon became obvious that this was not enough. More work needed to be done—especially follow up work to contact all the referrals that were scattered far and wide throughout all the many military bases that dot the area. The only realistic way for this work to be done was to have a called worker stationed there himself<sup>1</sup>.

For this reason Pastor Beckmann requested two seminary students be sent to contact WELS members in the Tidewater area and to serve them with the gospel. These two young men and Pastor Beckmann worked together for some time doing follow-up work, preaching and administering the Sacraments. Beckmann conducted the first official worship service for RELC in January, 1965. It was held in the home of Richard and Edith Cordner<sup>2</sup>.

This humble beginning showed promise yet RELC quickly ran into the same wall she will run into again and again in her early development. The people she aimed to serve do not remain in one place for very long. Nearly everyone who came to these early worship services was a serviceman, married to or a child of a serviceman. In 1972, when RELC was seven years old, there were only three non-military families. Beckmann writes, “When the fleet’s in, attendances run in the high 50’s. When it’s ‘Anchors aweigh’ we don’t always mention

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<sup>1</sup> Beckmann, Walter F. “Kingdom Work in the Old Dominion”, *The Northwestern Lutheran Vol. 59* 1972 17 December 1972, Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee, WI, 1973: 424,425, p. 425

<sup>2</sup> Bumbalough, Barbara, “A Seed Grows in Virginia,” *25 Years of God’s Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach, Virginia*, (November 1993): 3-5, p. 3. This collection of articles commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of RELC does not have page numbers. I added my own pagination to the booklet and will site those numbers throughout this paper.

attendance figures.<sup>3</sup> The humble beginnings of January 1965 lasted only until the fall of the same year. As ships set sail the numbers dwindled and what was started soon stopped.<sup>4</sup>

Not until November 1967 was the mission restarted. While other pastors might consider retirement at or before the age of seventy-two, Pastor Luther Voss considered that a good age to accept the call to set up a base camp in the Tidewater area where he could serve as the WELS civilian chaplain for the entire southeast coast. He had previously spent two years in Vietnam as our Synod's first civilian chaplain. Having served in the U.S. Army during WWI, he was uniquely suited for this position. For three faithful years he preached the Word of God and administered the Sacraments in the Tidewater area<sup>5</sup>. Worship services that had previously stopped now resumed in Pastor Voss's apartment. The first service had nine in attendance.<sup>6</sup>

A year later that group of servicemen and their civilian families had grown to 20 and Pastor Voss's apartment could no longer hold them. So the members of RELC rented the music room on the campus of Norfolk Academy, a private prep school in Norfolk.<sup>7</sup>

This fledgling congregation took root. On March 23, 1969, the voter's assembly adopted a constitution for the newly formed congregational body. In August of that same year, the congregation was accepted into membership of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. In April 1970 the process for RELC's acceptance as a synod mission was begun<sup>8</sup>. Now they were

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<sup>3</sup> Beckmann, "Kingdom Work in the Old Dominion," p. 425

<sup>4</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>5</sup> Bumbalough, Barbara, "Pastor's and Teachers' Biographies", *25 Years of God's Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach Virginia* (November 1973): 34-37, p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>8</sup> Tollefson, Donald and Erich Ealdek, Ed. North Atlantic District: History of Congregations. Northeastern Publishing House: Long Valley, NJ, 2000, p. 27

ready for a pastor of their own. Pastor/Chaplain Luther Voss had already made plans to retire before the close of the year. On June 28, 1970, Paul C. Ziemer, the first of the four seminary graduates called to serve<sup>9</sup> was ordained as RELC's first full time pastor.

Pastor Ziemer took over much of the chaplain work Voss had started. In addition to his call to serve as pastor, he was called by our synod's Military Services Committee to serve as a civilian chaplain while he worked with the mission nucleus. This was hardly a small undertaking. Karl Schmugge writes in a retrospective on Ziemer's career,

Thus a pattern became established of driving the 400 mile loop to conduct services at Cherry point Air Station, and Camp Lejeune, NC, every other Sunday afternoon and evening. On the alternate Sundays he flew down to offer worship services for military personnel at Fort Bragg, and then over to Raleigh to conduct services for some civilians who were beginning to gather there. (This is also the time during which he began taking lessons which finally led to a Private Pilot's License.) Military bases in Virginia were fitted in between the weekends.<sup>10</sup>

Everyone rejoiced to have a pastor. A parsonage was rented and services were moved from the music room of Norfolk Academy to the auditorium.<sup>11</sup> But they needed a church building too. Norfolk Academy held the right to cancel their rental agreement at any time. Even more critical however was a recently passed strictly enforced local ordinance forbidding "group religious activities in residential dwellings<sup>12</sup>." This bill included parsonages<sup>13</sup>. In order to

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, all four of RELC's fulltime pastors (Paul Ziemer, Ronald Hahm, Joel Luetke, and current pastor Eric Roecker) were called to serve directly from the Seminary. I recently spoke with my brother Nathan Luetke, a voter at RELC, who mentioned that they are presently (November 2005) considering calling an associate pastor from the graduating class of 2006. No official vote had taken place as of the time of that conversation. If this should happen, the next graduate called to serve would likely be a classmate of mine.

<sup>10</sup> Schmugge, Karl, "'Welcome Back to North Atlantic' to Pastor Paul Ziemer," *North Atlantic District News Volume 2, Number 1*, January 1997, Northeastern Publishing House: Fairport, NY, 1997: 6,7.

<sup>11</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>12</sup> Beckmann, "Kingdom Work in the Old Dominion," p. 425

<sup>13</sup> Ziemer, Paul "Let the Saints of the Lord Rejoice," *The Northwestern Lutheran Vol. 60*, 1973, 11 March 1973, Northwestern Publishing House: Milwaukee, WI, 1974: 74.

remain within the bounds of the law, all religious instruction conducted in a home had to be of an informal nature and between not more than two people. Any couples who desire to go through BIC courses together would have to do it outside their home. By 1972 Pastor Ziemer had twelve adults and five children desiring instruction and no church building<sup>14</sup>.

A building also serves as a home base from which mission work can be done. The Tidewater area is a rambling metropolis that in 1972 had over a million citizens. Rivers and inlets divided the land and the people. Vast tunnel works and bridges helped to connect but did not change the facts that people are spread far and wide. A need for a sister church in the area was recognized from the beginning. The sooner RELC could get her roots settled, the sooner another church could be planted in the area.

Good news came in November 1971. The Synod's board of Trustees authorized \$20,000 to purchase three acres of land from a Kempsville Mennonite farmer<sup>15</sup>. The land was located on Princess Anne Road in Virginia Beach. The possibility of buying a four-year-old existing church building on Providence Road was also considered, but did not seem feasible at the time<sup>16</sup>.

Bad news came shortly after. In order to build on the three acres previously quoted at \$20,000, an additional \$30,000 worth of improvements would be needed on the land itself before any foundation could be laid. Add to that the required "religious-use permit" that had to be acquired from city council and could take as long as nine months to be approved. The worst news of all came in August 1972. A recent city zoning and water moratorium bill passed. This bill prohibited new water connections to all new building sites<sup>17</sup>. It basically meant no one could

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<sup>14</sup> "Kingdom Work in the Old Dominion," p. 425

<sup>15</sup> Schmugge, p. 7

<sup>16</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

build anything until the moratorium was lifted. There was no telling how long that might take. All in all it appeared as though if RELC was to get a building it would be very expensive and years down the road.

Hope kindled again when the building located on Providence Road mentioned above and previously considered out of the question was put on the market at an amazing price. An ecumenical merger had occurred between two churches of the Brethren and one of their buildings was no longer needed. The Church of the Brethren indicated they would be willing to sell the building *and* the surrounding three acres for a mere \$130,000<sup>18</sup>. Rough estimates for the construction of a building half its size were over \$140,000<sup>19</sup>. The one they intended to sell was conveniently located exactly where RELC wanted to settle, was attractive, and could accommodate up to 200 worshippers<sup>20</sup>. This building had more to offer as well. Ziemer writes,

A pastor's study and spacious sacristy led off from the chancel area. And, as a bonus, there were eight Sunday-school classrooms attached. Six of these rooms were formed by wooden folding doors which permitted them to be opened up to make a large fellowship area. In the future, this portion of the building can easily be used for two classrooms and a kindergarten room when a Christian day school is begun.<sup>21</sup>

Immediate request was made to the Synod to purchase the property and the final papers were signed on December 22, 1972. Dedication of the new building followed on January 14, 1973.<sup>22</sup> Bumbalough writes,

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<sup>17</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>18</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3. Interestingly, it is mentioned in the "North Atlantic District History of Congregations" (p. 27) that this building became available due to "a split in a Pentecostal body, the church of the Brethren".

<sup>19</sup> Ziemer, p. 74

<sup>20</sup> Ziemer, p. 74

<sup>21</sup> Ziemer, p. 74

<sup>22</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

In the span of two short months, God had move the RELC flock from the uncertainty of shaky temporary shelter, and gathered it under its own roof in a spacious, well-appointed building. As the organ boomed out the strains of the opening hymn, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” on Dedication Sunday, it was truly the time to declare with the psalmist—“This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.”<sup>23</sup>

Ziemer continues,

What effect will this building have on the spread of the Gospel in southern Virginia? Only the Lord knows for sure. But 156 worshippers were present on dedication Sunday; five new families from the community visited the following Sunday; an adult instruction class has been begun with five students, and the average church attendance for the last month was up twenty over the month before. What else lies ahead? Preaching, teaching, and bringing the word where and whenever possible—the Lord will take care of the harvest.

One final touch was needed. Up to this point Pastor Ziemer had rented an apartment. In the spring of 1973 a parsonage was purchased for \$32,500. That same spring, Pastor Ziemer accepted a call to teach at Luther High in Onalaska, Wisconsin.<sup>24</sup>

Thankfully it took only a few short months before a new pastor could take his place. On July 22, 1973, Seminary graduate Ronald E. Hahm was ordained as RELC’s second pastor.<sup>25</sup>

Plans for expansion continued during the tenure of Pastor Hahm. The building purchased from the Church of the Brethren had its foibles that needed fixing<sup>26</sup> but there was also room in it

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<sup>23</sup> Bumbalough, Barbara, “Early Years at RELC”, *25 Years of God’s Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach Virginia* (November 1973):13,14.

<sup>24</sup> Bumbalough, “A Seed Grows in Virginia,” p. 3

<sup>25</sup> Bumbalough, “A Seed Grows in Virginia,” p. 3

<sup>26</sup> Bumbalough, Barbara, “Early Years at Resurrection,” *25 Years of God’s Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach Virginia* (November 1973): 11-16. Barbara Bumbalough includes a thorough and delightful first person ‘glimpse’ at the new church prior to renovations. I include it here now because it allows the reader to see how extensive the renovations must have been. Bumbalough writes,

“My first glimpse of the new church came in late Fall of 1972, and today one would scarcely recognize the chancel area as being a part of that picture. The only “Lutheran-looking” appointment in the entire sanctuary was the large cross which hangs behind our present altar, and that was positioned about one foot higher on a natural wood and burlap-toned background. At the base of the cross was a large picture-window glass opening which provided viewing of baptism by immersion in a huge fiber glass tank which was located in the walkway running behind our altar area.



for a Christian day school. In September, 1976 the school opened with Miss JoAnn Galkiewicz as the teacher. She had fifteen students from grades one to seven<sup>27</sup>. Four years later she resigned her call in order to teach for the Department of Defense in Japan. Thereafter, she taught at Lord of Life Lutheran elementary School in Friendswood, Texas<sup>28</sup>. Mr. Scott Jungen was installed in her place as the new teacher and later as the principal as well. His wife was called to teach first and second grade for a time. When she didn't have a call she served as uber-volunteer.

In May, 1978, Pastor Hahm accepted a call to teach at Northwestern Preparatory School in Watertown Wisconsin. This time the span between pastors was much less. Seminary graduate Joel T. Luetke was assigned and later installed as pastor of RELC on June 25, 1978.<sup>29</sup>

God continued to bless his outpost in one of America's major seaports. RELC was originally started to serve military personal in the area. That it did and did well. The church grew in membership and support. When RELC was eighteen years old she, so to speak became an adult. Spring of 1986 marked the beginning of RELC's completely self-supporting status. This was a celebrated milestone yet also a huge hurdle<sup>30</sup>.

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Directly in front of the baptistry window was the organ, which sat in an 18-inch-deep pit, with the organist facing the congregation. Immediately in front of the organ was a table which concealed the instrument somewhat, but it always struck me funny that the center focal point of the whole chancel area was the organist's head.

To each side of the center table, at 45 degree angles, the choir pews were situated, two on each side. These pews were enclosed on two sides by a solid-panel oak wood railing, and deacon's benches were positioned directly in front of the choir railings.

The original chancel area of the church resembled the appearance of a carpeted stage. It had only one floor level which rose about two feet above the present sanctuary floor, and it extended out into the sanctuary about three feet farther than it does today. A two and one-half foot high solid-panel oak wood rail, was attached to the sanctuary side walls and stretched to the lectern on the left and the pulpit on the right, separating the chancel area from the congregation. Imagine the pastor, with the choir seated behind him, delivering his sermon by the center aisle, close to the first pew, and that will give some impression of the original setting I encountered on my first visit to "The church of the Brethren" on Providence Road.--- Bumbalough, "Early Years at Resurrection" p. 13,14.

<sup>27</sup> Tollefson, p. 27

<sup>28</sup> Bumbalough, "Pastors' and Teachers' Biographies", p. 37

<sup>29</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4

<sup>30</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4

RELC had from its inception worked to serve others in the surrounding communities. A total of nine daughter congregations claim RELC as their mother<sup>31</sup>. The first was started back in 1971 by Pastor Ziemer in Raleigh, North Carolina. It is now Gethsemane Evangelical Lutheran Church. From this church four other congregations sprung up in North Carolina<sup>32</sup>. Shortly after pastor Hahm arrived in 1973 he started serving a small group of WELS members in the Roanoke area<sup>33</sup>. In November 1983 under Pastor Luetke a mission nucleus involving a considerable number of RELC's members living in the Newport News/Hampton area began holding its own services on the peninsula with Pastor Luetke. This nucleus is now Our Redeemer Lutheran church of Newport News, Virginia and from that church grew Living Hope of Richmond, Virginia. God was indeed blessing the outreach efforts of RELC. Yet when RELC became self-supporting, it all of a sudden faced some very real challenges<sup>34</sup>.

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RELC had previously transferred thirty souls to Our Redeemer and struggled from the loss of their regular financial support. Shortly after that she gained self-supporting status. This posed some very real difficulties. It was decided in June 1987 after eleven full and exciting school years, that the Christian Day School had to close its doors. There simply wasn't the money available to maintain it<sup>35</sup>. The elementary school had experienced a regular fluctuation in its enrollment during these eleven years. As many as twenty-five were enrolled one year and as few as seven in another (1980-1981). This was the case because so many members had to

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<sup>31</sup> Luetke, Joel, "From the Pastor," *25 Years of God's Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach, Virginia*, (November 1993): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>33</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 3

<sup>34</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4

<sup>35</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4

transfer whenever Uncle Sam so directed<sup>36</sup>. Yet perhaps there was another reason the school closed. Bumbalough writes,

During the eleven years of the school's operation the classroom was set up each Monday morning and packed away at the end of the day each Friday. The teaching area was then used for Sunday school as well as fellowship events. Occasionally there were those among us who participated in worship on Sundays but failed to notice that we operated a school during the week. When it came to "do or die" funding in 1987, we had learned that a school's visibility is vital for its continued growth.<sup>37</sup>

Yet when a door is closed it pleases God to open a window. Barbara Bumbalough rights in her historical essay,

On Friday in May [1986], a single telephone inquiry to Pastor Luetke (received by our secretary, Mary Ludwig) resulted in the reception of seventeen new members, representing seven families. A group of mature Christians, from another Lutheran body in Portsmouth, had become disheartened with changes in their church. Before the close of the year, all the families had joined RELC by affirmation of faith (Bender, Conrad, Engel, Florke, Helms, Rohlf, Wagner).

No only did the reception of this group fill a great void in the congregation, in terms of numbers, but they were enthusiastically involved and quite generous with their time, talents, and treasure. Their zeal was contagious; it was invigorating to get a transfusion of new blood. They often expressed how grateful they were to be in RELC's midst, so the fellowship bond was mutually beneficial.<sup>38</sup>

The hard times soon passed and the next several years saw much needed improvements made to existing facilities. The parsonage had new windows put in, a new roof, new siding and a completely refurbished kitchen. Except for the windows most of this work was done entirely by members of the church, the kitchen almost entirely by members of those families who recently joined. In 1989 a new organ was purchase to replace the fifty year old one originally purchased second hand by the members of the Church of the Brethren. The original dirt parking went through several renovations. It was first replaced with sea shells and sand. That kept down most

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<sup>36</sup> Bumbalough, Barbara, "Education in God's Word," *25 Years of God's Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach, Virginia*, (November 1993): 25-29, p. 26

<sup>37</sup> Bumbalough, "Education in God's Word", p. 26

<sup>38</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4

of the dirt tracked in on Sundays, but had an unpleasant fishy smell. This was later replaced by railroad bedrocks. These rocks, notorious to those in heels on Sunday were, to the relief of all finally paved over with asphalt (1985). A public address system was installed (1986). New kitchen cabinets (1987) and a newer and larger utility shed was built outback of church (1988). Vast improvements to the church building included a new roof, siding, and windows (1991). New doors, new carpeting and the gift of a beautiful stained glass window in the chancel came the following year (1992). Later another stained glass window was added above the Sacristy doors (1993)<sup>39</sup>. Again, nearly all this work was done with great enthusiasm by members happy to serve the Lord with their hands. In this list of property fixit jobs from the late eighties and nineties should also be added the fresh water hook up, steeple replacement, outdoor sign and sewer line installation of the late seventies and early eighties and the new carpeting and furniture for pastor's study, improved landscaping, new heating and air-conditioning systems, sinks and counter top kitchen of the later nineties. Again nearly 100% of the labor was done by members<sup>40</sup>. A list of those who faithfully served the Lord with their hands over the years would be too extensive to list here.

Time spent renovating and refurbishing her own facilities did not cause RELC to forget those around her hungry for the Word. Her continued desire to sow churches throughout the area continued during this time. In 1990 that group of seventeen from the Chesapeake-Suffolk-Portsmouth tri-city area was tenderly replanted along with other members of RELC from that

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<sup>39</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 4,5

<sup>40</sup> Gates, Charlie, "Property Maintenance," *25 Years of God's Grace: Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church Virginia Beach, Virginia*, (November 1993): 22-24, p. 22,23. It should be noted that while an extensive list of all those involved in the maintenance of RELC over the years would be neigh on impossible, Charlie Gates would certainly make the top of the list. He served as Head of Maintenance for many years and was very much appreciated.

area into a new congregation. King of Kings of Suffolk in Chesapeake, the ninth to claim RELC as her Mother/Grandmother church, had begun<sup>41</sup>.

November 1993 marked RELC's 25<sup>th</sup> year. During that year RELC numbered 221 souls and 159 communicants<sup>42</sup>. A blessed growth indeed from the original nine at the first service held by Pastor Voss in November 1967. Celebrations and happy memories marked this year. But there was more on the mind of Pastor Luetke and those who led with him than celebration. The number of souls under RELC's care first surpassed 200 ten years ago in 1983. That number fell below 200 the following year<sup>43</sup> but never did so again. Its continued uphill climb convinced those in charge that the present building would not be sufficient in years to come.

Already in 1992, under the leadership of Pastor Luetke the church council discussed a Vision and Mission Statement that included a future expansion and formation of an Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC). What began in one evening at a church council meeting soon became twelve years of planning that finally led to where RELC now stands, shovel in hand, building from ground zero<sup>44</sup>.

From 1993 to 1995, preliminary plans were discussed for expansion of the fellowship hall by adding a thirty by sixty foot addition and opening a day care center and kindergarten.

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<sup>41</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 5

<sup>42</sup> Bumbalough, "A Seed Grows in Virginia," p. 5

<sup>43</sup> This was due to the large mission nucleus (mentioned above) of RELC's members living in the Newport News/Hampton area who left to begin holding their own services on the peninsula with Pastor Luetke. This nucleus became Our Redeemer Lutheran church of Newport News, Virginia.

<sup>44</sup> RELC Building Committee: Finance, "Resurrection: Building on Faith": April 22, 2004. A copy is included on the CD-ROM entitled, "The History and Development of Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church" included with this paper.

A conceptual drawing was made at a cost of \$500. The estimate for this project was in the range of \$300,000 to \$400,000<sup>45</sup>.

In 1996 Pastor Malchow visited RELC and presented a funding program to help determine how to raise money for a Capital Fund Project. But it all sounded too expensive and years away. And in December 1997 Pastor Joel Luetke accepted a divine call to serve a congregation in Minnesota. From February to July 1998 Pastor Ervine Vomhof served as interim pastor<sup>46</sup>.

Some key events occurred while RELC was searching for a permanent pastor. The original mortgage was paid off. RELC became debt free for the first time in its history. The parsonage was sold and the proceeds invested. The congregation had a surplus in the general fund after all operating expenses were paid. In August 1998 the search was over as a new pastor was ordained and installed... a new seminary graduate. Eric Roecker continues to this day<sup>47</sup> to serve as their pastor<sup>48</sup>.

By late 1999 the vision of expansion was rekindled. Synod consultants, Dr. Dan Schmeling and Jason Nelson, were engaged to analyze the congregation's readiness to start an early education center. Their report issued a surprising result. An overwhelming need for a larger sanctuary to complete the mission of RELC over-shadowed the vision for an ECEC<sup>49</sup>.

It was re-evaluation time. RELC discovered in this report that their demographics as a small, transient congregation had changed. RELC had in fact become a large, growing

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<sup>45</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 10

<sup>46</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 11-13

<sup>47</sup> That is, December 2005.

<sup>48</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 14,15

<sup>49</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 16

congregation with second and third generation membership. In 2004 the number of baptized souls was approaching 340<sup>50</sup>.

This report was correct. The hallway into the fellowship wing was always crowded. The Sunday school children were jammed in every corner of the building while a growing Adult Bible Study group met in the sanctuary. Life With Jesus (Bible information) classes were becoming more and more frequent resulting in more adult confirmations. The sanctuary comfortably only seats 90, while services often have more than 125 attending<sup>51</sup>.

The reports were in. Now RELC just needed the impetus to move in the right direction. That came in December 1999 when an anonymous gift of \$100,000 was received for the purpose of starting a building fund. 2000 was marked by various meetings and visitations to assess the needs and ability to go forward with the new building project<sup>52</sup>.

In late 2000 a financial/stewardship presentation was given to prepare for a fund drive. In January 2001 the Study Committee published a final report of what RELC should do to expand the facilities. The rough estimate to renovate the existing facilities totaled \$2.9 million.

All seemed ready to move ahead. But in the Spring of 2001 another discovery was made. Several drafts had been made of the planned expansion. They were scratched and more were drawn. It was soon realized that no matter how much you redraw, an expansion simply would not cover all of RELC's needs<sup>53</sup>.

In the Fall of 2001, just as the plans seemed impossible to accomplish another anonymous gift was received, this time for \$250,000. Its purpose was to defray the cost of land

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<sup>50</sup> "Building on Faith" slide 17

<sup>51</sup> "Building on Faith" slide 18

<sup>52</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 19-22

<sup>53</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 24

if RELC would acquire a new site and move. This was a major turn in the path. A search for commercial land did not immediately locate any land at a reasonable price in an accessible location. RELC was about to give up looking and go back to renovation planning when a tip from a realtor directed RELC toward acreage on Centerville Turnpike for \$40,000 per acre. This was a reasonable price and close to the present location on Providence Road<sup>54</sup>.

Voters approved the land purchase and made an offer to purchase a ten acre lot. The offer was accepted contingent on a wetlands determination and zoning approval. All renovation plans were at this time finally discarded and all effort was redirected into developing a new site<sup>55</sup>.

Another blessing came when the Virginia Beach property was sold. A deal was made to sell the existing church property in stages. \$200,000 paid for the rear acreage allowing the new owner to immediately develop it, and \$500,000 paid upon evacuation of the church buildings, and RELC can conduct services rent free while construction of the new site is accomplished<sup>56</sup>.

In December 2002, the new site was purchased and paid for. The final purchase price was \$250,657, discounted from \$400,000 due to wetlands determined to cover about half of the property. An adjoining lot was purchased by another church for future expansion. Seeing an opportunity to grab the land while it is hot, RELC offered to purchase two additional acres<sup>57</sup>.

Christmas 2002 saw another anonymous offer to help raise money. A matching fund drive was started wherein all member donations up to \$5000 per family would be matched.

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<sup>54</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 27,28

<sup>55</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 29

<sup>56</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 32

<sup>57</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 33



Many families contributed more than \$5000 each so the donor extended the offer to match up to \$250,000 in total matching funds<sup>58</sup>.

By now RELC had made unbelievable steps forward in paying for the new church. It was ready to begin building. The architect and builder advise to start in spring 2004. Plans moved forward to get detailed drawings and permits to break ground in the April-May 2004 timeframe. The ten acres becomes twelve and God's blessings continue to pour in. A sign announcing the future home of RELC was placed on the property<sup>59</sup>. On June 13, 2004 ground was broken<sup>60</sup>. After more than twelve years of prayer and careful planning, RELC has begun a building project that promises to allow for continued growth of the Kingdom in southeastern Virginia. Then in 2004 another message from an anonymous donor came in. \$40,000 was offered to defray the cost of calling additional staff. Plans are being formulated to conduct a detailed study of RELC's needs for additional staff. A study committee will be formed in the near future<sup>61</sup>.

While the history of RELC ends with the present, its development continues into the future. It has been forty years since Pastor Beckmann first traveled south to seek out WELS military personnel in need of the gospel. In these forty years of God's grace much has happened for which the members of RELC have reason to give thanks. While this paper looks back at the past, no doubt, all who are involved in the construction of RELC's new building continue to look forward to the future. It is this author's prayer that God would continue to bless this church as he has in the past.

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<sup>58</sup> "Building on Faith," slide 35

<sup>59</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 39,40

<sup>61</sup> "Building on Faith," slides 47-49

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