

Built Up in God's Glory

**A History of the Building Projects of
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
Grand Blanc, Michigan**

Timothy Shrimpton
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Prof. James Korthals

Every congregation has its own unique quirks and personality. Some excel in certain areas of ministry and falter in others. Some seem to have their focus clearly in mind while others seem to struggle to find their purpose or niche in their communities. Regardless of the strengths and weaknesses, it's generally not hard to see the Lord working through them and in spite of them. His work his accomplished; his gospel goes out; his kingdom comes.

Gloria Dei in Grand Blanc, Michigan is a congregation with many stories. Perhaps the one that is most prominent among them when looking over its brief thirty-six year history is the number of building programs the congregation has gone through. At a time when congregations may have seen little in terms of physical expansion over decades, Gloria Dei has seen significant construction four times over a thirty-two year period.

This paper will attempt a brief survey of those four projects. It will also examine how God blessed those building projects to grow his church in Grand Blanc as well as what congregations might learn from the vision and execution of Gloria Dei's construction emphasis.

The Beginning

Before we can understand the story behind the building programs Gloria Dei has gone through, we need to take a brief moment to survey the start of the congregation.

In the present day, Flint, Michigan is a stereotypical example of economic down-turn. As General Motors has faced severe problems and cutbacks, the state of Michigan as a whole has faced difficult times. Yet Flint seems to have taken the recession especially hard.

This was not always the case, though. In the late 1960's, Flint (also known as "Buick City" for the large Buick facilities General Motors maintained in the city) was a thriving community. The Wisconsin Synod had a strong presence in the region. The Flint area congregations began the Flint Circuit Mission Committee (FCMC), a committee formed by one

pastor and one lay person from each of the local congregations. They were a "viable and active"¹ group. They would meet quarterly to discuss areas where they saw potential for growth. The FCMC was responsible for several churches springing up around the Flint area, including Gloria Dei and Mt. Sinai, in Montrose, Michigan.

In the late 1960's, the neighborhoods in Flint were beginning to change. Diversity where there was no diversity before began to creep in, and more than a few members from downtown churches began moving to the suburbs. Great credit should be given to the Flint-area churches. Rather than simply packing up shop and moving away from the inner-city as the areas around them began to change, through the FCMC they sought to start daughter congregations to serve those members for whom the commute to church had become rather lengthy. The overriding principle behind the starts ups was "Go where the people are and make it easy to go to church."² In doing so, it would also open up the opportunity to reach new communities with the message of the Savior.

Even at this time, Grand Blanc was developing into a "ritzy" suburb of Flint. Those who had enough money to move away from inner-Flint did; those with considerable money seemed to congregate in Grand Blanc. Members of the committee feared moving into such a setting would be setting themselves up for failure. There also seemed to be an unwritten, "gentleman's agreement" between the recently divorced Synodical Conference members that the Missouri Synod would stick to the cities and the WELS would be in rural areas and small towns. The FCMC sought to buck that trend and saw ample room for both Faith (the LC-MS church in Grand Blanc) and a WELS congregation to coexist in the same growing town.

1 Birner, Rev. Herbert. Written Interview. October 14, 2007.

2 Birner. Pastor Birner's church was Good Shepherd in Burton. That church, as he points out in the interview, was less than ten miles from where Gloria Dei was started. Yet the importance of convenience made it a viable place to plant a church.

Once the FCMC committed to Grand Blanc, Pastor Herbert Birner (pastor of Good Shepherd, Burton, Michigan) began the surveys and outreach into the area. Surveys uncovered a lot of members of Flint-area congregations who had moved and become disconnected from their churches. On October 18, 1970 the first worship service in Grand Blanc was held in the community room of the Bella Vista Mall. Pastor Birner preached on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, a time for everything. "I knew we felt it was time to establish a congregation for the WELS," Birner says.

It wouldn't be until almost a year later, on October 11, 1971, when the name for the congregation was chosen. *Gloria Dei* expressed exactly the sentiment the small group wanted. It was not their strength or might that would accomplish anything; it was all God's glory. Their Latin name expressed that eloquently. The small congregation worshiped in a rented room in the basement of the Citizen's Bank building for the next twenty-two months; Pastor Birner fit that service in between the two services at Good Shepherd.³

Land Purchases and Regrets

As the small nucleus began to grow slowly, the dream of many of the members of the fledgling Gloria Dei was to have their own pastor. Before doing so, however, the members sought to provide a home for their full time pastor as well as have land to build their own church building.

They investigated many options around the Grand Blanc area, and finally settled on a piece of property at 8200 South Saginaw Street in Grand Blanc. Saginaw Street is the main

³ Pastor would leave Burton around 9:30 after their first service, head to Grand Blanc with the organist for worship at the bank. They would then return to Burton just as the Gospel was read or the second hymn was being sung (the principal of Good Shepherd's school presided at the liturgy for the opening part of the service). Pastor Birner would arrive just in time to preach the sermon in the second service. That may sound like it was asking for trouble from a logistic point of view but Pastor Birner says that "it went like clockwork."

thoroughfare in Grand Blanc and the frontage on it would provide Gloria Dei with an amazing opportunity to be before the eyes of most people in and passing through the growing town. The land had a large house already on the property next to the road. They spent a great deal of effort cleaning up the parsonage before their first pastor, Pastor Donald Kolander, arrived.

The property was quite large for a mission start, about four acres, and receiving approval to purchase that land from the mission board was difficult. However, despite securing the funds and purchasing the land, the members of Gloria Dei ended up regretting the decision. While the property was spacious, it was shaped something like a triangle, narrow in the front and wide in the back. While the frontage on Saginaw Street was quite valuable, there wasn't much of it.

When approaching the property from the south, the left-hand turn required to come onto the property was quite difficult. Paul Meyer vividly remembers approaching the township with their request that a turning lane be put into Saginaw Street to make the turn easier and safer. The request, while entertained by the township, proved to be far too costly for the young congregation to afford.

A second problem with the land was that the parsonage was sitting on the prime portion of the real estate. The home sat right along Saginaw Street, where it would've been ideal to have at least a portion of the church building to allow for maximum visibility. Meyer checked what it would cost to dig a new basement and lay a foundation in the rear portion of the property and then to move the house from the front to the back. Like the turning lane, things turned out to be completely cost prohibitive.

Shortly after the small group purchased this piece of land and the troubles that went a long with it, another piece of property just around the corner went on the market. The land was

in three different parcels; it was family-owned by two brothers and a sister. The land shared some of its property line with the land Gloria Dei currently owned, but did not touch Saginaw Street; it was on the semi-perpendicular road, McCandlish. It offered more construction options than the land-locked Saginaw Street property, was a better shaped parcel of land, and it would be far easier for drivers to navigate towards as a turn from Saginaw Street to McCandlish was a more regulated and safer endeavor than the turn into the Saginaw Street property would have been.

Now Gloria Dei was faced with a rather difficult proposition. They had already just squeaked by to get approval from the mission board to purchase the spacious amount of land and the parsonage they currently had. Now they wanted permission to sell that piece of property and purchase the McCandlish Road property. Meyer describes it as asking "for the sun, moon, and stars."⁴ Yet they "fell on their swords," admitted errors in judgment and asked for permission to go in this new direction. It required some negotiation and compromises, but eventually Gloria Dei and the mission board settled on a plan that would be the best for everyone involved. Soon after the Saginaw Street property was put on the market.

Gloria Dei bought two of the three pieces of land available for sale. They purchased 5001 McCandlish Road which is where the parsonage would be built, and the neighboring piece at 5005 McCandlish, the current address of the church. The total price for the four acres of land was \$14,500. The sale was finalized on September 20, 1973. With the land on McCandlish purchased, serious plans could finally go forward for building a structure in which to worship as well as a home for their pastor and family.

4 Meyer, Paul. Phone Interview. November 11, 2007.

The Initial Church, Fellowship Hall, and Parsonage

Because the land on McCandlish was vacant at the time of purchase, Pastor Kolander and his family continued to live in the Saginaw Street home while a parsonage was built. At that time they formally put together a building committee. The committee consisted of Paul Meyer as Chairman, Ron Becker as Secretary, E. Louis Barger, Bernard Dittmar, Warren Roeske, and Pastor Kolander.

Meyer thought a “divide and conquer” approach to the dual construction of the church and parsonage would be most beneficial, as it was too great of a task for any one person to head up on his own. He asked Louis Barger to head-up the parsonage project, while he would focus principally on the church.

Meyer recalls their rationale as they worked through the plans for the parsonage: “We wanted to build a parsonage that was large enough to accommodate a Lutheran Family... We didn’t want to start off with a small parsonage that wouldn’t accommodate a man and his family if he had two or three children.”⁵

They opted for a bi-level design that could accommodate even a large family well. Because the Saginaw Street land was up for sale, they began construction on the parsonage first to enable Pastor Kolander and his family to relocate as quickly as possible. Royer Construction from Goodrich, Michigan was selected as the builder for the parsonage. Work began in June and was completed in November of 1974. The Church-

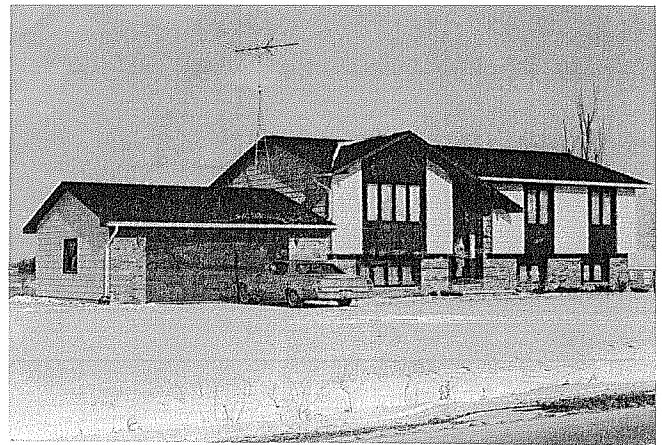


Figure A: The parsonage. Photo taken November 9, 1975; retrieved from WELS archives.

5 Meyer

Extension Fund extended a loan to Gloria Dei for the parsonage for \$39,534. The home serves as the parsonage for the pastor of Gloria Dei and his family to the present day.

As the construction progressed on the parsonage, planning continued for the church building. Just as Gloria Dei was looking to build, the synod architect, Duane Anderson, was looking to move on. However, aware of the Grand Blanc church's desire to build, he stayed on in a great enough capacity to see Gloria Dei's project through to completion. The Building Committee had many conference calls with Mr. Anderson on the phone in the Saginaw Street parsonage. At the time there were several different plans available which fit into the WELS' mission plans and Gloria Dei's budget. Pastor Kolander and Warren Roeske drove down to Cincinnati, Ohio, to visit Beautiful Savior who had just finished one of the options. They felt it met their needs and that it would fit in well with the community in Grand Blanc.

"The original floor plan called for a couple of steps between the church and the fellowship hall," Meyer remembers, "We opted not to go with that."⁶ They were already sensitive to needs of future members who may be wheel-chair bound as well as aware of the increasingly strict handicapped-accessible laws that would make later addition or remodels quite difficult should those two steps be in the way. This decision, while certainly wise in plan, would end up causing headaches in the construction and life of the building.

B.V. Merrow, then in Grand Blanc, was hired as the general contractor and worked with Gloria Dei to put together bid packs to other contractors in the area to get estimates for what cost they could build the proposed building. Merrow did a lot of work with church groups in the local area which ended up being quite a blessing for the congregation; this contractor's and architect's familiarity with Christian buildings was a luxury the church wouldn't have throughout

6 Meyer

all of the projects in the future. The Church-Extension Fund extended the congregation a second loan for the construction of the church totaling \$161,000 in May of 1974.

Eventually everything was in place and work could get underway on the church and fellowship hall. The groundbreaking service for the church was held on November 17, 1974. Work started the day after and as much work was done as could be before the Michigan winter set in halted work for the season.

Spring of 1975 brought with it exciting new developments. As the church construction was really starting to get moving, the sale of the Saginaw Street property went through.⁷ On April 27, the members began to celebrate the tangible evidence of things going forward. That day they held a service for the setting of the cornerstone of the church.

As construction progressed, a rather significant mistake was made. Going back to the decision made months ago to eliminate the two steps between the fellowship hall and the church, an oversight was made. Paul Meyer describes it:

We were well into the building phase of the program. We had those big wooden arches and beams set. The decking was on the main part of the church and Bernie [Morrow, general contractor] calls me at work one day and says, 'Hey, we have a major problem.' So I left work and came out there. What had happened was that when they did the site checking, Duane Anderson had sent out an architectural student who was doing his residency. He had overlooked the fact that there was an elevation difference in the roof line between the church and the [fellowship hall], and those wooden beams were off-set as well. So when it came into tying in the roof line of the fellowship hall to the roof line of the church, there was a mismatch. Those beams were cut to accommodate the two steps down.⁸

7 The property was sold to a local realtor who lived in the house briefly before selling it to a Greg Sharp, owner of the Exit Sharp Group who constructed 3 office buildings there at 8200 S. Saginaw Street. Both Kmart and Al Serra (car dealer) looked at the whole corner of Saginaw and McCandlish (including Gloria Dei's property on McCandlish) for potential building sites. Gloria Dei more than once turned down offers to sell their property. That same developer who built the three office buildings was in contact with Gloria Dei in late 2006 to purchase the back corner of Gloria Dei's current property to build another office building in the same style as the three already there. At the time of writing, the portion of land had been rezoned and the church was awaiting word back from Sharp.

8 Meyer

Although the decision was made to take out those steps, not all the plans were updated. Unfortunately, the large wooden beams that make up the support of the fellowship hall and church were already made and in place. They needed to scramble a bit to get something figured out. They went with a "saddle" fix to get the roof lines to meet, bridging the gap between the different heights. Perhaps "fix" is too strong of a word, however, because that mistake had lasting implications to the church building long after the initial construction was finished. As Meyer said, "It leaked forever.... Several of us from time to time, Jim Sharich, Gary Nielsen, and Gary's dad and a bunch of us would go up there every year or two and tar the daylight out of it. It was always a constant problem." To this day, when asked about any regrets or things that could've been done better with initial building, current pastor Dennis Himm recalls, "there were water issues in the hallway between the church and fellowship hall."⁹ Because of the modifications to that joint, the water flow no longer worked as designed, so rather than running off, water would simply sit on the roof in a valley and leak where the two sections met. A gabled roof was eventually put on the fellowship hall to undo the problems caused by this error and the issues with the fellowship hall's flat roof in general.¹⁰

The rest of the construction went on without much of an issue. The contractors did most of the work on the building; the small congregation did what they could as "weekend warriors," painting and some trim work as they had in the parsonage the year before.

As construction began to wrap up, Gloria Dei had in mind to put down gravel for a parking area. Then, over the next year or two as they had the money, the congregation would pave the parking lot. However, the Grand Blanc Township would have no part in that. They demanded a paved parking area before they would grant any sort of occupancy permit. So the

⁹ Himm, Rev. Dennis. Email Interview. Nov 14, 2007.

¹⁰ Himm, Email Interview. Nov 14, 2007.

members “dug deep” and the money was brought forward to complete the project as demanded by the township.

The construction from ground breaking to dedication lasted a moderate fifty-one weeks. The dedication day was November 9, 1975. There were two services held to dedicate both the church and the parsonage to the glory and work of God. Over those two services, 316 people were in attendance.¹¹

For a while, Gloria Dei made use of folding chairs for seating. They also received used chancel furniture from other congregations which was in use in the sanctuary. They had plans for the talented woodworkers within the congregation to eventually build their own altar, pulpit, lectern, and font. However, after two



Figure B: The church and fellowship hall. Photo taken November 9, 1975; retrieved from the WELS archives.

Sundays sitting on the cold, hard metal folding chairs the ladies group asked the men of the congregation to come together and simply said, as Meyer summarizes, “This ain’t gonna cut it; this dog ain’t gonna hunt.”¹² The comfort was an issue; the noise from the little kids’ shoes on the metal chairs was an issue. The voters came together and agreed with the ladies’ evaluation of the situation and looked into what they could do.

They hired Middlebury Church Furniture, an Amish furniture company out of Middlebury, Indiana. They were recommend to Gloria Dei by Merrow, who had been the contractor for the building. They came up originally to make the pews for the church, but the congregation ended up contracting them to also make new chancel furniture. This is the chancel furniture that is in

¹¹ *Glory to God: 30th Anniversary 1971-2001*. Self-published by Gloria Dei congregation in Grand Blanc, MI, 2001. p. 2.

¹² Meyer

use at Gloria Dei to this day. It took some time for the construction to take place and to be installed, but they have served the congregation well and proved to be a good investment.

Through all of this, the Lord greatly blessed Gloria Dei. From 1971 to 1975, their membership increased from 52 to 119 souls.¹³ They had the opportunity to bring 14 people¹⁴ into God's family through Baptism, and there were 11 confirmations.¹⁵ It was clear in these few short years that the Flint Circuit Mission Committee's decision to press on in Grand Blanc and the WELS' support of the mission were well-made choices. God's abundant blessings had enabled the church to proclaim law and gospel to an area that needed it, and his blessings would continue to be poured out on the still-small group in Grand Blanc.

The Education and Office Wing

After all was said and done, Gloria Dei had a wonderful building built that would serve them quite well through many years of ministry. Pastor Kolander stayed at Gloria Dei just two years after the building was completed before accepting a call to serve Fairview Lutheran Church in Milwaukee in late 1977. Beginning in mid-January of 1978 Pastor Birner once again served the flock in Grand Blanc, but this time as their vacancy pastor. He served until July of that same year when seminary graduate Mark Schwertfeger was ordained and installed as pastor at Gloria Dei.

As the congregation grew, thoughts of expansion went through the members' minds. During Pastor Schwertfeger's relatively brief time serving in Grand Blanc, the congregation established a fund that would facilitate starting a Lutheran Elementary School in the future. In 1981, to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the congregation, the basement of the parsonage

13 From 30 to 70 communicants.

14 13 children, 1 adult.

15 5 children, 6 adult.

was finished. In 1982, to help solve the dilemma of the water problems caused by the one-two punch of the botched roof line and the by-design flat roof on the fellowship hall, a gabled roof was put onto the fellowship hall. The congregational labor force (which will be prevalent in the future projects) took control and simply handled the roof project themselves without contracting an outside company.

Pastor Schwertfeger, like Kolander before him, accepted a call in the latter part of the year. In January, Pastor Birner once again filled the the vacancy until March of 1983 when Pastor Dennis Belter accepted the call to serve in Grand Blanc; he was installed on March 20, 1983. Three years later, in 1986, Gloria Dei operated for the first time without any synod subsidy at all.¹⁶

A master plan had been drawn up to carefully lay out at least one plan of how the site might be expanded, including a day school, worship and fellowship area expansions. The plan also included housing for future teachers on the opposite side of the church from where the parsonage had been built. In 1987, the desire for a Lutheran Elementary School was growing in Grand Blanc. The congregation studied portions of the master plan in an effort to determine what should be done next. A building committee was formed. The committee consisted of Jim Koeppen as Chairman, Warren Roeske as Secretary, Ron Becker, Paul Meyer, Gary Nielsen, Cliff Ross, Larry Bolton and Pastor Belter. The committee decided to add on an education wing that would include church offices for a secretary and pastor¹⁷ and an addition to the fellowship hall. The membership had grown to 191 souls; it was time to expand. The fund previously started for this project stood at \$23,000 by the end of 1987.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Glory to God*, p. 4. In 1980 the congregation had started this process and opted to not receive subsidy to help pay the pastor's salary.

¹⁷ Up to this point, following in the steps of Pastor Kolander, the pastor's office had been in the basement of the parsonage.

¹⁸ *Glory to God*, p. 4.

Just as things were ramping up for this project in the spring of 1988, Pastor Belter received a call to serve in Appleton, Wisconsin, which he accepted. Pastor Birner, yet again, came to serve as Gloria Dei's vacancy pastor from spring until late October. The congregation took the opportunity to do some much needed work around the parsonage. In October, Pastor Dennis Himm arrived with his family. His arrival marked the end of an era in which pastors stayed in Grand Blanc only five years, and served as a stabilizing agent for the growing church. Pastor Himm's installation was October 23, 1988.

Pastor Himm writes, "The plans for the educational wing were drawn up after my arrival. In my call letter I was informed that [Gloria Dei] wanted to start a school and that they were already growing a building fund for an education wing."¹⁹ Pastor Himm jumped in and kept stride with the ambitious congregation. The next year, the construction plans were drawn up. Since Duane Anderson had been stepping down as synod architect when the initial building was being put together, a new firm was hired to handle this project: Wigen, Ticknell, Meyer & Associates out of Saginaw, Michigan, of which Paul Meyer's cousin John was partner.

In 1989, the final plans were put forward. They included expanding the fellowship hall to the north, adding in a large storage area, increasing the size of the kitchen, adding an office area (that would be split in two to form a general church office and an office for the pastor), and adding two large classrooms as well as a small room in the hallway (which would be used for small meetings, Bible classes, and eventually a staffed nursery during worship services²⁰). The plans nearly doubled the space of the existing 4,000 square foot building. It was about

¹⁹ Himm, Rev. Dennis. Email Correspondence. December 3, 2007.

²⁰ This room was originally going to be just a long closet, but the project coordinator Cliff Ross convinced the congregation to turn it into the small, useful room that it is today. That proved to be a very wise decision.

two years after the plans were drawn up, on June 16, 1991, when they broke ground for the expansion.

Learning from their experience adding on the roof and enjoying some luxury of a larger, talented, diversified congregation, Gloria Dei found that it could be of a great benefit to do some of the work themselves. Initial estimates showed that "volunteer labor by members would decrease the labor cost by about 40%."²¹ The congregation really stepped up and made the building happen. Paul Meyer says, "We did most of that ourselves. We did hire the masonry work done and the mechanical work done. I can remember crews showing up on weekends and a few guys working through the week that had the time to do it."

A large portion of the money came from the Gary Kimmel memorial. Gary was killed in a plane crash at Detroit Metro Airport in 1987. Pastor Himm recalls, "Gary's wife, Jenny, wanted to make sure their son, Matthew, would have a LES to attend. Matthew was only a few months old when his father was killed." The rest of the funds came by way of gifts from the congregation to the building fund. The total cost of the project was \$172,000. Gloria Dei only had to borrow \$20,000, and that borrowing they did from a member. As Pastor Himm recalled, "Now was the time. The need was real. God had blessed Gloria Dei with talent to do the project."²² The expansion was dedicated on March 29, 1992.

Overall, considering the amount of volunteer labor involved, there were no big problems or issues in the construction of the first addition. Pastor Himm reflects on the results of this project, "I believe the project united the congregation in many ways. However, the addition did not lead us to begin a LES. It did, however, lead us to begin a Preschool which we have run ever since. [I have] one of the finest offices in the synod with the hand-made desk and

²¹ *Glory to God*, p. 4.

²² Himm, Email Interview, Nov 14, 2007.

bookcases." He also adds some tips to pastors involved in building projects and their building committees, "Based on [my] building skills, all power-tools were kept out of harm's way. They did allow [me] to hammer in a couple of closets and in a few other places that would not be seen."

To make use of the new-found space, as Pastor Himm mentioned above, in June of 1993 the voters of Gloria Dei voted to start a preschool the following fall. The pattern of Gloria Dei building additions proactively rather than reactively is easily seen even in this first addition. The preschool operates to this day, still in the second of the two classrooms built during this building project.

The Sanctuary Expansion

In 1996, the piece of property to the west of Gloria Dei's site (the piece left unpurchased in 1973) became available again when a church from Flint decided that expansion on McCandlish in Grand Blanc was not going to work for them.²³ Fearing the potential of being land-locked, the congregation voted to buy that six acre piece of property for \$100,000.²⁴ This brought their total acreage to a little over ten, and ensured that they had plenty of room to expand to fulfill their master plan.

The third building committee was formed in 1997 and sought, once again, to be proactive in their expansion, foreseeing a great need in the future for more space. Wes Siebert served as Chairman of the committee; also serving were secretary Mark Barton, Tom Furnner, Paul Meyer, Cliff Ross, Carl Hickmott, and Pastor Himm. In their initial meeting on August 14,

²³ Meyer

²⁴ As mentioned above (footnote 7), Gloria Dei is currently seeking to sell a piece of property back to the Sharp group. Whereas this piece was six acres for \$100,000, they're currently selling slightly less than two acres for \$210,000.

1997, the committee put forward six areas of need: classrooms, fellowship, worship, narthex, recreation, and parking.

The initial plan for the project was to build a Family Life Center which would add more class rooms and a gym as well as expanding the sanctuary and narthex. The six needs would be addressed in this way:

- Classrooms: 1 full size (30'x30'), 2 small Sunday school rooms for more flexibility
- Fellowship: air conditioned with room for larger gatherings and larger kitchen to accommodate.
- Worship: increase the sanctuary by 1/3, netting a larger chancel and sacristy areas.
- Narthex: double its size and include a large cry room with a bathroom attached.
- Recreation: a gymnasium to allow all-weather activities.
- Parking: add about twenty-five spaces and repave the entire lot.²⁵

Despite the great work done by the members, the previous building project was an incredibly taxing and draining experience for the congregation. It was agreed that Gloria Dei would seek to have most of the work of this new project hired out, where the members would do most of the finishing work as they had done with the initial church and parsonage projects.

By 1999, the average attendance at worship had grown to over 100 people (and thus taking them past the point of the "80% rule," which theorizes that your church should never be filled more than 80% of the way lest it feel uninviting to a visitor). Plans began to really move forward toward another addition. A building fund drive was started entitled "Rising to the Challenge to Serve our Risen Lord." In a presentation given to the congregation, it was stated that their goal was to raise \$152,500 by April 24, 2000.²⁶ The proposed total cost for the project was \$902,500, thus requiring a loan for \$750,000 if the goal was met by April.

25 "Rising to the Challenge to Serve our Risen Lord." Powerpoint presentation presented in 1999. Slide 4.

26 "Rising." Powerpoint. Slide 2.

Pastor Himm recalls, "After the building fund drive, we realized that we could not do all of the project because of insufficient funds, we decided to drop the Family Life Center from the project with the commitment that as soon as possible we would build the Family Life Center."²⁷ The decision was made to simply expand in the most vital areas, worship and fellowship. The rest of the project, the Family Life Center, would have to wait for another day. But a problem arose in the planning of the project: how could the the addition and remodel of the sanctuary and narthex happen and still maintain a place for the congregation to worship?

This problem was solved by building the project in stages. The first thing to be done was the building of the fellowship addition (which would come to be known as the Multi-Use room) at the west end of the classrooms that had been built in 1992. The ground breaking service was held on April 30, 2000 and the large room was finished by the fall of 2000. Work then began on the sanctuary; services were held in this new, large room while the construction work went on in the church building. The room was large enough to accommodate the chancel furniture and pews from the sanctuary as a means of storage and granting the ability to still use the furniture for worship during construction. Gloria Dei's own history remarks that the temporary worship space "worked even better than anticipated, although it took longer to finish the entire project that we had hoped."²⁸

For the entire project, the church took a different approach than they did with the original building. In 1975, they hired a general contractor and then worked with him to put together bid packages and ensure that all the different components came in at the best price. For this project, Gloria Dei hired general contractor Larry Higgins. Wes Siebert, the chairman of the building committee, had worked with Larry to build the new church at Emanuel in Flushing,

²⁷ Himm. Email Interview. Nov 14, 2007.

²⁸ *Glory to God*. p. 8.

Michigan where Wes had formerly been a member. The difference in working with Larry was that he assembled his crews and the church would not be involved in the micromanagement of the project. There was no need for Gloria Dei to review bids and ideally simplified the process. Not everyone was thrilled with the idea of handling things this way, but in the end it worked well for the church. Larry Higgins brought in Berry, Case & Associates as the architects for the project.

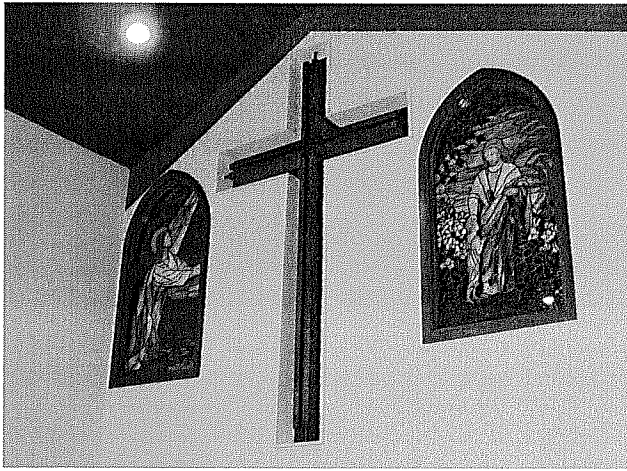


Figure C: The cross and stained glass windows that are set in between the narthex and sanctuary. Photo taken January 31, 2007.

After much debate, the sanctuary was expanded to the west, but the expansion section also was wider than the original sanctuary, allowing for a choir area to the north and a spacious sacristy with a bathroom and plenty of storage just off of the altar area. The sacristy housed a large and powerful sound and recording system as well as ample

space for banners and paraments. The wall dividing the narthex from the sanctuary was also pushed to the west, doubling the size of the narthex. The front of the church had stained glass windows made by the Nielsen family which were installed in 1984. Those windows, along with the original cross at the front of the church, were removed and inset into the dividing wall, over the main doors entering into the worship area. A new, larger cross was constructed and hung on the sanctuary's new front wall.

The Middlebury Church Furniture company, who had originally made the pews and the chancel furniture, was no longer in business at the time of this project. The original chancel

furniture was put back into use, but they still needed more pews. Kawkawlin Church Furniture out of Kawkawlin, Michigan handled the new pew construction.

In 1975, Gloria Dei benefited greatly by working with a contractor and architect who had great experience in church design and construction. In 2000, they lacked such a blessing.

Frustration came with the design of the sanctuary, in which the members and especially Pastor Himm contributed a greater number of ideas that one might have

thought would have been the job of those being paid to do the work.²⁹ Lighting, too, was problematic, to the point that its poor design delayed the church dedication two weeks. As it stands today, the lighting in the sanctuary is still too dim and uneven for certain people's tastes. The sound system, over time, proved to be a mistake as well, not in its concept but in its execution.

Because the sound system is located in the sacristy, at the front of the church, it is impossible for an usher to adjust levels if necessary during the service. That leaves the congregation in a

difficult situation; the pastor is not able to hear if there's a problem from his position and the people who hear the problem are unable to discreetly fix it.

That's not to give the impression that everything on the project went poorly, however. The tasks of matching wood for pews and support beams as well as brick for the outer part of the church went far better and was much easier than anyone had anticipated. The final product, despite the flaws and hiccups, is a beautiful worship space that serves the congregation well to this day.

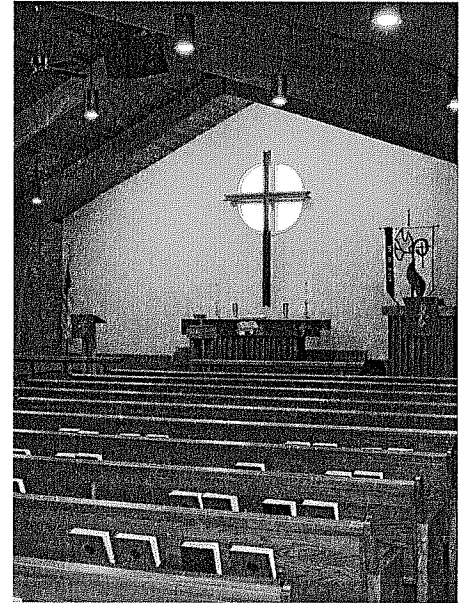


Figure D: The sanctuary after the 2001 expansion. Photo taken January 31, 2007.

²⁹ For example, the graceful three-tiered wall at the front of the church did not come from the architect but from Pastor Himm.

Amidst this building project, in 2000 an anonymous donation came to the church to outline the large wooden cross that had stood in the front of the church in 1975 with neon lights. The goal was to give the church another touchstone in the community, but the concerns are immediately obvious: how does one use a gift like this elegantly and not make the church appear as if it would be more fitting on the strip in Las Vegas than in suburban Michigan? The church chose to outline the wooden cross with a thin band of purple neon light. Despite a few reservations, that proved to be one of the best things the congregation has done. Now, whether in a canvassing conversation, an article in the paper, pastor's business cards, or advertisement flyers, when "5005 McCandlish Road" means nothing to someone, the simple line "the church with the big purple cross" is immediately recognized by most who live in the area. The tall, purple lights are visible not only on McCandlish which it faces, but also on the semi-perpendicular Saginaw Street, still Grand Blanc's main thoroughfare.

The expansion was dedicated on March 11, 2001. The new church was filled to capacity with 234 people attending the single dedication service. Gloria Dei now had room to spare—room to grow.

The Family Life Center

There was discouragement, initially, as the church was unable to complete the third building project in the exact manner that they had hoped. God's hand though, clearly seen through every step in the history of this church, was evident even in this seeming "problem." God seems to have been simply reinforcing the truths he expressed through Solomon in Proverbs 16:9. Gloria Dei had great plans in mind with their Family Life Center, but the Lord had bigger plans. Nearly everyone interviewed on the matter now sees the delay in this portion of the building as a tremendous blessing. Waiting allowed for a more stable time in the

congregational life and also enabled the congregation to build something better than they had originally planned.

By 2004, the membership of Gloria Dei had surpassed 300 souls. An analysis of the church body showed an even split of the congregation: 1/3 were 1-20 years old, 1/3 were 21-40 years old, and 1/3 were 40 years old and older. The younger 2/3 and some of the spunkier from the older bracket would benefit greatly from a recreation area that would come along with the Family Life Center. Once again, architects Berry, Case & Associates and Larry Higgins as contractor came together to hash out a revised plan for an addition to Gloria Dei's building.

By this time, the Sunday School rooms were overcrowded on Sunday morning. Classes had to be held in partitioned sections of high-traffic spaces that made for a poor learning environment as well as cumbersome fellowship around the Bible class hour. On January 9, 2005, the voters approved a preliminary plan from the architect for their addition. Ten days later, on the 19th, a planning meeting was held with the entire congregation. The planning meeting frankly discussed what the congregation was doing well and what could be improved. Needs were seen in space and staff; a need was especially seen in gaining a more active youth ministry.

Later in 2005, Cornerstone Consulting was hired to help put together the funding appeal for the building fund. Three yearly stewardship programs were roughly outlined, with special emphasis on the coming building project; overall they were to have a primary focus on proper Christian stewardship in all aspects of life. The building fund was given a name, "Growing to Serve." It had at its core three chief components: support, staff, and space. Space was self-evident. The Family Life Center plans were progressing well.

In support, a significant portion of all funds contributed to the building project would go to support other mission efforts being carried out by the WELS. Through the Mission Partners program, 5% of all monies donated would go towards assisting the Hispanic mission at St. Thomas in Phoenix, Arizona as well as the mission in Zambia-Chipata, Africa. This first-fruits support of other missions allowed for Gloria Dei to focus not only on its mission to the people in the Grand Blanc area but also to the world-wide mission of the church. It was also a way for the congregation to make a special gift, remembering all the support they had received just thirty years earlier. This helped to combat a fear expressed by some in the congregation that they were thinking only of themselves while other churches had less and needed more.

Staff was a bit of a debate. It was clear that the needs of the congregation were more than just the pastor and preschool teacher were able to address on their own. Additional staff was seen as a need, but the solution to that need was a debate. Should they call a second pastor? Should they call a staff minister? If so, should he or she be from Martin Luther College or an internal call to a member as the preschool had done in the past? Could it be a committed volunteer program? In the end, the congregation settled on taking part in the vicar program through Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Their first vicar, Timothy Shrimpton, was installed on August 20, 2006. Payment for the first vicar was funded completely by the "Growing to Serve" fund. The congregation voted to continue the program and move 1/3 of the total vicar cost into the general fund. This would continue each year until the general fund of the church was paying for the vicar entirely and therefore no special monies would be needed to continue to maintain the added staff. Gloria Dei's second vicar, Thomas Barthel, was installed on August 19, 2007.

"Growing to Serve" saw a grand total of \$330,000 pledged to support the building expansion, the mission work, and the additional staff. The money would be incoming over a three year period.

The building committee for this, the fourth building project Gloria Dei has tackled, was Wes Siebert returning as Chairman, Eric Diener as Secretary, Mark Barton, Tim Bliese, Tom Furnner, Gary Nielsen, Jim Sharich, and Pastor Himm. The proposed addition would include the gymnasium, a large classroom, bathrooms, an office area, storage, and another kitchen adjacent to the gymnasium which included a large pantry. Overall it would add 7,360 square feet to the footprint of the building, bringing Gloria Dei's total size to just under 20,000 square feet.

The groundbreaking service was held on October 15, 2006, the day of Gloria Dei's 35th Anniversary celebration. Pastor Himm's first grandchild was born that weekend in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, so he was not there. Michigan District President John Seifert (pastor at Good Shepherd in Midland, Michigan) was already scheduled to be the guest preacher for the anniversary service, and so he filled in for Pastor Himm at the groundbreaking in the early afternoon as well.

In an interview with Paul Meyer, he expressed the need to have a master plan and, when looking to expand a facility, to actually use that master plan. Such a plan enables a church to build with confidence and, ideally, not make a mistake and thus build themselves into a corner. Every decision was made with that in mind. A perfect example of such a forward-thinking attitude is the Multi-Use Room, built just before the sanctuary expansion in 2001. That large room's original purpose was to be 3 rooms and a hallway connecting the 1992 Education Wing with the Family Life Center. The shell of those rooms was built with the thought that

partition walls could easily be added in the future. The initial plan for the Family Life Center included subdividing that large room to include those classrooms. The building committee decided, since the room was so useful as an adult Bible class room and more intimate for congregational dinners than the gym would allow, to put off dividing up that room until it was deemed necessary. The other classroom space added in the new building would allow for Sunday School expansion even without the smaller rooms created from the one large room.

Throughout the construction of the Family Life Center, Gloria Dei found working with Grand Blanc township to be increasingly difficult. Water drainage was a huge issue as the church seemed to be caught in the middle of a power struggle between the township and the county, each claiming jurisdiction in the matter and each mandating rather opposite rules for the church to follow. "Sewer units" also became something that would cause a building committee member's stomach to churn. Despite not having large growth in the congregation, the township saw the gymnasium as requiring more allotment in the sewer lines, to the tune of more than \$20,000 in one-time fees.

When it wasn't water causing the problem, it was fire. The fire codes dictated that two firewalls had to be retroactively added to existing structure. One would be on the west end of the Multi-Use Room (the wall that would connect the existing building to the new construction). The second was near where the original church and fellowship hall met—at the infamous leaking point thanks to the "two step error" in the original building project. Adding in those two firewalls added \$50,000 to the total cost of the project.³⁰

The second fire related problem was a sprinkler system. The size of the gymnasium had to be modified several times so that an expensive sprinkler system wouldn't have to be run into the gym despite lacking flammable materials in the gym itself.

³⁰ Siebert, Wes. Email Interview. November 15, 2007.

The block work of the foundation and the walls of the gymnasium as well as the HVAC plumbing, and electrical work were done by the builders. The skills of the congregation, however, were once again used to great effect to do the stick construction of the classrooms, kitchen, etc. as well as all the finishing work. Marty Meyer (member of Gloria Dei and Paul's son) brought his building crew in to the Grand Blanc site over a weekend. They and congregational volunteers put up the frame for the whole new building almost entirely over the course of that weekend. Saturdays were work days where a crew would assemble to work on all the projects that needed to be hammered out.

Overall it worked well, but Pastor Himm commented, "The project fell on a few good men who put in a tremendous amount of time. Some of that was planned that way. However, we did not utilize our members as well as we could or should have. Early in the planning process we used sign-up sheets for those who could contribute their time and talents. We should have asked people directly and issued 'call for help' invitations throughout the project."³¹ And while the congregational members who did help poured their hearts and souls into the project for the glory of their God, the hired work seemed to not have the same high standards of excellence. For instance, the sealer on the blocks failed so that the gym has water stains each time in rains. That problem will be fixed in the spring of 2008. Likewise, the electricians damaged tiles in the gym with their equipment so that several tiles had to be replaced and the six coats of wax had to be reapplied.

Though it had some rocky steps, the Family Life Center was finally completed. The total cost for the project was just under \$700,000. The dedication for the Family Life Center was held on November 4, 2007. The sermon "Growing to Serve" was preached based on Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, 1:1-5, and 11-12. Gloria Dei now has a facility ready and

³¹ Himm, Email Interview, Nov. 14, 2007.

waiting for the congregation to be able to fulfill its long-held goal of starting a Lutheran Elementary School, to continue to be a blessing to the community, and to continue to receive the blessings of God as he sees fit to send them.

Conclusion

Four building programs over the course of thirty-two years. When one reads over the history of Gloria Dei, he or she must pause to wonder if those who clean the church are ever not vacuuming up construction dust.

Gloria Dei truly is a fitting name for congregation such as the one in Grand Blanc. From the humble beginnings in the Citizen's Bank building to the dedication of a new, beautiful Family Life Center, the story of this group has never been about their own glory. The focus has and will continue to be on God's glory. This brief history is really not about meetings and headaches, or brick and wood, or numbers and figures, or craftsmanship and art. The history of these building programs show God working through his people for one purpose and one alone, to share the message of sins forgiven in Christ to people who do not know it. The spiritual state of the area is no better than it was in the later 1960's when the Flint Circuit Mission Committee first looked at Grand Blanc as a potential expansion site. The difference is that now the congregation has an amazing facility and pool of talent to draw from to take that message out to the world.

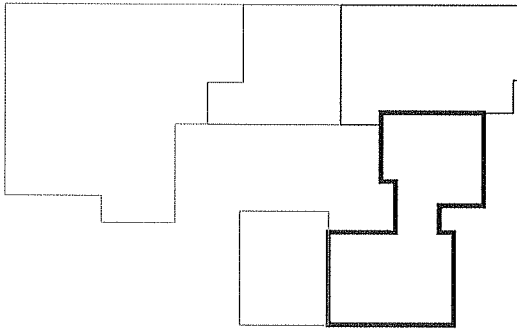
The principle emphasis those interviewed seemed to make for congregations seeking to embark on a building project themselves would be the importance of a carefully outlined and tailored long-range plan. Building impulsively and thoughtlessly will only bring trouble on those who build. Yet, Pastor Birner's words must be at the heart of everything that one plans, "The Word is the Holy Spirit's seed for starting a congregation of saints. There is no other way. One

can plan till he is blue in the face, but without the Word nothing will happen."³² God continues to meet and exceed the needs of all in Grand Blanc, through his generous physical blessings in a facility, yes, but chiefly in his spiritual blessings through his Word preached and taught in that facility. The words from the pen of the apostle Paul which appear on most of Gloria Dei's publications are a fitting theme for their work and conclusion to this short history.

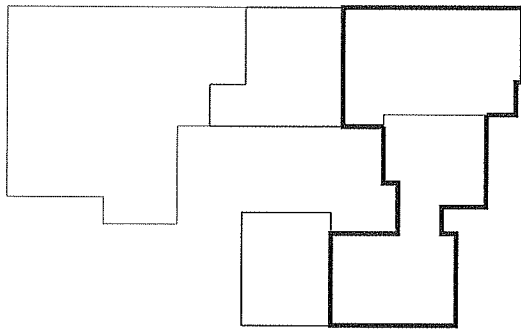
***And my God will meet all your needs
according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.
(Philippians 4:19-20)***

32 Birner

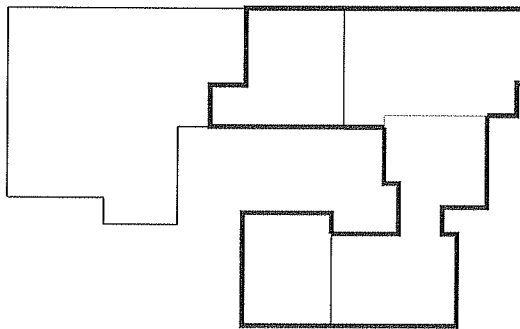
Appendix: Building Expansion Diagrams



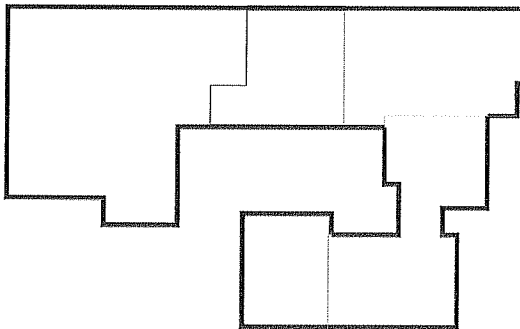
1975: The Initial Church and Fellowship Hall



1992: The Education and Office Wing



2001: The Sanctuary Expansion



2007: The Family Life Center

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