

A SHORT HISTORY OF...



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LA IGLESIA LUTERANA

SURE FOUNDATION

LUTHERAN CHURCH



Estableciendo amistades por Jesús

Building relationships for Jesus

Introduction—Surveying the Land

It was Seminary Call Day 2000. The “audible gasp from the assembly”¹ spoke volumes as WELS President Karl Gurgel made the announcement. “Steven Gabb, Exploratory outreach, New York City, New York, North Atlantic District.” A short time later he made his way through the alphabet to the “R’s.” The second assignment was announced. Seminarian Aaron Robinson’s name was called. He would partner with Steve Gabb in that vast mission field known as “the Big Apple.” The Wisconsin Synod, under the impetus of its North Atlantic District, was about to renew mission work in New York City.

Although the announcement of two Seminary graduates created excitement in the assembly that May of 2000, outreach to New York City prior to then was not unheard of for the WELS. Throughout the 1980’s and into the early 1990’s, the WELS had a presence in the Big Apple through the efforts of men like Pastors Glen Thompson and Dan Krause.² Likewise, the WELS had had an established presence in the surrounding areas of New Jersey and Long Island for many years. Nevertheless, it could be said that by the mid-1990’s the WELS had not established a presence in any truly metropolitan area in the North Atlantic District. The Mission Board of the NAD saw a great opportunity in their district to support a metropolitan ministry, and commissioned Pastors John Huebner (the district’s mission counselor) and E. Allen Sorum (the WELS cross-cultural consultant, now Seminary professor) to survey metropolitan areas within their district. After visiting several large cities (including Boston and Philadelphia) the surveyors made their recommendation that the NAD work toward supporting mission

¹ Sarah Gabb. Email. October 18, 2005 (hereafter cited as “Sarah Gabb.”)

² For more information on this period of ministry in NYC, please see: Rosenbaum, Glenn T.: *Peace Lutheran Church: the Manhattan Project*, WLS Essay File #2494, May 1, 1992.

efforts in the five boroughs of New York City. This was accepted by the NAD and supported by the BHM.

The plan was to call two seasoned pastors to work as a team. So call they did. For almost three years they called from the field with no takers (seventeen total calls were issued to seasoned pastors between 1997 and 2000).³ So the Board for Home Missions decided to switch gears. They would move forward with their objective of outreach to New York City by assigning Seminary graduates. Hence, Call Day 2000, when the WELS assigned Steve and Aaron to their first mission field.

May-July, 2000—Laying the Groundwork

One might have expected that these assignments would cause excitement among those attending that Call Day service, but these two men were not all that surprised. After all, in January of that year, Aaron and Steve were the only two Seminary Seniors who had gone on the Seminary Culture Club trip to NYC. In addition, they were good friends, even roommates. And to top it off, Seminary President David Valleskey (1996-2004) had inquired among the seniors who would be willing to be assigned to NYC. Both had said (essentially), “Here am I, send me.”⁴ After a long period of calling, New York would soon be invaded by two young pastors and their wives eager to carry out the Great Commission in the world’s most diverse city.

But what were two young Pastors to do in this vast mission field? What were the specifics of their calls? Not much. The Synodical plan was vague. The thought was to drop these men off in New York City and see what happened. The BHM realized that

³ Pastor John Huebner. Interview. November 10, 2005.

⁴ Pastor Gabb. Interview. November 10, 2005 (hereafter cited as “Pastor Gabb.”)

this was an area in which the WELS had very little experience. It was, for all intents and purposes, an experiment. And the NAD was willing to do it, regardless of great financial risk. The common thought was, “if we’re going to fail, let’s fail forward” and learn something about outreach along the way.⁵ What was clear was that the Synod was willing to let these missionaries experiment with different ways of doing ministry. Pastor Don Stuppy, who was on the mission board of the NAD (and who helped to do some initial ethnographic studies in New York City with Pastor Sorum), speaks to the thought process of the mission board.

We felt that a team approach would work best. We wanted each person on the team to focus on certain areas and work at training lay people to expand the effort. Another part of the plan was to begin Bible studies in various areas and see which ones flourished and focus on them. It was to begin with Bible studies and devotions in homes/apartments, hopefully lay led studies, and then gather these groups together periodically.⁶

Yet even with this thought process in mind, the BHM was wary of establishing a formal plan for work in NYC. Pastor Harry Hagedorn, the WELS Director of the Board for Home Missions and one of Sure Foundations staunchest supporters, elaborates:

Those of us that were convinced that the Lord our God would have us have a presence in NYC, were also convinced that we could not impose a form upon the effort. Rather we need to get among people, follow through with every contact we had or made, rejoice at whatever doors the Lord God opened, and build Gospel outreach ministry upon that. We were also convinced that there needed to be some form of a team to accomplish this under God's grace and guidance. The plan was to take a run at different ways of making contact with people, beg the Lord's grace and guidance upon his Gospel, and seek his wisdom in determining what to build upon to establish outreach ministry in whatever forms the Lord provided.⁷

In order to accomplish such experimentation, the BHM also realized that such a ministry warranted an established presence in NYC. At a lunch meeting with Pastor

⁵ Prof. E. Allen Sorum. Interview. December 8, 2005 (hereafter cited as “Pastor Sorum.”)

⁶ Pastor Don Stuppy. Email. December 10, 2005 (hereafter cited as “Pastor Stuppy.”)

⁷ Pastor Harold Hagedorn. Email. December 12, 2005 (hereafter cited as “Pastor Hagedorn.”)

Sorum shortly after graduation, he spoke to the Robinson's and the Gabb's about the Synod's desire to be committed for the "long haul," at least a ten to twelve year commitment.⁸ This was a different sort of call than other Seminarians had received. It was a unique ministry in a unique city. It came with unique thoughts and emotion. As Sarah Gabb, Steve's wife describes it:

The part that was hard was the unknown. Other pastors' wives were finding out about their parsonages—how many bedrooms, bathrooms, the colors, the amount of yard, etc. Their main concerns were how would they ever fill these big houses with their hand-me-down furniture! I, on the other hand, was wondering how to downsize for apartment living and what life would be like without a car. These other graduates/friends were finding out details about their congregations, church buildings, number of members, and how the church was planning to welcome them. Having never been part of a mission church (or exploratory), I wondered what it would be like to move to a place with no church at all, and then wondered what my husband was supposed to do.⁹

That sort of wonderment toward the unknown didn't bypass her husband Steve, either. In June, he and Aaron flew to Queens, NYC to see their apartments and sign their leases. The borough of Queens had been chosen by the BHM for financial/cost of living reasons as well as the fact that it has somewhat of a "neighborhood feel" to it.¹⁰ The two apartments had been found and secured some time earlier by Pastor Tim Wempner of East Brunswick, NJ. Each family had an apartment within a half-hour walking distance from the other in the area of the city known as "Little India." Steve remembers his initial feelings as they drove into Queens for the first time. "I remember thinking," he said, "No one has a clue we're here. How are we going to let them know we're here to serve

⁸ Pastor Gabb.

⁹ Sarah Gabb.

¹⁰ Pastor Stuppy.

them?”¹¹ In a city of millions, how were two young Seminary graduates to start a ministry?

July-October, 2000—Pouring the Foundation

Though the young missionaries and their wives might have felt alone when they arrived in NYC that July it was not really the case. Already there was a core group (around a dozen) of young “WELS transplants” meeting in the city. Founded in 1998 and headed primarily by a couple young men named Indelethio Nebeker and Chris Orr, this small group of WELS members met at each other’s apartments once a week on Sunday nights for informal Bible Study. In addition, Pastor Luke Werre from Dix Hills, Long Island came into the city once a month to lead a worship service with communion. This was a group that was already doing some outreach work as well. When the Seminary Culture Club had come out to NYC in January 2000, the core group met and worked with them.¹² Though not an instigating factor in the NAD’s decision to work in NYC, this core group would become instrumental in the startup and support of this mission.

Having successfully moved with their wives to their new homes in Queens on July 14th, 2000 the Gabb’s and Robinson’s gained some sound advice from Pastor Werre: “Take some time to settle in, get used to the city.”¹³ That turned out to be great advice, as the young missionaries and their wives, with much help from the core group already in NYC, started to learn what it meant to be a “New Yorker.” At least for Steve,

¹¹ Pastor Gabb.

¹² BethAnn Meier. Phone conversation. December 9, 2005. BethAnn was a member of the “core group” meeting at the time.

¹³ Pastor Gabb.

this was a great experience: “For me, this was a good change.”¹⁴ The core group assisted the missionaries in the essentials—getting new driver’s licenses, learning how to ride the subway, how and where to shop, etc. In addition, the missionaries began to get the new mission into business mode that took until early 2001 to square away. “NYC is its own animal”¹⁵ with many forms and legalities that at first forced the missionaries to set up a joint bank account in upstate New York before finding a WELS attorney from Albany that was able to get them the proper forms they needed to be recognized as a business.

A month after arriving in NYC, the young Pastors were officially ordained and installed into the public ministry at Our Savior’s Lutheran Church in East Brunswick, NJ. Steve’s father, Pastor William Gabb of Plano, TX, presided.

One of the first items of business for the new ministry team was to decide how they were going to promote themselves and their service to the New York community. That meant coming up with a name. But how to choose? Sarah Gabb explains the thought process that was involved.

As far as the name...I remember being in my living room in Jackson Heights with Steve and Aaron (this was before there was an office space in Woodside) and it was decided that coming up with a name would be an important first step (for synod publications, flyers, neighborhood outreach, etc.) So we were all trying to think of something catchy, and New Yorkish ("Big Apple ministry center", etc.) That evolved into thinking about what our purpose and mission was going to be in this community; what we hoped to offer to these people. I thought of the word foundation...solid foundation...sure foundation built on Jesus. From that we got excited about all the possibilities of a logo with the skyline built on the foundation of a cross. We looked in the back of the Bible to see if there were any fitting passages to convey this sure foundation idea and came across the passage from Isaiah 33:6 "He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure." The passage seemed perfect. Later on we were told that the foundation for much of New York City is solid granite. How interesting to think of all those skyscrapers being supported by such a solid foundation. This correlated well with

¹⁴ Pastor Gabb.

¹⁵ Ibid.

the message that the Lord is our sure foundation, and the mission to share this sure foundation with all New Yorkers.¹⁶

Thus, in the summer of 2000, Sure Foundation Lutheran Church (SFLC) was born.

Initially, the ministry team worked out of the Gabb's apartment while meeting regularly at members of the core group's homes for Bible studies. It didn't take long, however, for the team to realize that this casual environment (and lack of workable space) wasn't conducive to actively growing a ministry, so within a month they were looking for office space and a place to conduct Bible classes for the core group. They (or more specifically, Pastor Robinson) found such a space for lease at 64-20 Roosevelt Avenue in Woodside, a neighborhood in Queens. This office space was on the second story of a three-story building whose lower level was a hardware store. After making a deal with the landlord to put up \$4000 up front and make some aesthetic improvements, the team began renting that space early in September of 2000.

With the acquisition of more space came the suggestion from the small family of believers that they begin regular worship services ("We've got space, let's use it for worship!").¹⁷ So, on October 1, 2000, "12 people from 4 of the 5 boroughs, New Jersey, and 1 dog [met] for the first Sure Foundation worship service in newly remodeled storefront facility in Woodside, Queens."¹⁸ This first worship service was attended mostly by WELS transplants from around the city from the already established core group. All were English speakers. The order of service came straight from *Christian Worship: a Lutheran Hymnal* that would become the standard (with tweaks) for Sure

¹⁶ Sarah Gabb.

¹⁷ Pastor Gabb.

¹⁸ From the Sure Foundation Lutheran Church web page, www.sure-foundation.org (hereafter cited as "Web Page.")

Foundation worship until early 2002. Sure Foundation Lutheran Church was ready to start building its ministry.

November 2000-September, 2001—Laying the Bricks

In a city of millions, with 100's of different ethnic influences (in Queens alone there are at least 150 different languages spoken), the task of carrying out the Great Commission could be both exciting and daunting at the same time. As the ministry team settled in to their new home they discussed various ways of reaching out to the communities around them. The direction to which they would soon embark came in part from a suggestion by Pastor Sorum. He, along with Pastor John Huebner, had been coming out regularly (at least once a month at the beginning) to advise the young Pastors. Pastor Huebner's role was to help these recent Seminary grads figure out what "being a pastor" was all about, and Pastor Sorum came to help spur them into action and learn strategic planning for the "uniqueness of the missionary task."¹⁹ In this way, the BHM and the NAD were showing their total support for this new mission and for its missionaries.

As the ministry team and their advisors looked at the multi-cultural mission field in Queens, they came to the decision that a great way to do outreach might be to offer English-as-Second-Language classes. After all, ministry is, in large part, about relationships, and Sure Foundation was looking to build bridges with the people in their community so they could share the gospel with them. Since many people in that area were (and are) immigrants with a practical need for English in their everyday lives, it

¹⁹ Pastor Sorum.

seemed only reasonable and prudent to start building relationships in a way that also promoted Christian service.

The ESL program took root in November 2000 with a seminar presented by Mrs. Beth Thompson, the synod's consultant and trainer for ESL. Mrs. Thompson had the practical know-how to guide the ministry team and train the core group in starting up an ESL program. This direction pleased the Mission Board (both the North Atlantic and the Synod's BHM), and by January 2001 SFLC had the funds it needed not only to begin ESL, but also to bring Indelethio Nebeker onboard as the ministry team's ESL Coordinator. The financial help for this came from a Synodical restricted fund of the BHM, WELS Kingdom Workers and a generous gift from an anonymous WELS member from the eastern part of the U.S.²⁰ People wanted SFLC to succeed, and they were willing to support it with the needed monies. SFLC was getting set to expand its branches into the community.

In February, as the people of SFLC concentrated their efforts on preparation for the start of their ESL program, they received some additional help. Ms. Chrissy Hagedorn, a young woman with Kingdom Workers experience in ESL in Mexico (and fluent in Spanish), came for a few weeks to help with brainstorming and do some planning work with Indelethio. In addition, a team from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's Culture Club came out and helped to gather ethnographic and other information around the community. At that time SFLC also hosted some open houses to promote their upcoming ESL program. About eighty people from twenty different countries were

²⁰ Pastor Gabb.

exposed to SFLC through this effort.²¹ Through such efforts and careful planning, it soon became time to start the program.

About 15 people attended the first ESL classes at SFLC that March.²² It had been decided that the classes would be offered on a “two weeks on-three weeks off” system to allow the teachers time to think, plan and spend additional time promoting the program. The pastors, Aaron and Steve, were brought into the classroom, not to teach, but to act as conversation partners as a means of building relationships with the students who came through the door. The program was off to a wonderful start, gaining more students each time it was offered, and gaining recognition in the community. That hasn’t changed. The ESL program continues to be one of SFLC’s greatest strengths. But more on that later.

September 11, 2001—Dealing with Disaster

When the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell as a result of terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, it not only disrupted a city and a nation, but also the ministry of SFLC. “It flipped our world upside down,” said Pastor Gabb. “All of the sudden everything changed.”²³ On the fateful morning that changed the way America thought about its security, the Gabb’s were quietly moving their belongings to a new apartment. That domestic project was quickly set aside, however, as fear gripped the city. Everything shut down as bomb threats were announced. The ministry team spent the day looking after its members and trying to understand what was happening.

A prayer service was announced and held the next day at SFLC, as in many other churches around the WELS and the world. The city and members of SFLC remained in

²¹ Pastor Gabb.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

shock. When Phil Schupmann from WELS Committee on Relief called Pastor Gabb that day to ask, “What can we do?” all Steve could think to respond was, “I don’t know.”²⁴ Nothing like this had ever happened to our country. Clean up of debris seemed eons away as rescue teams were still trying to rescue those buried in the rubble and exhume buried corpses. When Indelethio and Steve went down to the East Side Armory to find out how they could help, they found hundreds of people searching for lost loved-ones. What could a young, inexperienced family of believers do to help in such a horrific tragedy? One thing was for certain, for the next few weeks, the SFLC ministry plan went on the back burner.

The opportunity and wherewithal to help in the relief effort did come, as SFLC coordinated with five churches in the Tri-State area to offer assistance to those in need. Each church had a representative and was asked to find out people they knew who needed help (especially financial help). Through a grant from the WELS Committee on Relief, that team was able to distribute relief checks totaling \$380,749 to fifty-one victims and families of the terrorist attack.²⁵ Jonathan Meier, a member of SFLC, took over the administrative tasks involved with this. People who were looking for aid filled out an application for assistance and the ad hoc coordinating team decided whom would get aid, and how much. Then one of the Pastors and a representative of the coordinating team would personally deliver a check and a word of gospel to those receiving aid. Though it seemed there was no quantifiable success with regard to adding to SFLC’s numbers through this ministry of mercy, “we were able to give them something so they

²⁴ Pastor Gabb.

²⁵ See *Addenda* (page 25) for more detailed statistics regarding this effort.

could grieve.”²⁶ And as the greater gift of the gospel was also given with the aid, it is clear that SFLC and the other churches were carrying out the Great Commission in a truly wonderful way. “And that’s what it’s all about.”²⁷

The impact on SFLC’s ministry by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 is certainly greater than this author will ever be able to fully realize. But there have been some positive developments. On Christmas 2001 SFLC held its Christmas service at the Marriott Marquee in Times Square. Along with that, they offered a free counseling service to those whom would certainly be met with extra grief during that time of year.

Then on September 11, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the attacks, SFLC did some extraordinary outreach. Teaming up with WELS Kingdom Workers and churches in the tri-state area, SFLC developed a program called “Operation: He is Here,” which brought in many musical groups and individual musicians from around the WELS. The sixty volunteers spent some time in subway terminals, Grand Central Station, and Central Park distributing 7,000 *God Our Refuge* books, 25,000 pieces of devotional literature, and Bibles to New Yorkers.²⁸ At the same time they advertised special anniversary services area congregations were holding (which did bring in some visitors). In addition, some of the musicians used their gifts to share the gospel by playing instruments or singing music in the subways. Then the volunteers went down to “Ground Zero” in Manhattan and sang and played music that attracted a crowd. It was God’s people using the gifts he had given them to reach out to all nations. Jonathon Roberts, one of the young musicians who came out to help, remembers how Pastor Robinson coached the volunteers in this effort. “Pastor Robinson told us our mission was to ‘share with people

²⁶ Pastor Gabb.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See *Addenda 1* for further statistics.

the good news and get back to the Bible for needed comfort.’ I remember him yelling out in the subway as we handed out fliers, ‘A time for healing, a time for hope.’”²⁹ When people asked them who they were and where they were from, they were able to tell them that they were from Sure Foundation Lutheran Church. This group had the sure foundation of God’s Word to give them sure footing as they reached out with the gospel in a big way.

But perhaps the greatest impact September 11th had on SFLC was on its people. September 11th allowed the people of SFLC (especially the Latino converts) to see the greater body of Christ in action, as WELS members from across the U.S. came to New York City to help in any way they could. From WELS Kingdom Worker disaster relief teams to individual prayers and donations of WELS members, the body of Christ was active. And it allowed the people of SFLC to bond together in active service as well.

It was really a neat process to see the Tri-State churches work together to disperse the money. For several of our Latino prospects it was the first time they had passed out fliers or been given the opportunity to share their faith with others on the street. I think it instilled in them a sense of commitment to SFLC to be representing our church in public.³⁰

Sure Foundation had the opportunity to show that its people were grounded on the sure foundation of the gospel, and they met the opportunity with all the grace and dignity it required.

Spring 2002-Spring 2003—Adding More Stories

By spring of 2002, SFLC was able to (at least in part) focus again on the mission activity they had started. During this year the ESL program really took off, gaining much

²⁹ Jonathon Roberts. Telephone conversation. December 11, 2005. Jonathon, along with Angela (Mickelson) Stelljes, wrote the *Sure Foundation Song* found in *Addenda 2*)

³⁰ Sarah Gabb.

popularity and recognition in the community (mostly among Spanish-speaking Latinos). Much of this came from word of mouth on the streets of Queens. Even immigrants who were brand new to the United States were hearing about the program. Pastor Gabb quips, “Some people found out about our ESL program just hours after getting to the U.S.”³¹ And they showed up at the door. SFLC had found a way to tap into their community and offer a service that would hopefully open the door for sharing the gospel. Sarah Gabb illumines,

Without any outside canvassing, flier handout, etc., people are finding out about our program. Some people have come in the door inquiring about the English program having only been in the country for days or weeks. We know that there must be some word-of-mouth promotion. Through ESL we are able to build trust with people who may not know who they can trust, as well as build relationships that hopefully allow us future opportunities to share our faith. The students see that we do this, free of cost, volunteering many hours of time, because we love Jesus.³²

Early in 2002, the ministry team began holding bi-lingual (English and Spanish) worship services. These services developed an interactivity described as “focused, interactive Bible studies surrounded by songs and prayer.”³³ In addition, the ministry team decided to send Indelethio to Ecuador in the summer of 2002 for a Spanish immersion experience to better help him serve as ESL coordinator.

With the ESL program well under way, SFLC looked to find more ways of reaching out to people throughout the five boroughs. One way they chose to do this was by offering a satellite worship location. In this way both pastors could be active in different parts of the city at the same time. Meeting in a dance studio in midtown Manhattan beginning in April 2002, these satellite gatherings mostly drew WELS

³¹ Pastor Gabb.

³² Sarah Gabb.

³³ Web Page.

transplants or people with some kind of WELS connection, though a few did invite unchurched guests.³⁴ The worship style was modified to accommodate a more relationship-centered feel.

We used *Christian Worship* and *Let All the People Praise You* hymns and the liturgy, written by the pastor, was printed on a card. There was a “Reflection Time” in which a contemporary Christian song on CD, fitting for the theme that day, would be played. Similar to the purpose of traditional choir pieces, I found this to be an edifying part of the worship service. The participants sat in a semi-circle and the pastor usually sat in a chair as well. The sermon was usually very interactive with participation from the group. On many occasions there would be an introduction and then small breakout groups would discuss and read proof passages and then come back together to share and the pastor would have a conclusion.³⁵

This type of Bible study, instead of the traditional twenty-minute sermon was put in place in order to allow the pastors more outreach and calling time during the week.³⁶

In addition, Bible studies were held in various locations around the city, such as Washington Heights and Astoria, Queens and in Brooklyn. Sure Foundation was fulfilling the directives of the BHM to work experimentally as they discovered the most meaningful ways of doing mission work in NYC.

Along with expanded ministries have come some extensive “event-based” outreach efforts. One such program is “Art in the Park,” a VBS-type program in the summer. It has been held at Hart Park in Queens, two blocks from the ministry center. Throughout the first few years of its existence, it has attracted many children and families in the neighborhood by “making a lot of noise.”³⁷ Using sidewalk art and a carnival-like atmosphere, the members of SFLC created this event as a staple in the neighborhood, which continues to attract repeat attendees.

³⁴ Sarah Gabb.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Pastor Gabb.

Another important outreach event has been the annual “Easter Extravaganza.” This outreach-oriented worship at the high point of the Christian Church year has attracted many visitors. SFLC even started bringing in outside help for this event, such as the Kettle Moraine High School praise group “Joyful Noise” as well as a praise band from Apostles’ Lutheran Church from San Jose, California, among others.

A third event SFLC has found to be great for in reach and outreach has been the Labor Day Retreats to the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. For the people of New York City, living in the “concrete jungle,” any opportunity to get out and see God’s beautiful nature is seized.³⁸ Outreach was happening as members and prospects boarded a bus to spend the weekend together in fun, fellowship, and Bible Study.³⁹ In 2000, twelve people attended. By 2003, that number rose to fifty-three people. Each year has brought with it more prospects, often outnumbering members by a large percentage.⁴⁰

Other outreach events have included the “Fall Farm Fiesta” and “Christmas for Kids” as well as making the attempt to do fellowship/outreach activities once a month.

March-November 2003—Changing Places, Changing Faces

With the advent of spring 2003 there came some significant changes to the SFLC family. The BHM announced that, due to budget restrictions, the SFLC ministry team and family would lose one of their pastors, Aaron Robinson. In March, Pastor Robinson moved with his family to St. Paul, MN after accepting a call to teach at St. Croix Lutheran High School.

³⁸ Angela (Mickelson) Stelljes. Interview. November 10, 2005. Angela was a member of SFLC from 2001-2005.

³⁹ Web Page.

⁴⁰ See *Addenda 1* for further statistics regarding “Art in the Park,” “Easter Extravaganza,” and the Labor Day Retreat.

At about the same time, however, Jonathan Meier (whom we met on page 12 as the one who coordinated the 9/11 aid distribution) was able to help soften the blow of Pastor Robinson's leaving by being added to the SFLC team as the "Director of Operations." Jon moved to NYC in 1999 and had done some accounting work in the financial district, but found himself spending more and more time helping out with SFLC. This was at first a volunteer position, and then when funding was available (later that year in the fall) he was brought on staff full time. His duties have included such things as administration, teaching ESL, evangelism, and teaching Bible Classes.⁴¹

Coincidentally, as these transitions were going on within SFLC's ministerial team, another pastor moved into town. This was Pastor Michael Roth, the WELS Hispanic/Latino Consultant for the Board for Home Missions. His job was to be a ministry consultant for all WELS congregations in the U.S. and Canada starting or involved in outreach to Hispanics/Latinos. He came to NYC to further his education, attending Drew University in Madison, N.J. for a Doctorate of Ministry for Hispanic Leadership and Ministry Development. While not a called worker of SFLC, Pastor Roth began to be very involved with its ministry. He had, in fact, helped out SFLC's ESL program, working with ESL Coordinator Nebeker in 2001 and through 2002 as a consultant as well as writing Spanish sermons for Indelethio to preach for the Spanish speaking prospects and members. Upon his arrival in NYC, he began to assume a role as preacher for the bilingual services in Woodside, since he was fluent in the language. At this time neither Pastor Gabb nor Jon Meier knew much Spanish at all, and Indelethio was depending on Pastor Roth's Spanish sermons anyway.⁴²

⁴¹ Jonathan Meier. Email. October 17, 2005 (hereafter cited as "Jon Meier.")

⁴² Pastor Michael Roth. Email. October 4, 2005 (hereafter cited as "Pastor Roth.")

Among all this change in personnel (paid or volunteer) came a directive to SFLC from the DMB: Pick a Focus.⁴³ It was time for the SFLC team and congregation to decide whether they were going to focus on Anglos or Latinos. They decided to focus on Hispanic outreach. What this meant was that the satellite worship services would be moved back to Queens to join the bilingual worship in their storefront facility there and most of the outreach efforts would focus on the extensive Latino community of Queens.

In July of 2003, Indelethio Nebeker announced his resignation. He was moving to Louisiana with his family. This was a blow to the SFLC ministry since Indelethio had been such a strong presence. So there were some very intense months for the SFLC family, with so many changes happening so quickly. Sarah Gabb explains how she viewed this tumultuous time: “All of these changes in the ministry team led to questions of trust for prospects. Many were saddened that they had opened up their hearts and lives, some deserting their strong Catholic roots, only to have the person that shared the gospel with them leave.”⁴⁴

As these changes affected the people, so they affected the ministers. Pastor Roth explains what was going on:

You now had a mission with a Spanish language outreach focus, with no one on staff who spoke any Spanish. I was asked to take one month to teach Spanish to Steve and Jon to help evaluate their ability for learning the language. We did that during the month of August. The decision was made after that to have Steve leave for four months of language training, leaving at the end of November. Jon would do his training after Steve came back.⁴⁵

Many changes were happening very quickly. In September 2003, the BHM and the DMB granted SFLC permission to seek out larger facilities. If they were going to

⁴³ Pastor Gabb.

⁴⁴ Sarah Gabb.

⁴⁵ Pastor Roth.

focus their ministry on Hispanic outreach (which they were) and if that ministry was steadily growing (which it was), they were going to need more space. The search was on for a new location. So many changes, but one thing remained—they were built on the sure foundation and lived in the promises of their God.

December 2003-August 2004—Strengthening the Pillars

On November 20, 2003, Pastor and Sarah Gabb, along with their two-year old daughter Adia, arrived in Oaxaca City, Mexico to begin four months of Spanish immersion. This was a very positive experience for the Gabb's as it helped them not only learn the Spanish language better, but also understand the culture that Spanish-speaking immigrants were bringing into NYC. Already at the beginning of their time in Mexico they felt relatively comfortable, as seen here from a web posting by Pastor Gabb.

Wednesday, December 3, 2003: Sarah just commented that she already feels adjusted. I guess I feel the same way. I'm sure there is more to this process of acclimation that needs to take place, but we both feel comfortable. I think that a big part of that comes from moving around to different parts of the country within the past few years, especially to Queens. We come to Mexico and see very few people who have the same skin color as us... Welcome to Queens! Here in Mexico, very few people speak English... Welcome to Queens! In Mexico, we do a lot of walking and the traffic is insane... I think you get the point! We've traveled a long distance, but some things haven't changed! On the other hand, there are plenty of cultural differences like food, architecture, and music that make life different here in Oaxaca. For us, it's a great mix of familiar and new ways of life!⁴⁶

The Gabb's remained in Mexico until April of 2004 and returned with a much greater sense of culture and a renewed zeal for mission work.

We learned a lot more in Mexico. Before our trip, I considered myself to be a culturally sensitive person. While that may have been true, I grew a lot in this area. I (we) learned to appreciate even more the cultural differences of another race, and embrace those differences. I learned that tamales & hot chili peppers

⁴⁶ Web Page.

just might be God's greatest gifts in the food category. Although we always knew it, we finally experienced how people in other countries think differently, act differently, and celebrate differently... and there's nothing wrong that, just different... or, as I like to look at it, unique and exciting.⁴⁷

While the Gabb's were in Mexico, Michael Roth and Jon Meier held down SFLC's ministry. But this became too much for them to handle alone, as Pastor Roth was still going to school full-time.⁴⁸ So they asked Pastor Hagedorn to find them some help. That help came in the form of Pastor and Mrs. Roger Sprain, a retired couple from Phoenix, Arizona. The addition of Pastor Sprain was a great help, as he had experience in Latino ministry and was willing to share his expertise with the ministry team. Jon Meier speaks about Pastor Sprain: "I look at Roger as a true mentor, especially in Latino ministry. We made visits with Bible studies, met new people and together did an isagogical on the OT. He was and is a great Christian and a great friend."⁴⁹

The temporary addition of Pastor Sprain was not the only news that spring. The ministry team also caught word that the owners of the building in which they were renting space (as well as the building next door) were going to sell. After discussing the situation with the DMB and the BHM, the decision was made to pursue purchase of the buildings. SFLC was looking for more space, and here was a grand opportunity to expand in the very spot they had become established! Pastor Roth and Jon Meier worked initially with the CEF to secure a loan until Pastor Gabb returned home. SFLC was continuing to strengthen its presence in the community.

A little over a month after the Gabb's returned to NYC, Jon Meier took his turn at Spanish immersion. He arrived at Quito, Ecuador on May 28, 2004 for a two month

⁴⁷ Web Page.

⁴⁸ Pastor Roth.

⁴⁹ Jon Meier.

immersion experience. His experience, like the Gabb's, helped him to learn better the language, culture, and history of the people he was serving the most in NYC. He returned in August 2004.⁵⁰

September 2004-Present—Building for the Future

Early in November 2004, SFLC received a gracious gift of \$110,000 from a WELS member that allowed them to purchase the two buildings on Roosevelt Avenue to expand their ministry in Woodside, Queens.⁵¹ Since that time the ministry has continued to flourish as a bilingual ministry with emphasis on Hispanic outreach. Sarah Gabb has come onboard the ministry team as the Director of the ESL program. They are also working on the renovations needed to their new buildings that will help establish SFLC as a permanent fixture for the WELS in New York City.

For a ministry that has only been around for a short time, SFLC certainly has a rich history. It is a history that emphasizes experimentation, collaboration, determination, and a dedication to sharing the good news of Jesus with all nations. It truly is a unique ministry in a unique mission field. As we look forward to the future of this ministry, we look forward in anticipation to see how our gracious God will bless the people of New York and the world through this blessed family of believers. There is much to be done. It is work that is challenging and that takes faithful effort, Synodical support, and financial assistance, but work that can be accomplished with the help of our gracious Lord of the Church. In reference to the decisions the leaders of our Synod have

⁵⁰ Web Page.

⁵¹ Ibid.

prayerfully made regarding our mission efforts in NYC (especially with regard to financial struggles the Synod has been facing as of late), Pastor Hagedorn states,

Have we established as much presence as we might in NYC? No. Have we stopped the "discovery" work and permission giving because of finances? Probably. Do we need to share the challenge of expanding Gospel ministry in one of the world's great cities and seek volunteers and financial resources among the willing? Absolutely.⁵²

In this spirit of willingness and determination to carry out the Great Commission however the Lord leads, we seek his continued blessing on the men and women who are faithfully serving as representatives of the church-at-large in New York City.

The Final Word...

I think these quotes from Pastor Don Stuppy and Sarah Gabb speak wisdom to anyone blessed to be involved in missions within our Synod (which is everyone). I put them out here naked at the end of my paper as words of advice for anyone going into or working in a metropolitan area. May God grant us such wisdom and patience as we seek to win the lost.

The New York field presents many challenges. The cultural diversity of the communities, the economic diversity, the transient nature of those living there, the mentality of living in "the city" and much more all have to be factored in as we do work there. It takes a unique person to be willing to live there and it takes time to get to know how people think.⁵³

While I certainly was excited about experiencing city life and witnessing first hand how God would grow his church in NYC, I never would have imagined what challenges I would encounter here. The logistical challenges of walking everywhere and waiting for public transportation in sometimes extreme weather. The challenge of materialism as I listen to other friends and family who raise their kids with backyards, large homes, and Christian day schools. The challenge of desperately wanting the church to grow and sinfully feeling that it was within my power to make that happen. The challenge of learning patience with God's

⁵² Pastor Hagedorn.

⁵³ Pastor Stuppy.

timing. The challenge of wanting everything to go smoothly for my husband simply because I love him and I know how hard he works. The challenge of saying goodbye to dear friends year after year. And sometimes even the challenge of seeing each person as a soul. I also never would have imagined the joys of such a ministry. The joys found in discovering another language and culture. The joys of raising my family in such a diverse setting. The joy found in opportunity and potential for Sure Foundation. And the joy in knowing that in spite of our personal shortcomings, he is bringing people to faith here.⁵⁴

And that is what it's all about!

The author would like to thank so many people who have helped in the writing of this paper: Pastor Steve and Sarah Gabb, Jonathan and BethAnn Meier, Pastor Michael Roth, Pastor Don Stuppy, Prof. E. Allen Sorum, Pastor Harry Hagedorn, Pastor John Huebner, Jonathon Roberts, Angela Stelljes, and all the people, past and present, who have helped Sure Foundation Lutheran Church along the way. To God be the Glory.

John Stelljes, December 2005.

⁵⁴ Sarah Gabb.

ADDENDA 1: Statistics 2000–2005

Submitted by Pastor Steven Gabb

Post 9/11 work (between Nov 2001 & April 2002...working with WELS Committee on Relief and the NYC metro churches to disperse funds to families of victims)

- 51 recipients
- \$ 380,749 dispersed in gifts/aid
- \$ 7665.67 average
- \$773 – \$18,500 range of gifts awarded
- 47 female recipients
- 36 from New Jersey
- 15 from New York
- 9 from NYC
- 43 lost a spouse
- 3 lost a fiance
- 5 other (job-related)

Post 9/11 work: OPERATION: *He is Here* (9/11/02–one year anniversary)

- An aggressive OUTREACH project to share the healing message of hope through Jesus (9/9 & 9/10)
- 6 Tri-State WELS churches, WELS COR & KW, WLC, et al – TEAMWORK
- Major transportation terminals
- Lunchtime Hot Spots
- 60 different participants
- 45 participants each day
- 7000 ‘*God Our Refuge*’
- 25,000 flyers
- About 135 man hours were spent prepping materials. About 495 man hours were spent reaching out in transportation terminals and city ‘hot spots.’
- 1st time opportunities to witness

Art in the Park (summer VBS, Every year, we have numerous repeats from the previous year which, I think, says something about the good impression the program leaves with the children.

- 2001 – 10 total kids (ballpark estimate)
- 2002 – 15 total kids (ballpark estimate)
- 2003 – 20 total kids (ballpark estimate)
- 2004 – 50 total kids, 24 kid average daily
- 2005 – 41 total kids, 25 kid average daily

Addenda 1 (continued)

Easter Extravaganza-- Because we worshipped in the park '01, '02, '03, it was hard to get an exact number of those in attendance. We safely estimated at about 100 each year. However, you can see the growth from year to year.

- 2001 - 30 prospects
- 2002 - 56 prospects
- 2003 - 62 prospects
- 2004 (inside, due to weather) - 39 total
- 2005 (inside, due to weather) - 52 total
- Our worship space is 160 ft², so we can't nearly accommodate the same number inside as we can in the park. Hence, the lower attendance the past 2 years.

Labor Day Retreat (In 2003, we started to charter a coach bus to accommodate the interest...Labor Day Retreat has been an awesome tool to build relationships with our prospects)

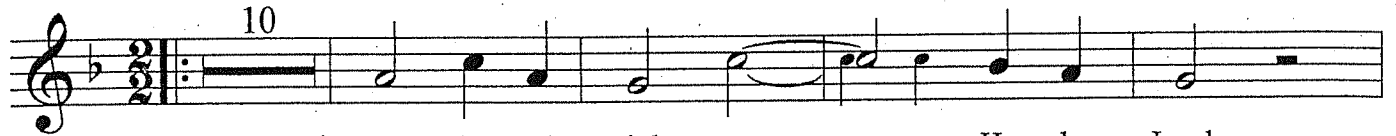
- 2000 - 12 total
- 2001 - 35 total (25 prospects)
- 2002 - 25 total (14 prospects)
- 2003 - 53 total (sorry, don't have any specifics on this year)
- 2004 - 43 total (15 new faces, i.e. people we had never met)
- 2005 - 41 total
- For '03, '04, '05 - I don't have specifics on prospect numbers, but every year the # of prospects easily outweighs the number of members...probably about 75% prospects, 25% members.

ADDENDA 2

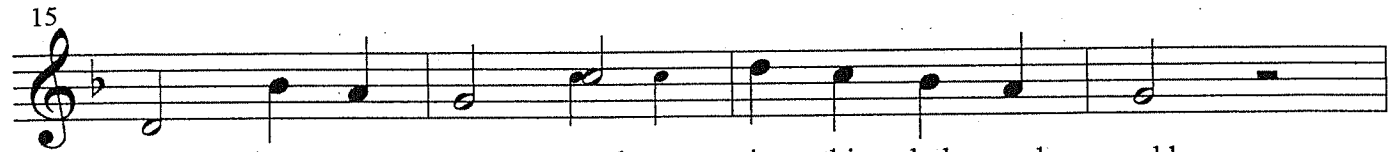
For the NYC area WELS churches

Sure Foundation

Angela Mickelson
Jonathon Roberts



1. Fa - ther Al - might - y, _____ Ho - ly Lord,
2. Christ is our strong - hold, _____ al - ways the same,



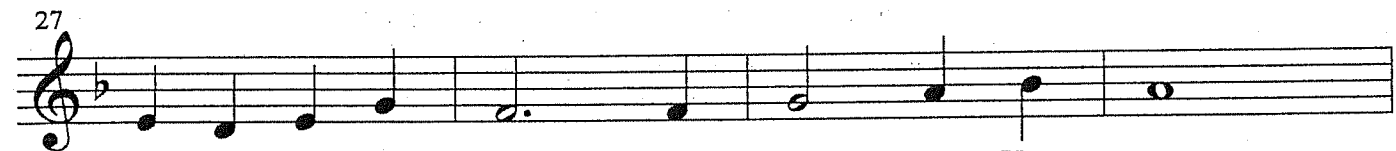
We jour - ney on - ward in this dark - ened world.
Al - might - y for - tress our re - fuge is His name.



Strength - en, sus - tain us, _____ bring us peace. Our
Sav - ior, Re - deem - er, _____ Ris - en Lord, Your



foot - steps are wear - y, our hearts are weak from bur - den.
life free - ly giv - en, our glo - ry and sal - va - tion.



O - ver come with pain, we cry out Your name.
O - ver come with tears, we smile through our fears.



Fa - ther of mer - cy, give us the shel - ter of Your
Sav - ior of mer - cy, give us the shel - ter of Your



CHORUS:
grace. We are mem - bers of His house.
love.