

# 25



LIVING  
SAVIOR



## **THE HISTORY OF LIVING SAVIOR LUTHERAN CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL**

### **By God's grace it all began when. . .**

Back in 1977, Pastor John Guse, dubbed the "Roving Ambassador," traveled the states of North and South Carolina, visiting and communing our WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) service members. His care list soon grew to include far-flung civilian members, including the families of Ed Groeschel, Jim Larkey, Henry Kleine, William Munk, and Jonathan Tweit. Worship services began in the Tweit home and moved later to the Groeschel home in Hendersonville, NC, using taped services when a pastor was not available.

The next year they moved to the Hendersonville YMCA, where the church members had to clean up the room prior to the service, set it up, and take it down after the service. At times they had no heat, at times no music. Pastors Guse, Scott Stone of Knoxville, TN, and Paul Schmiede of Raleigh, NC served the group. The WELS Mission Board granted them exploratory status, and seminary graduate Jonathan Guenther was installed on July 1, 1979, to be their pastor.

Three months later, however, Pastor Guenther received a call also to serve a group starting in Charlotte. When Charlotte began public worship on November 2, 1980, this young newly-married pastor drove three hours one way and a 300-mile roundtrip to serve both congregations.

### **It became official when. . .**

With their own pastor on site, the Hendersonville congregation chose the name "Our Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church" and submitted a constitution and bylaws to the State of North Carolina. Its acceptance on March 12, 1980, established the official birth date of the congregation, a member of the Michigan District of WELS. The first officers were Paul Sitz, President; Jonathan Tweit, Vice President; Henry Kleine, Secretary; and William Munk, Treasurer.

The congregation, meanwhile, did all they could to support their ministry.

When the YMCA began a building expansion program, the congregation had to look elsewhere to hold worship. Resourceful and fully committed, they discovered a Church of Christ building for sale and agreed to buy it with their own funds. With their offer of \$70,000 accepted and paid (leaving them with a workable debt of \$20,000 to one member), they went to work to refurbish their new worship center. Member Ken Klein and three volunteers did much of this work.

In July of the same year, 1980, President Paul Sitz died. Memorials from friends and members were used to purchase an altar and baptismal font. Private contributions paid for the remodeling, and a generous gift of \$10,000 paid off the indebtedness. The church was debt-free.

What could go wrong? Our Savior had not consulted with the Mission Board, had not yet achieved full mission status, and had not gone through the normal process for purchasing land and a building. Pastor Guenther had some tall explaining to do. This caused tension between Our Savior and the Mission Board that lingered for two decades. Meanwhile, the church attendance was averaging about twenty-three people per Sunday.

**More new pastors came to serve when. . .**

As Pastor Guenther's duties in Charlotte became full-time, the Hendersonville group turned to seminary graduate Philip Strackbein who was called to share time from Greenville, SC, where Abiding Peace Lutheran Church was just getting started. At Hendersonville, Pastor Strackbein conducted worship services, Sunday school, and Bible class. He visited the sick and shut-ins and was available in case of emergencies. But twenty months later he accepted a call as missionary to Columbia, South America. Following a short vacancy another seminary graduate, Robert Rhyne, was assigned to serve Greenville and Hendersonville.

On January 12, 1986, the congregation welcomed Social Security (S.S.) retired Pastor Harold Schwertfeger to serve them.

More improvements: an organ and piano gifted, a new heating and air conditioning system installed, replacement windows installed . . . and a Ladies Guild was organized!

**At last, one pastor stayed for more than a few years when. . .**

On October 2, 1988, Our Savior celebrated Pastor Schwertfeger's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in the ministry. At the end of the month, he retired to Lake City, MN due to health problems. Another S.S. pastor, Frederic Kosanke, was installed on January 8, 1989. Meanwhile, the congregation added a new Allen organ, basement renovation, basement window replacement, carpeting, padded pews, parking, and paving!

Still, problems persisted. By both Federal Government and WELS pension regulations, Pastor Kosanke could devote no more than twenty hours a week to church work in order to qualify for pension payments. Although he could count many pastoral visits as social, the weekly pastor's workload, that most members do not see, easily exceeded the twenty-hour limit.

Our Savior was an unusual congregation: with a full-time pastor only for a few months and with part-time or S.S. pastors the rest of the time. Still, Our Savior survived and grew at an above average pace for a new mission start in the South Atlantic District. Our Savior purchased, remodeled, and modernized its building with no Synod funds. A very special congregation!

### **A new future beckoned when. . .**

All of this happened more than twenty-five years ago. But without Our Savior of Hendersonville, Living Savior of Asheville and Hendersonville, NC, would not be celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary.

Both Pastor Kosanke and the congregation wanted a full-time pastor to take over. It would not be easy. For one thing, the church had no parsonage. Pastors Schwertfeger and Kosanke both bought their own homes. Then, in 1998, Pastor Kosanke retired full-time.

The next two years Pastor Tom Kock served Our Savior, commuting from his congregation in Johnson City, Tennessee, and retired Pastor Reginald Pope filled in for a few months. But Pastor Kock did not just serve Our Savior. Living Word, a congregation of the Church of the Lutheran Confession, closed its mission in western North Carolina. Their members met with Pastor Kock, and they were welcomed to join the flock at Our Savior.

The church began in earnest to search for a full-time pastor. After making a number of pastoral calls with no success, they appealed to the District Mission Board for a grant of \$20,000 a year for two years.

### **A full-time pastor came at last when. . .**

The Synod, in turn, offered to supply a pastor for the congregation providing they would consider a move toward Asheville and go into mission status. On July 3, 2000, Pastor John Qualmann, a full-time pastor, was installed.

Anticipating Qualmann's arrival and eager to serve, the congregation had already put together plans for a Vacation Bible School that summer. Pastor Qualmann started offering God 101 classes and a women's Bible study. Within a year the small but growing congregation started worshipping in Groce Funeral Home on Long Shoals Road in Skyland (South Asheville).

The members worshipped for the last time in Hendersonville on April 1, 2001. Pastor Raymond Cox served as guest preacher, as Pastor Qualmann concentrated on the upcoming service at the new location. The next week 190 worshippers celebrated

Palm Sunday worship at Groce Funeral Home. We sold the Hendersonville building in Autumn 2002.

Twenty-four years of faithful dedication and unswerving faith had set the stage for a promising future. By combining the names of Our Savior and Living Word congregations, they chose the name “Living Savior.” A new constitution replaced the old. Hendersonville passed the mission to Asheville, and the twenty-five years we celebrate today had begun. But (who but God knew?) Hendersonville would return.

**It came time to think of building again when. . .**

By the next year, we had negotiated a deal with the Valley Springs Grange people to renovate their building at 301 Overlook Road, Asheville and use it for our Ministry Center. The building was in terrible disrepair, but we agreed that if they paid for the materials, we would do the work to restore it and rent it back for our Center. The members pitched in and renovated virtually every feature inside.

Meanwhile, we continued to worship at Groce Funeral Home and to raise money for building a new church. Three years into our time in Asheville, we increased our staff with the first of several vicars (student interns) whom we have listed elsewhere. They helped serve us just as we served them as part of their training in ministry. A year after leaving us and returning to the Seminary, each one graduated and entered the full-time ministry. We counted each one as a special blessing among us.

As time drew near to build that church, we needed to own, not rent, the property to build on. Congregation President Wendel Burton led the way to purchase the Ministry Center property. A short time after the sale, however, Buncombe County officials informed us that they had hoped to buy that land. They wanted to provide a service road for their buses to drive from Estes Elementary School on one side to Valley Springs Middle School on the other.

Not to be deterred, we had Burton offer the County School Board that we would build their road if they would deed us a strip of land along the south side of our property. After a bit of red tape to close the deal, the School Board and Buncombe County officials granted us a 75-foot-wide strip and we built the road. The local Times-News reported the deal as a “win/win situation.”

### **Our pioneer spirit manifested itself again when. . .**

Meanwhile, to maximize our outreach and witnessing, in 2003 we welcomed three young women “Volunteer Evangelists” followed by three young men--each group for six months. We prized each one and the work they did. One, however, needs to be mentioned by name, Rinda Boehm (now Werner), who stayed for four years! Rinda, it seemed, brought a new friend to church every Sunday.

We purchased the property on March 28, 2005, and congregation president Chuck Henrich turned the first shovel of earth at groundbreaking on August 14.

In the spirit of our pioneers, our dedicated members volunteered hours of “sweat equity” to complete the building for worship. They tore the old exterior off the Grange building and added offices and a classroom to it. (Today, the old Grange building comprises the church office, the adjacent classroom, and the library.) They helped with wiring, staining, painting, outfitting the kitchen, landscaping, and countless other tasks. Before the drywall went on, members were asked to write their favorite Bible passage on the inside structure. Now, every time we worship, God’s Word, that flows from our voices and resonates in our hearts, surrounds us with a silent echo built into the walls themselves.

God was blessing our ministry, and we witnessed substantial growth. We dedicated the new building on June 17, 2007, and in September we opened our preschool with two classrooms. Eva Krauss, Director and lead teacher, and Leah Qualmann, Assistant Director and teacher, accepted the challenge to operate the school on a limited budget.

### **We marveled at God’s grace and guidance when. . .**

After about two years in our new building, we saw a need to add additional staff, and the congregation called Pastor Gary Baumler out of retirement to serve part-time. When Pastor Qualmann left for a new call to Greenville, WI, on June 19, 2011, Pastor Baumler served the vacancy.

During those years in Asheville under Qualmann, the congregation exuded a spirit of devotion, friendliness, and mission awareness. Visitors often commented favorably about the warmth and welcome they experienced on a Sunday morning.

But, a vacancy? For how long? God worked his wonders, and his people took the initiative given them. Even before Pastor Qualmann left, the congregation requested a seminary graduate to fill the void. The call went to Caleb Kurbis at his

seminary graduation. He accepted and was installed on July 17, less than a month after Qualmann had left.

Pastor Kurbis was new to the ministry, but this one-time fishing boat captain came with unusual savvy and energy to steer our fishing boat called Living Savior. At the following budget cycle, Pastor Baumler confidently retired again.

The fourteen years of Pastor Kurbis's ministry here rounded out the twenty-five years that we celebrate.

### **God's blessings continued to multiply when. . .**

Youth ministry blossomed, including trips to our national and district youth summer camps, an annual ski outing in February, and a March trip to a youth basketball tournament at Luther Preparatory School in Watertown, WI, to promote ministry. Pastor Kurbis, an ex-college soccer player, fashioned a week-long soccer camp in June that drew from 100 to 200 children a year. The vicar program was reinstated.

Foundations classes, teaching the basics of our Christian faith, were ongoing year-round for adults. If you could not attend a class at the time and place offered, the class would come to you. We regularly welcomed new faces among us. And we regretted losing those who left to new places, whether on earth or into eternity.

The preschool, with Eva Krauss still the Director, has thrived and reached its capacity of three- and four-year-olds and is self-supporting. With its dedicated staff, it has gained good standing in the community and has blessed the congregation with several baptisms and some solid new members.

And volunteers! This church would not be what it is without many hard working, humble volunteers. We would like nothing more than to list an honor roll here, but they do not serve to be on an honor roll. Nevertheless, if you are reading this and have stepped up to help our ministry, we need to tell you that we deeply appreciate you and praise God for you.

We can't get everything in an anniversary history that we would like, but if you ever get the opportunity, take time to talk with members former and new, and they can tell you first-hand stories that give glory to God.

### **We looked again for God's wisdom and direction when. . .**

This takes us to the latest seven years of this anniversary. The members of Living Savior did not want to squander God's blessings or grow complacent about our

ministry. We asked the question: “How can our Living Savior congregation in South Asheville best continue to serve the Lord in Western North Carolina?”

Two choices presented themselves: 1. Continue to build and expand on what we have in Asheville. Or, 2. Expand the ministry to a new site, namely, back to Hendersonville where the population had been expanding considerably since Our Savior Lutheran Church left there.

Members shared compelling arguments for each choice before they settled on going to Hendersonville, where we could reach more people for Christ. On Saturday, February 25, 2017, Living Savior began holding services at the Cascades Mountain Resort on Sugarloaf Road. About twenty members of those attending the Asheville church committed to attending the Hendersonville campus regularly.

In June of that year, we leased a retail space at the Four Seasons Mall in Hendersonville as a more permanent worship site. Again, true to our heritage, we brought loads of sweat equity to convert the site to a serviceable Ministry Center. We held the first service there on July 8. It was easy to direct people there: right next to Honey Baked Ham!

**We grew increasingly excited about the return to Hendersonville when. . .**

We proceeded to call a second pastor to serve predominantly as the mission pastor at our second site. The third call connected with God’s choice for us, seminary Professor Paul Zell, who was installed on January 21, 2018, at Living Savior.

While Pastors Zell and Kurbis and faithful lay people set about searching for souls in the Hendersonville area, the church leaders were also searching for the ideal place to build our church. They landed on a 4 ½ acre site at 200 Upward Road in Flat Rock, conveniently located near an Interstate Highway 26 interchange and next to East Hendersonville High School. We closed the deal on August 29, 2019.

Gone were the days of paying \$77,000 for a ready-built church. This time the church needed a down payment of \$67,000 for the land. But, to complete the deal our Synod’s Church Extension Fund (CEF) and Board for Home Missions approved a loan of \$341,500 and a grant of \$273,200. By God’s grace, in less than two years, the generous gifts of friends and members allowed us to pay off that loan.

On March 27, 2021, we celebrated our mortgage burning on the property, and our building committee began putting together a “plan/program” of what our building there should look like. That same month, we kicked off the three-year All Together, Upward Together Campaign to eliminate the existing mortgage on the Asheville

church and fund the development of our Hendersonville Campus. In 2024 the campaign paid off the Asheville mortgage which allowed us to move ahead with developing building plans, with church member Michael Derrig as our architect.

**We faced serious challenges still ahead when. . .**

It has been asked rhetorically, “Does any church building project ever go smoothly?” Soon we faced the answer to that question. The first drawings for our church were tested for bidding, and the cost had soared far above our funding, even with some serious support from the Synod.

We revised the drawings and put them out for a bid. The new low bid was within our reach. However, some cautioned that the financial challenge moving forward was too big to risk. Following serious debate and discussion, the congregation voted to pull together and move forward with the building. We do so humbly and prayerfully.

On December 18, 2025, we signed a contract with Beverly-Grant to construct our Upward Road Ministry Center.

During this time, on June 1, Pastor Caleb Kurbis accepted a call to start a mission church in Erie, CO. We immediately began to call for a new pastor. On July 28, we called Pastor John Stelter to serve Living Savior, focusing especially on the expansion of our Hendersonville mission. He accepted and we arranged for him to move to North Carolina in January, 2026, during the semester break of their five daughters’ schooling.

Pastor Stelter has been serving us already, but his installation, was (twice!) postponed due to snow and ice storms. As this story goes to print, we have installed him on March 1, 2026.

**We will give thanks and rejoice again repeatedly when. . .**

Gary Baumler  
Editor

April 26, 2026

CHURCH	PASTORS		TYPE	SERVICE DATES	
Our Savior	John	Guse	VT	1977	1978
	Scott	Stone	VT	1979	6 mo.
	Paul	Schmiege	VT	1979	6 mo.
	Jonathan	Guenther	FT	1979	1981
	Philip	Strackbein	PT	1981	1982
	Robert	Rhyne Jr.	VT	1981	1986
	AT	Kretzmann	SR	1986	1986
	Harold	Schwertfeger	SR	1986	1988
	Frederic	Kosanke	SR	1989	1998
	Robert	Schumann	VP	1998	1998
	Tom	Kock	VP	1998	2000
Reginald	Pope	VP	1999	1999	
Living Savior	John	Qualmann	FT	2000	2011
	Gary	Baumler	PT	2009	2012
	Caleb	Kurbis	FT	2011	2025
	Paul	Zell	FT	2018	present
	John	Stelter	FT	2026	present

*VT - Visiting; FT - Full-time; SR - Semi-Retired (SS); VP - Vacancy; PT - Part-time*

VICARS		SERVICE DATES		PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER STAFF SINCE 2007			
Timothy	Berg	2003	summer	Eva	Krauss	Heather	Simms
Benjamin	Tomzack	2004	2005	Leah	Qualmann	Mary	Mauney
Jeffery	Bolwerk	2005	2006	Sue	Burton	Sarah	Kurbis
Jeremy	Cares	2006	2007	Kathy	Gross	Debra	Peterson
Thomas	Welch	2020	2021	Beth	Foster	Emily	Mitchell
Justin	Digman	2021	2022	Ruth	Woods	Terese	Southern
Jacob	Ungemach	2022	2023	Stacy	Propst	Margie	Alnes
Peter	Christie	2023	2024	Kristen	Payne	Rebecca	Reich
Nathaniel	Brauer	2024	2025	Kathy	Baumler	Georgia	Cone
Benjamin	Schwartz	2025	2026	Melodie	Iwanek	Katie	Pfeiffer
				Val	Phillips	Rachel	McHargue
				Jennifer	Torrey	Stephanie	Boeshore
				Sarah	Angel	Mary	Turner
				Brynn	Williams	Krystal	Worley
				Melissa	Wright	Carol	Pieper
				Kelley	LeBlanc	Sharron	Hilliker
				Karen	Derrig	Teresa	Blythe
				Annisia	McDonald		



**Our Mission:** Living Savior Lutheran Church & Preschool exists to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people. In 2001 we began as a mission in South Asheville. In 2017 we expanded our mission to a second site in Hendersonville. Our goal is to bring the life of our Savior to a dying world.

301 Overlook Road      161 Four Seasons Blvd  
Asheville, NC 28803      Hendersonville, NC 28792

**New Church Site:**  
200 Upward Road  
East Flat Rock, NC 28726

[LSavior.org](http://LSavior.org)