


# Following the Good Shepherd

**Thirty Years of God's Faithfulness at Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church**

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**Founding Verse - John 10:27-28 (EHV)**

"[27]*My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.* [28]*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.*"

## Intro

Thirty years ago, a small group of believers gathered with a vision to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the growing communities of West Fargo. What began as exploratory outreach has become three decades of God's faithfulness to Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church.

Through pastoral transitions and ministry challenges, through growth and loss, through a pandemic and times of uncertainty, one constant has remained: our Good Shepherd has never let go of his flock. He promises such in our founding Bible verse (above). The pages that follow trace how God has worked through us in this place. As we celebrate thirty years of ministry, we look back with thankful hearts and forward with hope as we reflect on how Christ has guided us.

## The Beginning (1993-1995)

The story of Shepherd of the Valley began not in West Fargo, but in the hearts of members and pastors at Ascension Evangelical Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minnesota. In the fall of 1993, they recognized the growing population on the west side of Fargo. They expressed interest in expanding mission outreach to these western neighborhoods. Though the WELS Board for Home Missions deferred the initial request for assistance, the vision persisted.

By April 1994, the Board granted authority for exploratory work in Fargo/West Fargo with "existing manpower." Pastor Robert Koester of Ascension began providing outreach training to willing individuals to find newcomers and unchurched souls in the western neighborhoods. Although no synodical funding was initially available, special gifts from congregations, Sunday schools, and ladies' groups within the Dakota-Montana District helped fund these early outreach efforts.

When Pastor Koester accepted a call that fall, the work briefly paused. But the Good Shepherd had other plans. In February 1995, the Board for Home Missions granted synod funding for manpower, and the calling for an outreach explorer began.

After several returned calls, pastor candidate Paul Baur was assigned from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's graduating class to serve as a home missionary in West Fargo. He was ordained and installed on July 30, 1995. Using a parsonage on the south side of Fargo as a base, Pastor Baur gathered and trained a nucleus of members. The group chose the name "Shepherd of the Valley," and Shepherd of the Valley began in September 1995 as an exploratory church, worshiping with Ascension Lutheran in Moorhead during that first year.



**Taking Shape (1996)**

In January 1996, a regular church newsletter began as planning for the exploratory congregation took shape, marking the start of a new chapter. The early editions highlighted key milestones, such as the first Christian funeral in February, the first Bible Information Class with thirteen participants in March, and the first infant baptism in May. Talks also began about leasing the former West Fargo post office building, which would become home for Shepherd of the Valley. Five foundational committees—worship, education, evangelism, building, and altar—were established to guide the church's growth.

July brought our first fair booth at the Red River Valley Fair, shared with Ascension. In August, we held our introductory Vacation Bible School with forty-four children from age three through grade eight participating. Remarkably, we had VBS in our present location before our first worship service!

A formal letter from Pastor Lloyd Schlomer at Ascension wished well to those who would be moving to the space at Shepherd of the Valley. The first worship service at our church was on September 8, 1996. The dedication of the post office building, now a refurbished worship facility, was held that same day, marking a significant milestone in our journey.




That first service had seventy-five members present and was an answer to prayer. There had been debate about stepping out as an exploratory church sooner, but the decision was made to wait for seventy members to start, as opposed to beginning with only twenty-five. God blessed them with a first worship service that exceeded their goal by five! Our first anniversary brought a vote on our constitution; Sunday school began with twenty-seven students; and total membership was one hundred souls, with sixty-four communicant members.

**Growth and Transition (1999-2000)**

In March 1999, the congregation received a letter from the church council president. Pastor Baur was being called to Oregon. The council saw this as "an opportunity for self-evaluation." This process examined reasons why the congregation thought Baur should stay, his strengths, the congregation's strengths, areas to improve, and specific and long-term goals. Interestingly, the long-term goals included a new building and possibly having a Christian day school—visions that would continue to guide the congregation for years to come. Pastor Baur decided to stay.

In August 1999, the Building Committee was formed to research and make recommendations to meet the building needs of the church body. However, by the end of December 1999, Pastor Baur asked the congregation to please pray for him and his family. He had received two calls in November from exploratory churches on the East Coast. He accepted the call to Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, leading to a vacancy at Shepherd of the Valley.

While calls went out for our next pastor, Pastor Schlomer from Ascension served as interim during this transition. In July 2000, Pastor Jeffery Halldorson accepted the call to Shepherd of the Valley and was installed as the new pastor, coming from an exploratory congregation in British Columbia, Canada. Shepherd of the Valley was accepted as a member of the Dakota-Montana District in June of that year.



**Building Ministry (2001-2004)**

In 2001, the Women's Group met in the fall to elect officers, pick a name for their ministry, and discuss their vision. By January 2002, the council heard the presentation of the Ladies Group constitution and job descriptions. Additional hymnals were ordered because of the growth at Shepherd of the Valley. The women were encouraged to do sewing for the Central Africa Medical Mission, making diapers, rolled bandages, pill bags, and pads, as well as collecting eyeglasses.




The May 2002 newsletter included a drawing of the new addition to be built on the old loading dock area (the church office area). That fall, there were thirty-five children in both Vacation Bible School and Sunday School, fifty-nine family units on the membership list, college students began meeting at Ascension, confirmation was for 5th-8th grades, and two young men were awarded scholarship money. Television commercials were being prepared for Shepherd of the

Valley, a land deal was considered and rejected, and a research committee looked into a Christian day school to better utilize our building and evangelize.




In 2003, a youth group was started and 4-H met at the church. Clothing and blankets were collected for the Hmong missionaries in the Twin Cities to distribute, free daily e-mail devotions were tried, and summer weekday services started. During the summer, two Kingdom Workers—Luke Italiano and Ben Springer—helped in ministry, creating a Welcome Packet as one of their projects and assisting with VBS and evangelism.

In July 2004, Pastor Halldorson received a call to an exploratory church in South Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He asked for prayers and eventually accepted it. Once again, Pastor Schlomer from Ascension filled in during the vacancy.

**A New Shepherd and New Ministries (2004-2013)**



The vacancy in 2004 didn't last long. While the congregation awaited their new shepherd, Luke Italiano and a friend helped serve the ministry during the summer vacancy. That fall of 2004, Pastor David Bitter was called and installed as Shepherd of the Valley's third pastor.

As with the arrival of Halldorson, Bitter's coming marked a time of evaluation and change for Shepherd of the Valley. A preschool was discussed in the spring of 2005, following several years of looking into a parochial school. That vision became a reality in fall 2006 when Kristi Smith was called to lead Little Lambs Christian Preschool. Mrs. Smith led Little Lambs until spring 2009. In fall 2009, Mandy Elseth was called to lead Little Lambs and continued in that role for many years. As enrollment at Little Lambs increased, a helper was needed, and Stacy Bitter was hired as a teacher assistant in the fall of 2010.

Throughout the latter 2000s and early 2010s, there was much work to be done in the church: baptisms were performed, marriages officiated, and classes taught. For the church, this marked an era of continued progress as it sought to serve its families. For example, in 2007, there were 25 children in confirmation!



In 2010, a Planning Committee put together a presentation. The goal was to summarize the issues the church faced, particularly with future growth. A need for more space was emphasized. Our current building's limitations were noted. After all, it was a post office! The Planning Committee explored options and

made several recommendations, including an emphasis on retiring the church's debt. In 2016, the church's mortgage was finally paid off, a blessed result of this effort!

Shepherd of the Valley was blessed by Pastor Bitter's efforts for almost 9 years, until 2013, when he accepted a call to Wisconsin. According to the July 13th Council meeting minutes, there were 188 baptized members of Shepherd of the Valley. The church had certainly come a long way since its humble beginnings in 1996!

**Continuing Onward (2014-2022)**



In February 2014, Andrew Krause was installed as Shepherd of the Valley's fourth pastor. The congregation continued to worship in the former West Fargo Post Office where services were first held in 1996, even as the building became increasingly tight on space with the preschool utilizing much of the worship seating area during the week. The congregation continued to look for a larger facility.

Fargo and West Fargo remained booming areas into the late 2010's, with growth especially along the south side of the interstate. Church families were scattered around the area, with people coming from as far as 40 miles away to worship. The congregation celebrated its church anniversary each year in September as a reminder of God's continued grace, and by 2020, membership had grown to approximately 170 souls.

The church entered the 2020's amidst various challenges and trials. The first was the difficult choice of closing the Little Lambs preschool. This decision was made based on costs, worker shortage around the synod, and the departure of the preschool's teacher, Mandy Elseth. The second trial was the sudden loss of Gayle Krause, wife of Pastor Krause. Her loss hit the congregation hard. Coupled with this tragedy was also the retirement of Pastor Krause. He had been considering retirement for some time, and Gayle's passing moved those plans up. Besides these hard trials was the oncoming of the COVID-19 pandemic, now amidst a pastoral vacancy. These were difficult times for Shepherd of the Valley. And yet, the challenges and trials offer us perspective and important reminders about holding onto Christ as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

Even throughout the vacancy and the pandemic, the Lord still took care of the West Fargo flock. Supported by vacancy pastors from South Dakota and laypeople, regular ministry continued. Of special note during this time was the arrival of Pastor Jordan Uhlhorn in 2021 at Ascension in Moorhead. After becoming acclimated to the Fargo-Moorhead area, Pastor Uhlhorn would also help shepherd the vacant congregation.

**Building on the Foundation (2022-Present)**



It would take some time for Shepherd of the Valley to receive an answer to the question of who their new pastor would be. In May 2022, the church received her answer: pastor candidate Dan Sprain was assigned from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to be the new pastor of Shepherd of the Valley. This was 26 years after Pastor Baur, the first pastor candidate, had been assigned to Shepherd of the Valley. Pastor Sprain was ordained and installed at Shepherd of the Valley later that summer.

When Pastor Sprain arrived, much had changed since before 2020. Questions needed to be answered: Were we ever going to get a new building? How many members were still around following COVID and a year-long vacancy? What would ministry look like going into the future? These and many other questions are always unfolding before us, as the good Lord allows.



After over 25 years of being in the same building, efforts were renewed to try and find a way to a new property. The original plan had been to be in the post-office building for 5 years! Unfortunately, these efforts never materialized into much. That being the case, the church leadership has directed the congregation more recently toward our current facility needs. Recent work in that area has included refreshing the sanctuary with new paint, a new altar, a stone backdrop, and more.

One feature that didn't change from before 2020 was the presence of families at Shepherd of the Valley. From 2022-2026, Pastor Sprain had the privilege of baptizing over a dozen babies, and even one adult too! There were five weddings and several funerals officiated too. A constant stream of classes, Campus Ministry, and even a renewed Youth Group has kept the ministry going in a healthy fashion. Also, since 2023, efforts have been strengthened to work together more closely with Ascension-St. Paul's, our fellow WELS Churches in the Fargo-Moorhead Area. In short, God has been very good to Shepherd of the Valley following the challenges and trials at the beginning of the 2020's.



That leaves an important question: where do we go from here? No one can tell the future. We can only look back on our history and present time and make the best evaluations we can. The good Lord is the one who knows what will happen to Shepherd of the Valley. In the short-term, there doesn't seem to be any shortage of ministry opportunities. For that, we give thanks and continue to follow Jesus, trusting in him every step of the way.

**Conclusion/Reflection**

History is not just names and numbers. It's the telling of stories. This story is about a group of saints in West Fargo, ND. For any of you reading this, you might be familiar with the presence of lots of Christians in the Fargo-Moorhead area, let alone Lutheran! What makes this one small Lutheran church in the Fargo-Moorhead area of note? Better yet, why celebrate 30 years of a WELS church being a small fish in a big pond filled with bigger fish?

This is why: For three decades, God has graciously blessed our Gospel ministry in West Fargo and the surrounding region. His blessings continue even now. As we reflect on this history, we celebrate our Lord—the Good Shepherd who has led us faithfully and will continue to guide us forward. For his goodness and faithfulness, we give him all glory, honor, and praise. The history of Shepherd of the Valley can be summarized with the words of a beloved hymn based on Psalm 115:

***"Not unto us, not unto us be glory, Lord;***
***Not unto us but to your name be praise;***
***Not unto us but to your name all honor be giv'n***
***For matchless mercy, forgiveness, and grace."***

