

Highlights of Florida-Georgia District - 60th Anniversary

THE FOUNDING ERA -- 1948-1957

- In the post World War II era of our nation's history the organizing convention of the Florida-Georgia District gave birth to the 34th District of the Lutheran Church, Missouri synod. It was held at Trinity Lutheran Church in Orlando in February of 1948. The District formed with 22 congregations and adopted a budget of \$27,000. The Rev. Conrad Kellerman, a senior pastor in the District serving St. Matthew Lutheran Church in Miami, was elected president.
- Struggles with financing new mission starts was the main concern in those years when places to start mission were many but money to purchase land and buildings was scarce. For example subsidized mission starts were not allowed to invest in air conditioners for their facilities, but because of the generosity of a business man in the District electric fans were made available for much needed cooling in the hot summer months.
- The 10% plan was initiated in the District at the 1949 convention to make funds available for expansion. All congregations were requested to contribute 10% of their total current expense budget over and above regular offerings so that the District could purchase sites and construct facilities. Thus the Church Extension Fund, later know as LCEF, became a vital tool for ministry in this young District.

A TIME OF NEW COMMITMENT -- 1957-1963

- The 1957 convention convened at the George Washington Hotel in West Palm Beach, celebrating the tenth Anniversary of the District. President Kellerman retired, and his vice-president, the Rev. F. W. Lorberg was elected to serve as District President to face some interesting challenges to meet financial obligations. CEF loans totaled a staggering \$450,000. Eleven church sites had recently been acquired, six churches were under construction and twenty-two missions were under District subsidy. To deal with the financial crisis, delegates at the convention resolved to call an annual fiscal conference that included lay representation.
- The national climate during a time of integration and social concerns moved the young District into black ministry and social ministry. Missionary Bill Jones did a yeoman's job of starting up black ministries in the major population centers of the District. He is credited with starting seven congregations.
- Social ministry start-ups in this era included Hollybrook Homes, a low-cost housing project in Jacksonville, Fl. and East Ridge Retirement Center in Miami, Fl.
- Hispanic ministries got a big boost when four missionary pastors including Herman Glienke and Eugene Gruell came to the District following their expulsion from Cuba by the Fidel Castro regime.
- By 1963 the number of congregations in the District was 87 divided into 12 circuits, with 20,000 members. At the 25th Anniversary of the District the

rapid growth of parish preschools and elementary schools, with the expanding number of those in teaching ministry, was acknowledged.

THE EXPANSION ERA - 1963-1973

- The Rev. August Bernthal of Grace Lutheran Church, Winter Haven, Fl., was elected president of the District at the convention in Sarasota, following the retirement of Pres. F. W. Lorberg.
- We call this the era of expansion because at the end of President Bernthal's 10th year of presidency in 1973 the number of congregations expanded from 87 to 151 congregations.
- In 1964 the District Office was moved from the leased space in the Metcalf Building in midtown Orlando to the large house on a lake at 441 Park Lake Cir., Orlando.
- Pan-Lutheran cooperation created institutional coordination in campus ministries and outdoor education and encouraged broader social and welfare ministries. Changing demographics created new challenges for District members. The Urban Church Planning Division of American Missions of the National Lutheran Council, attempted to help members understand the past and design new programs to minister to changing community needs, especially in urban and black ministries.
- During this era the District expanded the teachers' conferences to include all District educators and conduct biennial pastor-teacher workshops.
- The 25th anniversary of the District was observed by a special Convocation at Eckerd College, St. Petersburg in August 1973. Bernthal challenged the District to prepare for rapid population growth and changing demographics that would tax ministry resources. During the next era the church would continue to face rapid technological, demographic, economic and social upheaval. In both American society and in the LCMS, conflict appeared imminent. Shortly after the convocation Pres. Bernthal resigned the presidency of the District to assume the office of fifth vice-president of synod, when its incumbent died. The Rev. Lloyd Behnken, first vice-president of the District, filled the vacated office of president until the next convention.

TIME OF REORGANIZATION, REAFFIRMATION AND RENEWAL 1973-1987

- At the New Orleans Synodical convention in the summer of 1973, heated discussions about doctrinal clarity and ecclesiastical authority continued the polarization of many into active traditionalist and progressive groups. Behnken and the District leaders anxiously prepared for the June District convention at the Seville Hotel in Miami Beach. In the initial ballot taken 216 voting delegates selected Behnken as the first full-time District president.
- Throughout the initial years of his presidency, Behnken was a moderating voice in the synod and in handling conflicted issues that arose in the District. During these tempestuous years of intra-synodical struggles under the leadership of Behnken, the District maintained its primary focus of work at home-mission growth and social services. Walking the middle road and tending to its work at home thrust the District into the national Lutheran limelight.

- Delegates to the 1978 convention, held at Eckerd College, concluded the half-decade of self-study and re-organization of district administration. They separated District activities into four divisions - Ministry and Nurture, Parish Services, Missions, and Administration. Each division was chaired by one of the four fulltime district executives called into District service by this time.
- Two outstanding synodical leaders, Ben Eggers (renowned in Youth Ministry) and Fred Lietz (considered Mr. LCEF of synod), were given executive positions in the District. Eggers was named Executive Secretary of Parish Services and Lietz, Executive Secretary of Administration. Each in his field offered creative administrative techniques for the District.
- President Behnken throughout the synodical turmoil of his first two terms as District President continued to stress the servant role of church leaders. He kept encouraging pan-Lutheran cooperation as well.
- In late September, 1987, President Behnken quietly requested a temporary leave of absence from office because of illness. The Board appointed Rev. Thomas Zehnder as acting president with authority to sign legal documents on behalf of the District. President Behnken died on December 22, 1987 and entered the eternal rest offered him through the Gospel of Christ, which he cherished.

ERA OF PROMISE - 1987-1997

- On June 13-15, 1988, delegates met for the twenty-third District Convention at Lake Yale Baptist Assembly Center. Meeting only six months after President Behnken died, the delegates elected the Rev. Thomas Zehnder on the first ballot by giving him 85% of the votes.
- District leaders met at Hope Lutheran Church in Pompano Beach, Fl., to develop a comprehensive plan. They developed long range objectives. "Progressing: In Faith" was adopted to promote stewardship for the construction of the new District headquarters. This \$1.25 million dollar three year project provided the impetus to build a thirteen thousand square foot complex in Orlando Central Park, between Orlando's business district and the international airport. This continues to be the District Office to this day.
- The Division of Mission Services faced a new challenge when long-time Executive Secretary Erdmann Frenk retired. The Rev. Gerald Seaman, pastor of Ascension Lutheran Church, Casselberry, Fl., was called and accepted the post.
- In this era, as congregations were urged through a thirty month Church Growth study to change emphasis from maintenance to mission, there was an increased awareness of facing a largely unchurched culture.
- Hurricanes Andrew in South Florida and Alberto in South Georgia left several churches in those areas in need of help for families and extensive repair on homes and churches. The call went out to District and Synod to help in the recovery efforts.
- The 40th anniversary of the District was celebrated at 23rd Regular Convention of the District. It was decided at this convention to change the office of vice president from three to two. Elected to serve were the Rev. Robert Strickert from Georgia and the Rev. Edgar Trinklein from Florida. After Strickert was no longer eligible due to term limits, the Rev. Oscar Gerken, Faith, Eustis, FL was chosen

as second vice president to serve with Trinklein as the first vice president. At the succeeding convention, delegates elected another Georgian, the Rev. Gerhard Michael to serve as the second vice president with Trinklein. At the 1997 District Convention, delegates voted to require that one vice president come from each state.

- Multi-cultural outreach was emphasized at the convention as opportunities to reach out to non-English speaking people in our metropolitan areas of the District increased.
- Anticipating the challenge of facing the responsibilities of the next century, the Board of Directors adopted a new way to do business. Policy-based governance required the four division executives to identify the “core values” which motivated them to carry out their duties.
- In February 1997 President Zehnder accepted a call to King of Glory Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. First Vice-President Rev. Edgar Trinklein of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Lakeland, Fl., took the helm until the next Convention in May. He was unwilling to run for office at the May convention because he felt “a younger person with vision and courage who will serve for more than one term would be the best thing for the District”.

ERA OF WORKING THE FERTILE FIELDS AGAIN -- 1997 - 2008

- The convention of May 19-21, 1997 at Lake Yale elected the Rev. Gerhard Michael as District President. Michael, challenged to refine the core values and enrich parish corporate life, wanted the Gospel to come through clearly in the great variety of worship experiences available in this multi-cultural District.
- The District Convention of June 2-4, 2000, authorized the development of the Concordia House of Studies, starting new congregations each year equivalent to 3% of our existing congregations, and embarked on a major \$10,000,000 financial campaign to help underwrite these initiatives. The three year campaign, which was over and above regular congregational remittances for the ongoing work of the District, was called “Forward Together - Servants in His Mission.”
- In his report to the District at the 2003 Convention, President Michael reported, “The three yearshave been marked by news that is not good: a significant downturn in the economy; the bombing of the twin towers in New York by terrorists; the collapse of major companies due to the overarching greed of corporate executives; war in Iraq. Add to this news from the public sector the problems we face on a personal level.... We, however are determined not to cave into the anxiety, for we know that God who calls us to go forward has revealed himself to us in the past. He is faithful. He loves us.....”
- The 2006 District Convention, the 29th, was held on June 9-11 in Lake Mary, Fl. The “Ablaze” initiative to reach 2,000,000 people with the Gospel by the year 2017, started at the previous synodical convention, sparked enthusiasm at the District Convention. District goals of outreach were set and Witness Outreach Seminars were publicized. The challenges set before the delegates were these five: strengthen existing congregations; plant new congregations; raise new leaders; growth in biblical stewardship; and strengthening our partnership in the Gospel.

