

## ***Chapter One***

### **Founding and the First Ten Years: 1953-1963**

*“To be at the intersection of decades is to be thankful...  
Thanksgiving must be here; for life and a place, for a church, for friends and family,  
and for a God who knows us and waits for us.”*

In the early 1950s, as the nation entered a period of prosperity and urban areas expanded, the Board of American Missions of the Augustana Lutheran Church targeted Northern Virginia for a new mission church. Taking the lead in this effort was the local Augustana Lutheran Church, located in the District of Columbia. That congregation was led by Reverend Clarence T. Nelson, a visionary pastor who saw the need to start new suburban parishes in the greater Washington metropolitan area.

On April 23, 1953, Pastor Nelson and Ruth Youngdahl Nelson, equally visionary as her husband, initiated the first gathering of individuals living in and around the small community of Springfield who might be interested in forming a new congregation. In support of this group, Pastor Nelson also involved members of his own congregation—some already living in Northern Virginia—to help launch the new parish. They joined with others, after the meeting, in knocking on doors within the immediate neighborhood and circulating invitations to attend the next meeting of the group.

Out of that first gathering came the decision to proceed with organizing a new congregation. An old farm house and lot on Backlick Road, already purchased by the Augustana Board of American Missions, was readied for use. The initial meeting on May 3, 1953 held in the structure was to launch a Sunday School. The next month, the group held the first worship services in the laundry room of the house and led by Norman Hjelm, a seminary-bound college student from Pastor Nelson’s congregation. Amidst such humble beginnings, St. Mark’s Lutheran Church was begun.

Many years later, some of the founding members recalled those early days. Ruth Hellwig remembered these years as “a wonderful experience” in which God “had placed us there in that special time.” LaVon Clark had a similar memory and declared that she and her husband, Ernest, “felt like pioneers” on a new suburban frontier. Gerald and Fae Burke were among the earliest active members. Fae recalled helping hang a curtain in the wash room to conceal the wash tubs so there could be a more dignified worship setting.

Other key couples from those years were William and Eleanor Lundin, Opal and Claire Mueller, and Karl and Eleanor Saalbach. “There were many meetings,” Eleanor later recalled, as the mission congregation continued to organize. She added that there “was always a job that needed attention and it seemed everyone was taking turns trying to cover all the needs.”

At Sunday services on December 6, 1953, an organizational meeting was held and an official “Role of Charter Members” issued with the period of enrollment extended into the next year. By March 1954, fifty-two individuals had signed the charter and they, along with forty-five children, became the original members of St. Mark’s. In an account published later, the Springfield Independent, a local newspaper, identified the congregation as “the first organized church in the Springfield community.”

In August 1954, St. Mark’s welcomed Reverend Duane Carlson, who had graduated that year from Augustana Theological Seminary, Rock Island, Illinois, as the congregation’s first pastor. One of the founding members of the new church, Gerald Burke, had met the prospective minister and his wife Alice when on a business trip to Rock Island. He reported that the young couple was ideally suited for St. Mark’s and the task of building the new parish.

Rev. Carlson arrived a few weeks before the first unit of the new church was ready for occupancy. As a result, he led his first services of worship in the old farm house. In the years since, he has often talked about the delight of those first Sundays in the old house, except when someone would flush the toilet upstairs, setting off noisy pumps during the service. Such distractions, however, failed to discourage the young minister. Rather, the whole setting energized him, as it did all those involved in the founding of the congregation.

The new pastor launched an agenda of neighborhood evangelism and program development. As the number of parishioners grew, the new unit quickly became too small. Rev. Carlson and the lay leadership of the church took steps to meet the needs of the expanding congregation. In 1959, construction began on a new building with an inviting and spacious sanctuary, a large fellowship/learning hall in the basement, and a tall campanile that quickly became a visible landmark in the neighborhood. Upon completion of the building, the old farm house was dismantled. The congregation soon found the new facilities could not accommodate the growing number of Sunday School children and Lynnbrook School was rented for some of the classes.

In 1960, St. Mark's participated in an experimental two-year program sponsored by the Board of Social Missions. The program involved placement of a social worker within the professional staff of this suburban congregation. Martin Ferm served in this capacity for one year. Meanwhile, the numbers of parishioners continued to escalate, reaching 614 communicants and 1,131 baptized members by fall 1960.

In 1961, Mary Strand arrived from Gustavus Adolphus College, where she had graduated that spring, to become a parish worker at St. Marks. She remembers how young and energetic the congregation seemed and recalls running off Sunday church bulletins on Friday afternoons in Karl and Eleanor Saalbach's basement on the only mimeograph machine available at that time. In 1963, she married Carl Anderson and the couple remained in the congregation to raise their family.

In the space of just seven years, under the leadership of Pastor Carlson and through the dedication of growing numbers of members, St. Mark's emerged as a vibrant and lively Christian community. In the tenth anniversary history, the excitement and commitment of the young congregation is apparent. In a concluding statement, the authors sought to summarize the moment: "To look back over time is to be sentimental. Memories are there: of those of strong faith, who plowed the ground of the present . . . of men and women who bring themselves before the God of All Mercy before whom generations rise and fall and ages pass. Who but God can rightly assess what has ultimately been done here?"