

## **Chapter Three**

### **Renewal and Renovation: 1980s**

*"How do you capture the life of a congregation? How do you put on paper the emotions, the challenges, the triumphs, and the tragedies of a dynamic, changing and growing congregation? How indeed? Goals and plans, accomplishments and accolades are easy to list. But it is in the often unsung actions of our members . . . that the heartbeat of the congregation lays."*

*"St. Mark's Lutheran Church, 1953-1988"*

The thirty-fifth anniversary history, in a section on "St. Mark's in the Eighties," included a statement by Pastor Carlson that sounded the dominant theme of the 1980s and into the early 1990s. "One of the characteristics of a growing, dynamic congregation," he declared, "is that it dares to step out into new ministries without hesitation, or if not new ministries, to strengthen and approach time-tested ministries in a new way." With these comments, he pointed the congregation toward a period of change and adjustment.

Lutheran mergers during the decade set much of the context for change. In 1982, the second merger of American Lutheranism during the late twentieth century occurred. This time the Lutheran Church of America voted, along with the American Lutheran Church and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). After a series of additional votes, including one that led to the creation of a new hymnal, the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States came into being on January 1, 1988.

One major result of the new national body for St. Mark's was its inclusion in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod, which brought together churches in the District of Columbia with those in suburban Maryland and Virginia. St. Mark's regretfully bade farewell to its sister congregations in the Virginia Synod and turned with anticipation to take part in the new entity. The shift from Virginia to the Metropolitan Synod represented a significant shift for St. Mark's, bringing it into new relationships with other churches who shared a similar suburban and urban setting.

These decades found the Lutheran Church Women (LCW) at St. Mark's hard at work. With four active circles, this critically important service group strove to meet a wide variety of needs. The LCW circles provided help for projects within St. Mark's and outside the congregation, particularly at the new National Lutheran Home. The thirty-fifth anniversary booklet listed them among those committees who formed "the backbone of our church."

A long-standing commitment to musical performance and worship enhancement expanded during these decades. In 1981, two new hand-bell choirs joined four existing choral groups—Youth, Carol, Cherub, and Chancel—and instrumental music became a regular feature of many Sunday services of worship. In 1987, the long and fruitful tenure of Joe Adgate as choir director came to an end. The momentum he had generated over the years, however, was picked up and continued by Robert Webb, who as Director of Music worked to further enrich the musical ministry at St. Mark's. Over the coming years, he would join with Gary Jensen and Ina Berkey, two highly talented church organists, to introduce new choral arrangements and concerts to both St. Mark's as a congregation and the wider Northern Virginia music community.

During the 1980s, the pastoral staff at St. Mark's continued to change and expand. The Church Council called Brent Thalacker in 1983 and Ross Trower in 1984 to serve as associate pastors. A graduate of Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis, Pastor Thalacker had four years of ministerial experience when he arrived and brought important pastoral skills to the congregation. One of his most important contributions was the founding of Phoenix and the role it played in assisting individuals experiencing major life changes, particularly divorce. From the beginning, the new young associate pastor worked closely with Pastor Carlson in meeting the spiritual needs of a large congregation.

They were joined in that effort by Ross Trower, who had retired as Chief of Chaplains, United States Navy, after a career of thirty-eight years in the military. With his wife, Margaret, Admiral Trower had often attended St. Mark's over the years and had come to know Pastor Carlson, whom he had impressed as an unusually committed individual. Pastor Carlson remembered that he had once asked: "What can I do for St. Mark's?" Struck by the generosity of this offer, and learning of Pastor Trower's retirement, Pastor Carlson invited him to join the pastoral team to help with home and institutional visitation. Over the years, Ross Trower has fulfilled this and many other important assignments, including helping guide the congregation through transitions between senior pastors. Aside from the specific duties of his nearly three decades at St. Mark's, Pastor Trower has had an enormous impact through his warm personality, impressive intellect, quick wit, and ability to relate to others.

Strengthened and encouraged by the new staff support around him, Pastor Carlson sought to move forward on the major issue facing St. Mark's during the 1980s and early 1990s: improvements needed in the existing physical structure of the church. Connected with achieving that goal was his own plan to retire, a decision that would add to the challenges facing the congregation. In seeking to refurbish the church building, Pastor Carlson attempted to motivate the membership to embrace certain hard realities. He reminded them that there comes a time when all buildings need to be renovated and brought up to date, and he added that all pastoral leadership must, over time, change hands. It is to his great and enduring credit that he pressed ahead on both fronts of renovation and renewal.

The story of St. Mark's effort to rebuild and redesign major parts of the three units constructed originally in 1954, 1960, and 1968 started with the appointment of renovation committees in 1983 that began the process; in 1987 when the congregation approved the concept; and in 1989, chaired by David Nestleroth and Walter McKee, which developed a set of drawings related to proposed changes in the narthex, chancel, and nave. The last of these efforts, known as the Building Improvement Committee, oversaw the architectural and design changes made in the following years. After a successful appeal for financial support for the new plan by the congregation, led by Pastor Carlson, the Committee retained liturgical design, stained-glass, and construction consultants to prepare the final plans. For the construction phase, the congregation hired Whitener and Jackson Contractors. While construction was underway, the congregation met in the Fellowship Hall. Most of the construction was completed enough that Easter 1992 services were held in the newly rebuilt structure. Two more years passed, however, before the final work—including the installing of the new organ and a new elevator—was finished. As all the hard work came to an end, St. Mark's emerged enhanced, improved, and ready for the coming years of ministry.

During these years of planning and construction, Pastor Carlson and the Church Council had established a Long Range Planning Committee. Beginning its work in 1987 and reporting in 1989, the Committee addressed the new demographic and sociological realities facing St. Mark's as a result of major changes and growth in Fairfax County and particularly in the Springfield area. The initial report noted that during the mid-1980s membership had leveled off, stewardship efforts produced only modest increases in annual giving, and church membership had seen a decline in traditional family units and an increase in singles and childless couples. The 1989 Long Range Plan called for new efforts to expand membership and lay participation in the worship and ministry of the congregation, among other objectives.

The plan also urged a review of "the procedures for calling a new senior Pastor," a timely suggestion in light of Pastor Carlson's announcement that, as of spring 1991, he would resign after thirty-seven years at St. Mark's. The news was received with great regret, but the congregation understood that Pastor Carlson was ready to take up new challenges. His decision was respected and the congregation hosted a wonderful celebration of his long effort and many accomplishments, particularly the critical period of renewal and renovation that he had initiated. Because of that final work on his part, the congregation could now look to the future and the new opportunities of ministering to the ever-changing setting of Northern Virginia.