

Southern Lakes Church History

1985-2025

40 Years of God's Faithfulness!

Southern Lakes Evangelical Free Church came into existence forty years ago, as the result of unceasing commitment and prayer.

***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”
Colossians 3:23-24 ESV***

PHASES OF CHURCH HISTORY:

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| II. | 1998 - 2000 | A Permanent Home |
| III. | 2000 – 2018 | Building for the Future |
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PHASE I “The Early Years” (1985-1998)

In late February 1985, a meeting was held at the home of Steve and Jill Horsman. Present with the Horsmans were Gene and Ruth Schroepel and Superintendent of the Forest Lakes District of the Evangelical Church of America, Gene Swanstrom. At that meeting, Gene referred to an earlier conversation that he had with Ray and Elaine Wills of Elkhorn about a possible church plant.

On March 12, 1985, an informational meeting was held at the Community Center in Elkhorn, Wisconsin. A group of Christians (four or five families including some from Camp Timber-Lee in East Troy, Wisconsin), and some of whom were the Schroepels and Horsmans, dreamt of establishing an evangelical free church in the area.

On March 17, the group held an organization meeting. In attendance was District Superintendent Gene Swanstrom. A Bible study was started after the March meeting, but disbanded for the summer. Pastor Rob Palmer and his wife, Deb, were part of these Bible

studies, along with Greg and Mary Kay Meeker (Timber-Lee). Pastor Palmer was a 1984 graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Discussion had been held about stopping for the summer, but they continued to meet. It was decided that because so many of the attendees were involved in ministry that it would be better to begin holding church rather than a year of Bible study.

Under the leadership of Pastor Palmer on November 3, 1985, Southern Lakes Evangelical Free Church held its first service. The Sugar Creek Town Hall on County Road H in Walworth County, Wisconsin, served as the church's first location. Seventeen charter members were recorded on the incorporation date, February 23, 1986. Jake and Sharon Kaldenberger attended the very first service. Bill and Sandy Rima followed on the second Sunday. Bill Rima and his wife, Sandy, recalled their first attendance at SLC's second Sunday service. They both felt "at home."

Leroy and Marla Carlson joined the church plant when they returned from Austria. The Timber-Lee staff members in the charter group included: Leroy and Marla Carlson, Gene and Ruth Schroepel, Greg and Mary Kay Meeker, Steve and Jill Horsman, and an Elkhorn couple, Ray and Elaine Wills, and then Faye Wills.

Pastor Palmer and his wife, Deb, engaged the congregation by preaching and leading Bible studies. Pastor Palmer worked in the trades, and the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) assisted with his salary during his first year as pastor for SLC. The church family celebrated Sharon and Jake Kaldenberger accepting Christ, the church's first members brought to faith at the church.

During this time period, the church conducted youth Pioneer Children's Ministry. As SLC continued to expand, the members purchased a school trailer for \$2,000 and relocated to (the original) Lakeland School in Elkhorn in 1989. The trailer became known as the "church in a trailer," as it contained all the equipment necessary to run church services. The trailer was transported to Lakeland School where its contents were set up before each service in the cafeteria (then moved to the lobby), facing the swimming pool. Several members were baptized in the Lakeland pool.

Also in 1989, the Horsman's were commissioned as missionaries to Alaska. While meeting in the town hall, a 10-acre parcel of property was purchased, and the future home site became a reality. After the purchase of the property (during the years before building) the church rented a tent and held services under it, outside. The church was required to meet one time per year, from 1989 to 2000, on the property in order to retain its tax-exempt status.

Pastor Palmer served for approximately 5 years, from 1985 until 1990. Then for the next few years the church invited guest speakers from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, as well as local retired pastors.

A representative of The Christian League for the Handicapped (Inspiration Ministries from Walworth, Wisconsin) contacted SLC, indicating that a gentleman was visiting from “out west.” The gentleman was looking for employment as a pastor. Soon thereafter, Southern Lakes Church welcomed Pastor Terry Pritchett, his wife, Pam, and three boys. Pastor Pritchett served for approximately 5 years, from 1993 until 1998.

Pastor Steve Jensen served as Interim Pastor from 1989-2000. He had worked at Faith Christian School and as an administrator at Inspiration Ministries in Walworth. Since the church’s attendance numbers were down, he filled in and gave guidance as needed. Under the guidance of Pastor Jensen, the church decided to move forward and build.

PHASE 2 “A Permanent Home” (1998-2000)

Bill Rima described this defining time in the church’s history. “One night at a Board meeting, we were challenged by . . . an interim pastor, who said, ‘You guys have been here for a long time. You keep telling people you’re going to build this building, and you never do. I recommend that you either build or take your sign down and close up.’”

The members took this message to heart. With renewed enthusiasm and dedication, they decided to build the church themselves. Their initial fund contained savings of \$60,000. The members felt led to trust God that it would grow to \$100,000 by July 1, 1989. They started saving their money . . . Some taught summer school and numerous families donated their earnings, some through second jobs, and some through the sale of personal items. Giving was life-changing for the members, and God provided so that the \$100,000 goal was reached by July 1, 1989.

Without a pastor or a building, the church wasn’t an acceptable loan candidate. After a great deal of contemplation, they decided, “Let’s go ahead and start with the \$100,000, and let’s see just what God has in store for us.” Hiring a builder was not affordable, so they obtained plans, and decided to build the church themselves. They fashioned phase one of the church building after the Tomah Evangelical Free Church. Leroy Carlson acted as the general contractor, heading up the project.

On the hot and dusty Labor Day in 1999, about 35 motivated and dedicated church members held a ground breaking ceremony to undertake the building of Southern Lake

Evangelical Free Church at its present location. The church members worked “hands on” to complete the construction themselves. Church families worked diligently Mondays through Saturdays, building footings, pouring concrete, and preparing the site for a new church building. A small trailer was used as their dining hall. It became routine to work at the site on Saturday mornings from sunrise until 9 or 10 p.m. and then attend and serve at church the following day. The devotion and work ethics demonstrated during this period of intense work and construction is still evident today in the Southern Lakes Evangelical Free Church community.

Milo Eldridge emphasized that the original building was built predominantly by volunteers in a matter of months. The church’s philosophy at that time was that, even without a permanent pastor, building the church would be their main focus. Other than Sunday morning services, the church members concentrated solely on building the church.

Many church members are aware of the miracle that occurred during construction. One cold morning, the crew gathered early for coffee, prayer, and excitement to raise trusses. They had rented a crane and its operator, a costly venture. When the first truss was hooked onto the crane, the operator got the nod to crank up the machine. But the crane wouldn’t start. The volunteers were stunned as the operator tried again and again, to no avail. For the operator to bring the crane back another day would not be feasible. Church members laid hands on the crane and prayed. The engine popped to life amidst their cheers, and the trusses were all set that day. Praise the Lord!

The members of the congregation worked diligently and by Christmastime, 1989, the 8,000 square foot shell was up. However, the church was out of money. Without a full-time pastor and with a small congregation, a loan from a financial institution was out of the question. After prayer and reflection, they approached the EFCA, the Evangelical Free Church of America, who graciously granted the much-needed funding from the Christian Investor’s Fund.

The night before the Easter service 2000—the church’s first service in their new building—the members gathered in front of the church, praying and holding hands. Leroy Carlson uttered the now-famous line: “Let’s wear it out for Jesus.” Southern Lakes Church was dedicated “to the glory of God,” and that stands inscribed in the cornerstone, in the foundation of the front door.

Leroy Carlson observed God’s gracious blessings. “For nine months, our lives were on hold, consumed by construction. Nobody got sick. God put everything aside for us so we could get that building done.”

On Easter Sunday 2000—with siding that proclaimed ‘Tyvek’—the first service was held in Southern Lake Church’s new facility. The small membership was astounded to see 100 people present. God had big plans for Southern Lakes Church.

PHASE 3 “Building for the Future” (2000-2018)

Although the church officially moved on Easter Sunday of 2000, members note that construction was far from completion. The remainder of the year was spent finishing projects. The trim and exterior of the building were still being painted during November’s chilling days. While the Tyvek (weather-resistant siding barrier) remained the visible exterior of the church, Bill Rima recalls being at the church early in the mornings to staple flapping sheets back in place before the congregation arrived for services.

Milo Eldridge pointed out that the railings built along the stairway leading up to the platform were installed to ensure safe passage to the stage area. The cross utilized in the play on that first Easter Sunday (and still used to this day) was constructed from 4x4s collected by their son, Dale. A feature of the Lenten season was a display of live “Stations of the Cross” on Good Friday. The stations consisted of items that children could touch and relate to, like a bag of coins, the cross, and special items that enhanced the services.

In 2000, the church celebrated 14 or 15 baptisms, using the Inspiration Ministries pool. The church continued to grow. Sunday school classes were maintained. A classroom trailer was utilized for additional classroom space, and dividers were placed in the sanctuary. Church members were so eager to utilize the new facility that classes were held before the walls were up! Furnishings for the new church were provided by the Delavan-Darrien Public School District. A General Board was established, consisting of a Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary, to lead all ministries. It should be noted that the general board were ministry leaders.

Sean Sweetman became the Pastor in 2000. He had spoken at SLC previously, and had graduated from Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. At the time of his hiring, he was employed full-time for Adams Electric. Pastor Sweetman was hired by SLC in a half-time capacity for the first year. The first administrative staff was also hired, and multi-media became integrated into the services.

In 2001, a library was opened in the church. The library was originally located where the Hope Café now is. It was later relocated to a room closer to the church office. It eventually closed due to lack of book rentals with the onset of digital technology.

Southern Lake Evangelical Free Church embraces the community on every level. An example of this occurred on September 11, 2001 (commonly called 9/11). On that day, after word spread of the tragic plane crashes into the north and south towers of the World Trade Center in New York, some 50 individuals gathered at the church. They joined hands and prayed for the victims, survivors, and their affected families, as well as the nation.

“Everyone remembers where they were when they heard about 9/11.
We remember uniting at church and praying together. That was significant.”
Milo Eldridge

In 2002, the first worship director was hired, and a second Sunday service was added to the worship schedule. As the church continued to grow, additional space was again required. The church did not have funds for such a project, so members agreed to once again take on a construction project.

From 2003 to 2005, a generosity campaign was created wherein members pledged finances toward the addition of space for youth and offices. This second phase of construction totaled approximately \$1M. The church members raised approximately \$600,000. Approximately \$300,000 was pledged prior to construction commencing. The balance was borrowed.

In November 2003, site work began for Phase 2. In December 2003, members were outdoors pouring footings in the midst of snow flurries. Throughout the process, they wrapped everything in blankets and straw. During the winter, wall sections were built in the garage, and in April construction began. Contractors were also hired for some of the work, including hanging and finishing drywall, electrical work, and plumbing.

In 2005, the church moved into the new youth wing and offices. The church enjoyed a Capital Campaign celebration at a combined service. Pastoral staff expanded and a discipleship plan was formulated. Several youths travelled to Chicago for a Youth Outreach event. For the first time, the church staffed a booth at the Walworth County Fair. In 2005, annual income and expenses totaled within \$20 of each other. “Raising a Modern Day Knight” program was initiated. The sanctuary was completed, and a Hurricane Katrina relief team was sent.

By 2006, four pastors were on staff: the pastor, associate pastor, youth pastor, and family pastor. In 2006, Pastor Sean Sweetman was ordained. A men-only missions trip was held. An all-church picnic was enjoyed, and approximately 20 baptisms were celebrated. In regard to the church’s financial standing, giving exceeded expenses. A new logo was developed. In 2011, the By-laws were revised, changing governance from a general board to an elder board.

Pastor Sweetman served approximately 16 years, from 2000 until 2016. Under Pastor Sweetman's ministry, attendance increased significantly and at its peak in 2009-2010 reached approximately 600. Pastor Mike Wells served as Interim Pastor from 2016 to 2018.

PHASE 4 "The Best is Yet to Come!" (2018-present)

In 2018, SLC hired Ken Brummel as the Lead Pastor. A great insight from Pastor Brummel came by way of his cover letter in which he asked the question: "What if the Senior Pastor you have been praying for is already close by?" At the time Ken was Pastoring nearby in Waterford and was interested in using his gifts of teaching and leadership in a greater capacity. Hindsight has shown that SLC and Pastor Ken were a good fit as it needed a "builder" not a "maintainer."

In 2020 the church set out to accomplish a new 2020 vision but instead experienced a big setback with the Covid Pandemic in March. The church closed for nine weeks and had to quickly pivot to provide services online for the first time. Pastor Ken encouraged the church to "Make Lemonade out of Lemons," and used a large bowl of lemons to regularly illustrate this. Milo Eldridge complimented the steadfastness of the church staff stating, "During Covid, the staff went above and beyond to hold the church together." The next several years were a time of rebuilding as attendance was slow to rebound.

In accordance with the "Done in '21" slogan, the church paid off both mortgages from Phases I and II in 2021. The remaining \$200,000 was raised in less than six months. It was a sweet time of rejoicing as the church burned its mortgage and thanked God for His faithfulness.

Under Pastor Brummel's leadership the church continued to clarify its mission, define its strategies, and incorporate numerous new opportunities, including the Discipleship 360 strategy for making disciples and the Discover Series for onboarding new members. With Pastor Brummel's experience and his continuous exuberance for planning and creative ideas, SLC continued to thrive.

SLC continues to mature and grow in ways that honor God. In November 2024, the church embarked on a two-year "BOLD Initiative" to raise funds for a new Family Center with a gymnasium, a warming kitchen, restrooms, educational space (in the partitioned) gym, and storage areas. The proposed Family Center was part of the long-term vision and master plan of SLC for many years. The projected cost is \$2.66 million for the 9,977 square foot addition. The congregation's enthusiastic support for this project was evidenced by their "First Fruits Offering" of over \$270,000 and their BOLD Initiative pledges of 1.4 million

over two years. A groundbreaking ceremony for the Family Center was held on May 3, 2025, and a proposed grand opening date in 2026 is planned.

The BOLD vision for the future is to reach and grow new families. This is a deep value of the church being lived out by second generations now involved in serving the church. Three current staff members have grown up at SLC and now serve in various roles.

- Former Elder Board Chair Kevin Swedberg and his family have attended SLC for approximately 20 years, during which his son, JD, became involved in various church ministries. JD Swedberg, SLC's current Student and Technology Pastor, serves with his wife Hannah, who also grew up in the church.
- Former Family Pastor Bill Stukenberg and his family attended SLC for approximately 20 years, during which his son, Josiah, became involved in various ministries. Josiah Stukenberg, SLC's current Worship and Family Pastor, serves with his wife Faith, who also grew up in the church.
- Kent Westendorf and his family have attended SLC for approximately 20 years, during which his daughter, Abigail, became involved in various ministries. Abby Gentile now serves as SLC's Children's Director.

During these recent years the church has continued to improve by adding the Hope Café, remodeling the Gathering Room, adding another Family Restroom, building a new portico for the front entrance, enlarging the Kid's Space by removing walls, making technology upgrades throughout the building and auditorium, etc. The church continues to fund and take short term mission trips to help our Global Impact Partners in places like Alaska, Honduras, and Kenya; and is also very involved with impacting our local community through various outreach efforts, community partnerships, etc.

As the Church prepares to celebrate 40 years of God's faithfulness, it is experiencing a season of momentum growth. As of Fall of 2025, SLC's attendance is approximately 350 people and growing. Another 60 families listen weekly to online services. Family Night on Wednesdays are at an all-time high with Awana, Gen-T, and Parenting Classes all thriving. There is a unified team of Elders and a competent staff team leading the way.

Pastor Brummel and his wife, Dawn, along with the Elders, Staff, Ministry Leaders, and Congregation of SLC, continue to faithfully serve the Lord. We believe **"the best is yet to come!"**