

# **EMMANUEL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN RIFLE, COLORADO –**

## **A BRIEF HISTORY**

### **GOD OPENS DOORS**

In 1914, with no Lutheran congregation in this part of the Colorado River valley (known as the Grand River until 1921), Charles and Doratheia Bernklau, along with their six year old son, Frank, traveled from Rulison, Colorado to Arkansas and later to Seward, Nebraska to visit John Sommers, Frank's cousin. While there, John gave Frank the name of the President of the Colorado District of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. After returning to Colorado, Frank wrote to the District President and received the name of Pastor Theodore Rasckli who was then serving the church in Paonia, Colorado. In March of 1915 Pastor Rasckli met with Frank Bernklau in Rulison and on Good Friday that year the first service was held at the Bernklau home along with the John Bernklau family and the Henry Frahm family also in attendance. That next year, on December 30th of 1916, members of the first confirmation class of the Rifle Lutheran Church were confirmed. It included three Bernklau children, Will, Dora and Kate plus Oscar Demmer. Great seeds were being planted.

From that time forward the small congregation heard God's Word and received the Sacraments, often only once a month. The circuit pastors had to journey here by train and then either by wagon or afoot, depending on the condition of the roads. The services were initially held in private homes and later at the Antlers and Horn schoolhouses.

On February 14th of 1943, the Reverend J. L. Bundschuh was installed as the first resident pastor at Glenwood Springs, and held weekly services at Glenwood and Rifle, using the Methodist churches in both locations. Over the next decade several pastors served both congregations and in 1951 the cornerstone of Holy Cross Lutheran Church of Glenwood Springs was laid, with the first service held on Easter Sunday, 1952 in the yet uncompleted building.

### **EMMANUEL – “GOD WITH US”**

Emmanuel Lutheran Church of Rifle, Colorado was organized at a meeting called for that purpose on the evening of January 16, 1950. At that time the congregation was renamed Emmanuel Lutheran Church, a constitution was adopted and also there were elected three elders (G. W. Schultz, Carl Bernklau and A. K. Toennies), a treasurer (Ed T. Bernklau) and a secretary (C. W. Barkow).

### **GOD'S HOUSE OF WORSHIP**

On June 7th of 1953, groundbreaking ceremonies were held for a permanent House of Worship on Daniel Street in west Rifle. The original construction loan from LCMS Colorado District Church Extension Fund provided the \$7957.33 needed to build the new church. Annual payments, at 2% interest, were \$795.73. On July 19th of that same year, in only 42 days, the first service was held with Vicar James Kunze officiating, though the church was far from being completed. Pews were fashioned out of nail kegs and planks. With the indoor plumbing being unfinished an outhouse was made available on the property, and water for drinking was brought inside the church in large cream cans.

On December 24th of 1953 the first Christmas Eve Service and Children's Program was held. Ninety were in attendance and an offering of \$20.56 was received. Also, the church pianist, Barbra Dorrell was presented with a \$5.00 gift.

During 1953, the number of souls under the pastor's spiritual care was 54, of whom 35 were communicant members, and 6 were voters. The church building was formally dedicated on October 10th, 1954 with Pastor G. L. Oldsen officiating.

In the years that followed, Emmanuel existed as a mission congregation and was faithfully served by pastors from Holy Cross in Glenwood Springs. From August of 1953 to January of 1970 Pastor G. L. Oldsen served as minister. He was succeeded by Rev. Harold Kieck. From 1979 through 1983 Rev. Donald Pullman served as Emmanuel's first called minister. Rev. Fredrick Hahn then served as vacancy pastor and in August of 1985 Rev. Timothy Ludwig was installed.

The church on Daniel Street provided a spiritual home for over thirty-six years. The final service at this location was held on December 17th, 1989. In that time the congregation was blessed with God's endless grace and spiritual riches which were poured on the generations who worshiped here...hearing His Word, receiving the Holy Sacraments, communing, baptizing, confirming, marrying, counseling, sharing fellowship and celebrating the victory of the saints at funeral services. The congregation found great benefit from the pastors and vicars who tirelessly served God, and also from the lay members who combined to strengthen and grow this Western Colorado church.

## **GOD GROWS EMMANUEL**

The house of worship on Daniel Street provided a worthy home for proclaiming the saving Gospel message of our Savior, however, over time the growth of the congregation necessitated a larger church structure. The strength of this formidable congregation became obvious as many dedicated souls tackled the challenges of land acquisition, design, construction and funding. God is well aware of how many prayers and petitions were offered as the new church project moved forward.

On Christmas Eve of 1989 the first service was held in the new house of God on East 5th Street in Rifle. The building was not complete and instead of pews, folding metal chairs accomplished that purpose, an improvement over nail kegs and planks. The actual Service of Dedication took place one month later, on January 21, 1990, officiated by Pastor Ludwig, who served the congregation of Emmanuel until October of that same year.

Emmanuel was then blessed by the service of Pastor Allen D. Anderson, pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Glenwood Springs, as vacancy pastor. He would serve again in that capacity a decade later. Worthy of note is the fact that, after accepting a call to Mount Zion Lutheran Church in Boulder, Colorado, Pastor Anderson was elected to the office of President of the Rocky Mountain District of the L.C.M.S. in 2012, serving there for six years.

After accepting Emmanuel's call the Reverend Dale V. Heinlein was installed the 24th of September 1991. God's Word and Sacraments continued to feed the congregation and soon plans to add a fellowship Hall and classrooms to Emmanuel began to take place. With many donations, and with many hours of volunteer labor, and again with many prayers, the new addition to Emmanuel was completed in 1998. The completion of our commercial kitchen was

realized in May of 1999 and the new facility went to work immediately. Dinners, bazars, Bible classes, Sunday school classes and meetings now made good use of the expansion.

## **WITH CERTAINTY – GOD IS WITH US –EMMANUEL**

One of God's greatest gifts, however, came into existence in late August of 1999. For the first time, the doors of Emmanuel Lutheran Preschool were opened. Classes started small, but word traveled quickly and the school's reputation for educational excellence and for faith-based teaching began filling the classrooms. In addition to its preschool Emmanuel added Kindergarten classes in the fall of 2006. To date, a thousand young souls have begun their education in the spirit of the Savior, Christ Jesus, as He said in the Gospel of Mark, "Let the children come to me..."

Pastor Heinlein accepted a call to serve the Makah Nation at Neah Bay on Washington state's Olympic Peninsula in September of 2000. Again, Pastor Allen Anderson from Holy Cross in Glenwood Springs served as vacancy pastor for a little over a year.

In the summer of 2001, the congregation's call to the Reverend Edward Schmidt was accepted and on November 11th, 2001 he was installed as the Pastor of the congregation of Emmanuel. Pastor Schmidt served as God's chosen representative for sixteen remarkable year. In October of 2017 he accepted a call in Tennessee.

As Emmanuel has previously done, we entered a time of vacancy and began a critical time of self-evaluation in order to eventually extend a call to our next shepherd. During the time of vacancy we were blessed to receive the pastoral care from Pastor Karl Wright, who drove five hours every weekend from Alamosa, Colorado. We also received Word and Sacrament from Pastor Mel Mertens who, in addition, served as the Circuit Visitor for the Western Circuit.

Late in 2018 Emmanuel extended a call to the Reverend Charles W. Westby which was accepted. Pastor Westby, to the glory of God, was installed as Emmanuel's pastor on December 23rd, AD 2018. Once again, the Father has provided a called and ordained minister of His Word, a proper administrator of His Sacraments and a valiant soldier of the our Lord's Great Commission.

## **ONE HUNDRED**

From its humble beginnings in 1915, when worship consisted of a couple of families and a circuit preacher who performed services maybe once a month, to the "mighty fortress" Emmanuel has become, God has provided more than adequately for His congregation in Western Colorado. A thousand, thousand thanks are due to all of the pastors, vacancy pastors, vicars and laity who kept God's Word alive. And no church would ever survive without the worshipers, Sunday school teachers, elders, pianists and organists, executive directors, treasurers, secretaries, board members, choir directors and members, ushers, and all who have cared for their church home in so many ways.

A hundred years later, there is no greater evidence of God's gifts of grace than what we at Emmanuel have received, both from the Father and from the company of saints before us.

***Soli Deo Gloria***