



## A Brief History of Grace Community Church

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# Grace's History

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On November 17, 1898, a group of 66 believers made a covenant to form a new church. In a rented hall in the heart of Detroit's thriving German community along Gratiot, they dedicated themselves together to Christ. They went out that very night, calling on friends and neighbors to join with them as a new family with a distinct purpose and a distinctive name: The Ebenezer German American Baptist Church. The term "Ebenezer" was not taken from Dickens, and although the name later became famous, it was not then very common. It was a Biblical term, from when the prophet Samuel set up a monument to mark a miraculous victory. He called it "Ebenezer" which means "Stone of Strength," (or "Hard Rock", some might say) and proclaimed "To this place the LORD has helped us." That phrase became the motto of our forbears here at Grace. But another part of the name was also important. Even though they were all of German heritage (and speech), our founders were moved to define themselves an American church. They were determined to minister among all their neighbors--even the English speakers. Very radical.

### **A Start in the Inner City**

The group met for several weeks in a rented hall, led by a lay person, Deacon Frank Koppin. They soon raised the princely sum of \$2,344.00 to build a white frame structure a few blocks away on the corner of Moran and Leland. The building is still there, just behind the Faygo plant down on Gratiot. By 1907 Ebenezer had more than tripled in number, so they built a new brick structure on the corner of Canfield and Mt. Elliot, which also still stands today. The new church cost \$23,000.00. It was a good thing they expanded. Detroit was about to put the world on wheels.

## **Decision to Expand**

The automotive revolution, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression and two World Wars profoundly impacted the once-tiny congregation, even as the city itself changed around them. There were hard times of deprivation. Sons sent off to war. Urban problems of crime and disconnection began to arise. Massive population shifts, largely from the rural south, altered forever the ethnic face of Detroit and Ebenezer, which became much less German and far more American. In 1939, responding to the needy, our forebears began a mission to serve and share Christ with a hundred youngsters and their families at Anthony Wayne Elementary, located on the far edge of the city, miles to the northeast near the forests and wetlands surrounding a small road aptly named "Moross."

In 1944, the church called her eighth pastor, the first not of German heritage: Dr. E.

Arthur McAsh. He went on to serve for 18 years, the longest tenure of any pastor to date. The blessings of the mission school project convinced the pastor and deacons that the Lord might favor another location for a church bursting at the seams after the end of WWII. By 1949, the congregation was meeting in the fully furnished basement we now call Theatre B. Soon filled beyond capacity, the young - old church accelerated her building program and completed the main building by 1951 at a cost of \$258,000.00. People from all walks and many different ethnic and religious backgrounds were drawn by the Lord to the friendly church with the unusual name, and began to worship together.

From the late 1940's throughout the 1950's, the church grew inside and out. One of her teenagers, Al Kuhnle, helped kick off a series of Detroit rallies featuring an unknown preacher with a distinct southern accent named Billy Graham. Energetic young women like Lois Lillie and Martha Dekker went out from among us to devote their lives to the poorest of Detroit's inner city. Outdoor concerts and services were held in the wooded "Chapel in the Trees" where our present Worship Center now stands, attracting many neighbors and friends to summer concerts featuring leading Christian speakers and artists. Ebenezer buses motored through

new subdivisions every weekend, bringing hundreds of children (and some of their parents) to Sunday school. Vacation Bible Schools went on for weeks during the summer months, drawing as many as 600 children to hear the gospel and experience the love of God and His people.

In 1963, Dr. Jack Scott became the ninth pastor of Grace/Ebenezer; the first of many Canadians called to serve Christ here, starting a new (and good) tradition. It wasn't long but that Jack's booming voice and deep insights from the Scripture became known around town (and around the world by live radio broadcasts). The church soon counted over 800 members and regularly met at near capacity. Some 70 missionaries were supported. A score of full-time Christian servants called Ebenezer their home church.

### **Tough Times**

The congregation got actively involved with the Detroit African American Mission, as one church after another left the city in the aftermath of 1967's riots. Ebenezer stood as a "rock" against the current of white flight.

In 1977, William Cummins came to the church as its tenth senior pastor. Reductions in numbers and strength had begun to afflict the church, owing in part to a very bad economic climate in Detroit, to be sure, but owing as well to serious problems within. After he announced his departure in 1985, it was revealed that he had also suffered a moral lapse. In the painful aftermath, those remaining worked to hold the church together, but it was tough. By mid 1987, although Ebenezer had some 500 members on the books, only 250 averaged in attendance. The church seemed destined to dwindle away unless the Lord was to intervene.

He did. By 1986 a few small groups had informally sprung up, where 5-6 families would meet together, study, and pray. During the course of prayer concerning the pain then being experienced at the church, these men and women sought the Lord's direction and wisdom. He answered, and from fervent prayer came a unified new vision. More accurately, it was a renewal of His original "old" vision for our church. We were perfectly located to

minister among city and suburbs. Rich and poor. Blue collar and white collar. Young and old. Black and brown and white. We were uniquely positioned to do what the experts said could not be done; we could become a Revelation 5 Church, where all people would worship Jesus together. Just like the original founders dreamed and did, we would reach out to all our neighbors, and Christ would be lifted up, to draw all to Himself. We were ready. We knew that to this place the LORD has helped us.

### **A New Vision**

A few months later, in January of 1987, a couple of the deacons who had experienced this answer to prayer in their small group met with a young country preacher named Kevin Butcher. A call was soon made. The next ten years brought blessing, tremendous growth and struggles in the family over our direction and even our location. However, in June of 1990, some 40 leaders met in retreat and God confirmed His Vision and Covenant among us. We changed. It wasn't just for "Baptists" any more.

Contemporary music began to take its place beside Hymns, while guitars and percussion joined traditional keyboards in worship. People of every race and from dozens of church backgrounds began to attend and join. We had become a different place. Sunday services and Bible classes began to look more like our neighborhoods. The congregation began to unite in Winning, Building and Sending for Christ. We dedicated ourselves to four defining principles: Grace, People, Authenticity and Relevance. So it was that in October of 1991, the people unanimously voted to adopt a new church constitution and change our name to Grace Community Church.

What followed was a season of tremendous growth and blessing in ministry and members. We worked to double and triple the church's original capacity by adding service times. By the late 1990's Grace grew to minister regularly to some 1200+ people, and occasionally to hundreds more. Some 40 small groups modeled after those few from the 80's sprang up. It became clear that we must build a new place to meet and worship if we were to remain a place that welcomed everyone. Plans were laid, which expanded to some \$8,000,000.00 in new construction. Although we raised

a good sum, there remained \$6 million in debt...a far cry from \$2344.00. Then more problems arose.

### **The Church Splits**

After a season of peace and prosperity, Grace began to plateau in growth and spirit by the beginning of our second century as we wrestled with the implications of increasing our intentionality in reaching the city around us. In 2001 we suffered a tragic church split surrounding the departure of our eleventh pastor, Kevin Butcher. Unity began to break down as certain elders resigned and members of the staff questioned the causes of those resignations, seeking reconciliation and understanding. The elders conducted a process which ultimately requested the pastor's resignation.

Unfortunately, the departure was messy with a new rending of unity which brought attendance to 30-50% of what it had been just months before and which still causes many to grieve. Coinciding with the loss of attendees was a failure of the church to meet its balloon construction loan, which led to significant staff reductions in the fourth quarter of 2001. The core that remained, under the leadership of an interim group of pastors and ministry professionals from our denominational affiliation (the North American Baptist Conference), prayerfully stayed together.

### **A Financial Miracle and a Renewed Hope**

Rev. Al Kuhnle, an energetic warrior still after 50 years of ministry in the city was called to serve as Interim Pastor. He felt called by God to eliminate the debt (\$5.3 mm pledged to cover principal and interest over three years in Nov. 2002), to stabilize the staff, and to prepare our church for our twelfth pastor, Rev. Bryan Hochhalter who came to Grace in January, 2004. Under his leadership the attendance has recovered, with a congregation blessed by greater diversity yet in race, age and denominational backgrounds.

In November, 2005, Grace celebrated the culmination of the Journey of Faith with the building debt completely paid in full and a total of more than 5.8 million dollars given!

Memories of the joys and challenges of the past are present with many in our body. At the same time, our congregation is growing. An increasing percentage of people have knowledge of these events only by reading our history. Everyone at Grace is grateful that life-change, faith encounters, record baptisms, and mutual care are replacing the hurt of a few years ago. And we're moving forward with a renewed sense of mission and a commitment to be the church God would have us be on this corner of this city...and in the hearts of people God can impact through us around the world.

In the story of our history, Grace just passed the 110 year mark. But we're feeling young...reborn through trials, healed by grace, and committed to leading a mosaic of people seeking life change into a growing relationship with Jesus.

***To this place the LORD has helped us.***