

## Prelude

by Helmut Fritz

Lightening slashed a ribbon of fire over Tomah, reflecting light off a thick canopy of clouds. Then the rain began to fall. It was the night of August 17th, 1990, and meteorological history was being made over the town. Rain came down in torrents as thunder and lightening conducted an apocalypse light and sound show. Somehow, a cloud front got trapped directly over the town of roughly eight thousand people. Perhaps, the glacier bulldozed hills and ridges on two sides of the town and the huge cranberry bog dotted swamps on the other sides of Tomah, contributed to the weather freak occurrence. Whatever the case, the town had monsoon rains as never recorded before. It was more than the Lake Tomah Dam could bear. The depression era dam holding back the headwaters of the Lemonweir River, soon had water flowing over not only its' spillways as designed, but also the entirety of its earthen levee. The thundering wash turned most low lying neighborhoods in Tomah into an instant, small scale, Venice, Italy. Law enforcement, rescue, and emergency personnel did hero's work informing and evacuating citizens.

A little church in a 1950s era, Levitown style neighborhood, also suffered in the floodwaters. It was the around 30 member, Bible Evangelical Free Church. They had recently imported a Minnesota farm boy and Trinity graduate, Timothy Erickson, with his charming wife Carole and well mannered young family. "Pastor Tim" was sallying forth from an office recently converted out of a nursery in the little church building. The nursery had been moved to what could best be described as a large basement closet, as the tiny building continued to fill with people attracted by scriptural teaching and the positive enthusiasm of a hard working congregation. The flood was another of many ups and downs that Bible Evangelical Free Church faced, allowed by a loving God to build character, fortitude, and a positive outlook that the congregation evidences even today.

Floods have not been new events to the little church on 402 Pine Street. The building and its' surrounding neighborhood after all, is located on an old swamp. However, the records were destroyed, especially during the August, 1990 flood. Therefore, C. LaVerne Hansen, one of the founding members of Bible Evangelical Free Church, has helped author Part I of this prelude. A predecessor Church existed before being re-organized into Bible Evangelical Free Church. Mr. Hansen was a leader throughout this historical time period. He continues to hold positions of responsibility in the church. Another "Founding Member" of the same stature and continued church leadership who made suggestions here was Stephen Wilder. Pastor Erickson contributed to this report by authoring Part II.

## An Eyewitness History of Bible Evangelical Free Church

### Part I: Miracles at 402 Pine Street

by Charles LaVerne Hansen & liberally edited by Helmut Fritz

Before there was a Bible Evangelical Free Church we called ourselves Faith Bible Church. The records of Faith Bible Church, along with the first records of Bible Evangelical Free Church, have been destroyed by repeated floods and sewage back-ups. Therefore, since 1975, being one of the few members of Faith Bible church still involved and being involved in the change of the fellowship in 1983 to the E. Free Denomination, I shall make known to the best of my ability the events leading up to an established ministry now at 625 W. Veteran's Street, in Tomah.

From about 1940, Faith Bible church served the Tomah area in a good manner and continued growth until 1972. The church had been started as a mission work by Wisconsin Rural Missions. In 1972 additional building space was needed. However, due to the dual ownership of

the church building and a parsonage, (i.e.; Wisconsin Rural Missions and Faith Bible Church both had ownership), matters at hand made it impossible for the local congregation to go forward with planning and building. Congregational breakups resulted with a majority of folks seeking out other churches in the area. Wisconsin Rural Missions sent Stephen Wilder to pastor a remaining group of about 30 souls in 1974, many from the Sparta area.. (Sparta is a neighboring city roughly the size of Tomah).

Numbers continued to dwindle and negotiations were started to agree on a partition of ownership of real estate. Pastor Wilder began a construction business to support his family while still serving as pastor. Negotiations lead to Faith Bible Church, Inc. purchasing the church building and Wilder purchasing the parsonage privately. Upon being bought out, Wisconsin Rural Missions ceded all official relationships with Faith Bible Church. We now had a debt free building, a pastor, and very few members. Most of the people living in Sparta left our fellowship to start worship groups in their city. These worship groups eventually grew to established churches, including Faith Evangelical Free Church in Sparta.. At Faith Bible Church in Tomah, the doors were never closed on Sunday mornings but because of the small number of people attending, new people were staying to minister.

Late in 1982 we decided to contact Dr. Wesley Johnson, Superintendent of what was then the Great Lakes District of the Evangelical Free Church of America. We made this decision after observing E. Free churches in Kendall, Sparta, and LaCrosse. Dr. Johnson met with us at our building to give us some insights on the workings of the E.F.C. denomination. We were offered help from the Evangelical Free Churches in among other cities, Neilsville, Pittsville, Kendall, Sparta, and LaCrosse. We decided to apply for acceptance in the denomination. As chairman of the church, I represented the church at the March, 1983 E.F.C. spring convention at Buckeye Evangelical Free Church in Madison. What an honor it was when we were officially accepted into the fellowship. I continued to meet with area E.F.C. pastors at their monthly meetings during which we planned the promotion of what we had renamed, Bible Evangelical Free Church.

A high point during this period was in July, 1983. We were host for several neighboring churches. Festivities included a potluck dinner. More than 100 people were present, which was quite an encouragement to us if the reader remembers our tiny numbers then. Most visitors were from area Evangelical Free Churches. Throughout 1983 and into 1984, these E.F.C. churches repeatedly sent speakers, singers and worshippers. Also during this period we were interviewing pastoral candidates. Stephen Wilder continued to serve in leadership and to preach but planned on limiting his presence in the church to being simply a member upon the arrival of a new pastor.

Our search was difficult. Bluntly, our tiny congregation was unable to pay enough to support a pastor. We had many applicants but none were appropriate for the church planter role we sought. Finally, on a very snowy day in April, 1984. Pastor Bill Kermott interviewed. His enthusiasm and determination, even with the small pay we could raise, overcame any reason for not engaging him in this work.

Upon approval of the Great Lakes District leadership, Pastor Bill moved his family to Tomah and began the church planting process. Our numbers were so small that he was essentially starting from scratch.. Progress was slow and trials were plenty. However, we learned to love, to share, and to grow in the Lord. God blessed us. The number of people fellowshiping with us grew. Other E.F.C. churches helped us financially during this time, continuing this support until 1986. Also for financial reasons, we rented our church building basement to the Headstart government sponsored child care program.

The year 1986 was a particular trial period. We started the year doing well enough to convince supporting churches that we no longer needed their financial help. However, our steadily growing little flock suddenly lost twenty-one people in one month due to occupational relocation. Funds got so slow in coming in that Pastor Bill was not paid regularly and programs were hard to develop. This time of testing brought us onto our knees. In answer to our prayer

God poured out His blessing on us by bringing in new people and new enthusiasm for the work. By 1987 boys and girls prayed to receive Christ, several people were baptized, and several new members were added. Before long our building was getting quite small as we looked for room to hold more classes. We were thinking and praying about a larger building!

In the spring of 1989, to the tearful surprise of the congregation, Pastor Bill Kermott announced that he felt his work was completed as a church planter. The sad parting was extremely gracious and all eventually saw God's leading as Bill moved on to successfully plant two other Evangelical Free Churches in our now titled, Forest Lakes District of the E. Free Church. With this we began a roughly six month search for a new pastor. God used this interim time to teach our congregation that everyone is a "minister" and must be a working part of the church for the effort to be successful. We still largely carry this ethic with us today.

It was also during this empty pulpit interim time that God made a nice, eight acre parcel of land at 625 W. Veteran's Street, available for sale. The site was immediately adjacent to Tomah city limits with city water and sewer available, a fact that appealed to the Church Board and the congregation. A deal was made to purchase the land. It is our current church building location today.

Continuing in 1989, with the guidance of Evangelical Free Church leadership, particularly Dr. Gene Swainstrom, Superintendent of the Forest Lakes District, we interviewed several pastoral candidates. It quickly became evident that Timothy Erickson was our choice. He started his ministry with us in the fall of 1989. Throughout the interim period the church continued to grow, accelerating upon Pastor Tim's arrival. Our crowded little church building at 402 Pine Street became even more so. Ray and Sharon DeVoe, a couple in our congregation living next door to the church building, graciously opened their home on Sunday mornings, eventually allowing several classes to meet throughout their house.

Finances improved so that by the fall of 1990 we considered hiring an architect. I participated in a committee that traveled to many church buildings, viewing styles, types of architecture, and past work of a shortened list of architects before we chose one. A preliminary plan was drawn. After congregational input and slight revision, the congregation finalized plans for our current building.

At our 1991 spring business meeting we decided to put our old church building at 402 Pine Street, up for sale. God moved so fast on the matter that the building sold within a month after being put on the market. An interesting phenomenon occurred during this time. Upon sale closure, a sudden and unusually severe windstorm blew a tiny ornamental church steeple off the building roof, doing absolutely no other damage and making the building look very suitable for the secular use of its' new owners. The new, private, owners still currently lease the facilities to the Headstart program, our former tenants. Meanwhile, we rented the building for two months after selling it. Then we became a "gypsy" congregation, renting office space downtown for Pastor Tim's study and church office, and for weekly small meetings. We also rented a public school gym for Sunday services. Even during this period God blessed and our congregation continued to grow.

After obtaining a loan, construction on the new building at 625 W. Veteran's Street started in September. More miracles happened here than I have space to write. Christian contractors from several states donated labor, God worked in the timing, and the congregation worked astonishingly hard. We put up a large tent on the site and the church women fed all of the builders, three times a day, with better meals than area restaurants could provide. It all was a witness as unsaved people marveled. We held our first church service in the building only three months later, in November 1991. Truly no person could doubt God's leading and help.

Much more could be written and there are many memories. Through it all though, God has worked through His people.

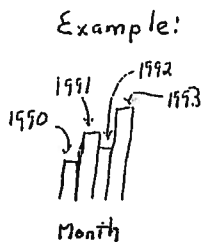
## Part II: Miracles at 625 W. Veteran's Street

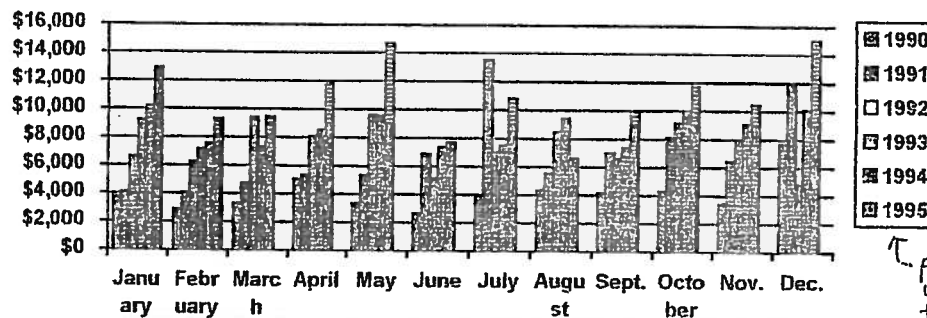
by Pastor Timothy Erickson & liberally edited by Helmut Fritz

Since raising a new building we have continued to see God's imprint on our ministry. In strictly numerical terms, growth has continued. Unfortunately as in the mid-80s this has not been without trials. When the congregation erected a building in the fall of 1991, attendance was 95. By the spring of 1994, average attendance was 200. However, in the summer of 1994 we experienced a rapid loss of 25 - 30 people usually due to career moves. Several of these folks were crucial members of the church leadership team. Nevertheless, attendance at worship has almost tripled in the last six years.

	Average Sun. AM Attendance	% Increase/ Last Year
1989	63	
1990	75	19%
1991	95	28%
1992	113	18%
1993	152	35%
1994	171	12%

Financially, we have experienced similar expansion. The annual budget in 1990 was about \$35,000. In the summer of 1991, the congregation committed an additional \$27,000 per year as "above budget and tithing" to support the building project for three years. In 1994 the building mortgage was incorporated into the General Budget. The unified General Budget for 1995 is about \$126,000.

Example:  




Note: In the above graph, 1995 is shown only in January and February

During the years at 625 W. Veteran's Street, we have seen several people converted to Christ. A handful of these new believers have become active adult members in our church. The majority of new Christians have been led to Christ through the outreach efforts of our Children and Youth ministries. Perhaps the most dramatic change in the last year has been in the area of youth ministry. This work has grown in average attendance at Wednesday night youth club from about 15 attendees in the spring of 1994 to 35 - 40 this past spring.

Why has this happened? What are the significant factors contributing to the remarkable growth in all of our ministries? Can we presume to explain it? The simple answer is that God has blessed and we shouldn't try to explain Him. However, the Bible clearly teaches that God who is all-powerful, chooses to work through people who, though sinful and flawed, are seeking to be obedient to Him. Therefore we must ask what characteristics of our attempts to be obedient have

made it possible for God to use us? My answer (and it is only my answer), will focus on several structural shifts and theological distinctives. I think that they directly contribute to God's blessing on the work of Bible EFC.

Here are three of what I feel, are the most significant changes at 625 W. Veteran's Str.:

1) We built a new building. From the days of cramming five or six classes in a 30 by 30 foot basement with three additional classes in the DeVoe's home, we have moved to a building three times larger with ten classrooms!

2) We rewrote the church constitution. This has streamlined the organization of the church with fewer elected leaders, less hands-on Elder supervision, and greater flexibility for ministry coordinators to run their areas of ministry.

3) We expanded our adult education ministries from one traditional Sunday School Class to three Adult Bible Fellowships. These ABFs have enabled us to multiply the fellowship, the welcoming, and the personal caring opportunities of our congregation. Is it just coincidence that the congregation grew more quickly in the year following the creation of ABFs than in any other year?

Reminder, the above are structural or programmatic changes. These are decisions we have made that are morally neutral; that is, they are neither good nor evil in and of themselves. These are adjustments we made to organize ourselves for more effective ministry. Theology remained constant here. Failure to make the above shifts would have hampered our ability for added ministry impact. However, we also must discuss theology. While the above outlined structural shifts were important, they would have been meaningless without several theological distinctives in our church. I do not deny the importance of the twelve theological points of the Evangelical Free Church in America, (the reader is encouraged to contact the Bible Evangelical Free Church Office for a copy), or the stands our congregation takes as outlined in our Church Constitution. I simply am stating here that these are our most important distinctives concerning God's using us.

The Theological Distinctives are:

1) There has always been the ongoing practice of prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God at our church. From the days of Wednesday evening prayer meetings with half the members, (12) in attendance to the present days of prayer in a variety of small, ABF, and ministry groups. Prayer is central to what God has done.

2) There has always been a commitment to the absolute authority of Scripture as a guide for salvation, life, and conduct of the believer at Bible EFC. From the pulpit to the K-4 and 5s Sunday School class, the goal is and has always been Bible based teaching.

3) There always has been an eager expectation for worship that results in an experience of the manifest presence of God at our church. This worship has always been sincere, creative, and flexible. Larger Celebration service attendance now forces us to also make the congregational worship planned for excellence. Somehow though, the worship of Bible EFC continues to communicate the love of God and the love of fellow believers.

4) We have always had an assumption that ministry involvement by everyone is normal. This has resulted in unbelievable accomplishments as everyone pitches in and does their part.

5) Finally, there has always been an Old Testament-like willingness to take risks in being obedient to God's direction at Bible EFC. Why would a small congregation purchase eight acres of land during the interim between pastors in 1989? Why would a church take on the intense work-load of building an edifice with volunteers in the space of three months? Why would the membership go along with the painful transition from one big happy family to three fellowship groups within the larger congregation? It is only explained as a result of a visionary faith willing to take risks to better achieve the Great Commission.