

## **HISTORY OF SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS LUTHERAN CHURCH**

The first gathering of "Lutheran Fellowship at Deep Creek Lake" took place July 4, 2004 at Will O' the Wisp. A group of about fifty individuals began worshipping together for worship, mutual support and Bible study. Soon they explored the necessary steps for the formation of a new mission congregation. An intense study and application process culminated Saturday, October 16, 2004, when the Synod Council of the West Virginia-Western Maryland (WV-WMD) Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) voted unanimously to establish "Lutheran Fellowship at Deep Creek Lake" as a Synodically-Authorized Worshipping Community. The Synod Council also voted to be supportive of "Lutheran Fellowship" as the first mission congregation in the synod since the merger of the ELCA in 1987.

Although called a "Fellowship," the group established the permanent church name of "Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church" in December, 2004. According to Dr. Ralph W. Dunkin, Bishop of the WV-WMD Synod, "This name really describes who and where you are". The goal of the new congregation was to minister to all, with special emphasis on providing worship opportunities for newcomers and tourists, as well as reaching out to the 50% of Garrett County citizens who have no church home. The social dynamics of a growing resort community brought new challenges to evangelism to which Shepherd of the Hills hoped to respond.

Mission status as a developing congregation was determined by the national organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America January 16, 2005. According to Mission Director, Helen R Harms, "It is the desire of the ELCA that God will open the hearts of people in the community to respond to the witness of the congregation . . . and that God will help the ministry grow in numbers and faith."

Many generous visiting pastors from the WV-WMD Synod have given of their time to lead the new ministry in Word and Sacrament before (and after) Reverend Claude C. Villemaire served as Mission Developer from September 25, 2005 to January 31, 2007. The Reverend Donald R. Thomas was installed and commissioned Sunday, November 11, 2007 and currently serves as the pastor of Shepherd of the Hills. During times of his absence, local resident Rev. Paul Blank preaches and presides at communion. Shepherd of the Hills also has a unique relationship with Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, Gettysburg, PA in which seminarians are given the opportunity to preach in the mission congregation once each quarter of the year.

The congregation began worshipping on Sunday afternoons at Will O' the Wisp, originally to accommodate the schedule of visiting pastors. In 2006, the congregation chose to move to Sunday morning worship in order to better meet the needs of young families and visitors to the area. Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church held its first worship service at Garrett Eight Cinemas Sunday, May 14, 2006. Under the leadership of Rev. Donald Thomas, Shepherd of the Hills continues to celebrate its niche ministry of serving newcomers, tourists and the un-churched. 2010 saw a total of 526 visitors, averaging 10.12 visitors per service.

The vision of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church is that it will continue to be a church that welcomes newcomers with liturgical, inspiring worship; is active in the community; and provides opportunities for learning, service and leadership. God's purpose for Shepherd of the Hills is to live as a community of faith in Christ Jesus, reaching out to all to share God's love and forgiveness.

Beth Johnson

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