

# Five churches become one

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NEW PORT RICHEY — Five Lutheran churches in west Pasco have consolidated their memberships and financial resources as leaders try to extend their reach amid dwindling worshippers at some locations.

The new church, which will begin services Oct. 5, will be called Spirit of Grace Lutheran Church. It is a combination of First Lutheran Church, Joyful Spirit Lutheran Church, Immanuel Lutheran Church, All Saints Lutheran Church and King of Glory Lutheran Church.

By pooling their resources, church leaders say, the congregation can concentrate on outreach ministries, from feeding the homeless to taking care of homebound seniors, that will make them more relevant in the community and help them grow their numbers. Leaders say they hope the growth will be strong enough to add two new locations in east Pasco.

"We said, 'How could we be more effective at reaching the unchurched in Pasco County?' " said Rev. Jerry Nordsiek, who has led Joyful Spirit for nearly a decade. "The churches that are growing are the ones that do outreach."

It will also save money. The consolidation will spell an end to five different electric bills and five insurance policies, for instance. One of the oldest locations, First Lutheran in New Port Richey, had only 30 members and could not find the money to hire its own pastor.

Spirit of Grace will hold services at the Joyful Spirit location on Old County Road 54 and at All Saints on Hudson Avenue. The three other buildings will be sold.

Membership rolls at all five churches total around 900, with most coming from Joyful Spirit, which has nearly 400.

## Churches' challenge

Numerous studies have found that mainline Protestant churches such as Lutherans are struggling for worshippers as membership at nondenominational churches has been on the rise. A February report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that nearly half of American adults leave the faith of their upbringing to either switch allegiances or abandon religious affiliation altogether.

The five Pasco churches come under the umbrella of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which is based in Chicago. They are part of the Florida-Bahamas synod.

The five churches are not the first to consolidate. In April, two small Lutheran congregations in Pinellas County, Holy Comforter on Treasure Island and Garden of Peace of St. Petersburg, decided to join forces and become Paradise Lutheran Church.

Nordsiek and Rev. Sally Cook, who leads Immanuel, will be the two lead pastors for the new church. Two interim pastors from two of the other churches will help during the week.

The new church will keep all the current employees at the five churches during a three-month transition period, Nordsiek said. However, once the new church gets a chance to evaluate its staffing needs, some positions may be eliminated.

Spirit of Grace will start from scratch on such things as putting together a choir, Nordsiek said. The new church will offer both contemporary and traditional services.

The local move to consolidate came not from the upper levels of the denomination but from church members, Nordsiek said. He said a team of representatives from each church spent more than a year putting the plan together.

Almost 350 members of the five west Pasco churches voted in June on the consolidation. More than 90 percent supported it.

Cook said she knew there might be some anxiety about the change but said she was confident things would work out.

"If you're going to face a transition," Cook said, "the church is a good place to face it."

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