

1993

Congregations in Profile



**United They Stand
at Christ's United Lutheran Church
in Barry Township,
Schuylkill Township**
by Susan Williams

It is a trait we all admire: the coal region's ability to survive. Long known for its contributions to international trading, long respected for fueling America's industrial machine, Schuylkill County has endured because of the patience and hard work of its people.

Little wonder that five of the area's Lutheran churches have spent decades reinventing themselves not only to survive, but to bring hope and faith and the Gospel to those who want and need it most.

Pastor Jay Serafin sums up his four exciting years this way: "We finally have some roots with the opening of Christ's United in 1992. The new church is centrally located near Ashland and is a representation of a unified, positive future for Lutherans up here."

A graduate of Berwick High School — and still an avid Bulldog sports fan — Pastor Serafin has lived in or near the coal region most of his life. As a graduate of Penn State and the Gettysburg Seminary, Pastor Serafin returned in 1989 as the initial steps for the construction of one church were just beginning. "Historically, the Lutheran churches in Ashland, Gordon, Lavelle, Girardville and Kimmel's all had joint pastoral support," he says. "From 1969 to about 1978, these churches considered themselves one congregation but still worshipped separately. Today, three of the original five churches are now one dedicated congregation with a concrete difference." Ashland Good Shepherd left the joint concept in 1978. Zion Lutheran in Girardville decided to go its own way in 1990.

Christ United's new 11,000-square-foot brick structure is a testament to

commitment and community spirit. The seven-acre building site is located outside Gordon. (The grove and cemetery, however, are situated at the St. John's church site in nearby Kimmel's. St. John's is the oldest of the congregations, established in 1830.) Designed by Bethlehem architect Wayne Batten and built by Harold Blacker of Wescosville, the church's cross-like design serves not only as a place of worship but also as a social center and school. Each wing of the cross is designed for large gatherings. One wing consists of an oversized kitchen and social hall which can serve 250 people. The education wing holds five classrooms, office space and parlor. The church itself allows 250 for worship, and another 100 worshippers can be accommodated in the narthex.

"We are proud to say that with 300 adult members, we average 150 worshippers on Sundays," exclaims Pastor Serafin. "In building the church, the gifts and talents from all congregations were used. The old stained glass windows from the Lutheran parish in Lavelle are now at Christ United, for instance."

"This is an exciting time for this church," Pastor Serafin comments. "The capital funds campaign was themed 'Share the Vision' because of the common identity we are striving to create."

Through the steadfast leadership of one strong church council, the new

church continues to define its role. Pastor Serafin believes the new foundation of Christ United is the power base it needs to propel itself into the challenging role of ministry in the area. "What we are dealing with regionally is change in how we perceive ourselves," he says. "What do we do with this sense of renewal? To a person, people believe it will be good, the renewed faith in who we are, that is." Community issues are no different here than in other areas of the nations — unemployment, alcoholism, drugs, loss of pride — all lead the church to the mission of service.

The first official church service was celebrated at Christ United one week before Christmas 1992. Since that time, a choir director has been appointed, the Sunday School has admitted 70 children, a talent show and fastnacht celebration have taken place, the grass has been planted, and a picnic has been planned for the last Sunday in August. A new picnic pavilion is being planned for the site, as well.

"We always seem to have curious visitors, and the narthex is wonderfully busy on Sunday mornings," says this four-year pastor. "We invite you all to our new church. Services begin at 9:30 on Sunday mornings!" †

(If you are interested in having your church's story told, please call Susan Williams, 215-395-7168.)