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'How sweet the sound:' Amazing Grace Lutheran Church opens its doors in Florham Park

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May 26, 2023

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The Rev. Beau Nelson, pastor of the new Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in Florham Park, is joined by Church Council President Glen Derner during a celebratory service marking the formation of the church on Sunday, May 21. Amazing Grace, the result of a merger of St. Mark Lutheran Church of Morris Township and Good Shepherd Lutheran Church of Florham Park, is based in the Ridgedale Avenue church building that was home to Good Shepherd for many years.

Photo by Penelope Jennings

FLORHAM PARK - Sunday, May 21 marked the official merger of the former Good Shepherd and Saint Mark Lutheran congregations and their reformation as the Amazing Grace Lutheran Church on Ridgedale Avenue.

Though this service was the worshipers' first official meeting as one group, they have been connected for years before. St. Mark, formerly located on the border of Harding and Morris townships on Harter Road, was Good Shepherd's sister parish before St. Mark closed its doors and the congregation joined Good Shepherd at its longtime Florham Park home at 160 Ridgedale Ave.

The service began at 2 p.m., and as congregants arrived at the church they were greeted by a banner out front reading "celebrate a new beginning."

Inside the church, people signed a guestbook to mark their place in Amazing Grace history and gathered in the pews. Many congregants were already friends as the Saint Mark and Good Shepherd communities have been connected for several years.

The two groups became linked in 2019 when the Rev. Beau Nelson was installed as the pastor at both churches.

"Up until Covid hit, he was doing 9:30 [service] at St. Mark and then 11:00 at Good Shepherd," said church secretary Cookie Davidsen of Morris Township. "And each of us had to adjust our times. So there was a lot of little give and take."

Amazing Grace uses the same building as the former Good Shepherd church so the place itself is familiar, but it still had to be dedicated as this new church.

Rev. Maristela Freiberg, the assistant to the Lutheran bishop and representative of the greater New Jersey synod, aided with the dedication and performed the ceremony to install Rev. Beau Nelson as pastor.

Church Council President Glen Derner of Denville spoke in front of the congregation as well to formally welcome his peers to their new spiritual home. Derner was previously the council president of Good Shepherd.

"I was thinking maybe I've got an opportunity to pass the torch to somebody else," said Derner. "But we wanted to keep the leadership from the two churches going just until we get ourselves established."

After the reading of some traditional hymns and bible passages, Rev. Nelson gave his first sermon for the new church. "But we're not here today primarily to celebrate Amazing Grace Lutheran Church," Nelson said. "We are here to celebrate God's amazing grace – that raw, amazing grace that brings our church into existence."

In his sermon, Nelson put an emphasis on this community being built, and especially the way it interfaces with the greater Florham Park community.

When asked why Amazing Grace chose the Good Shepherd location in Florham Park instead of Saint Mark in Morristown, he explained that though it was not an easy decision to make, they settled on Florham Park because it was in the midst of community.

This sentiment was echoed throughout his sermon.

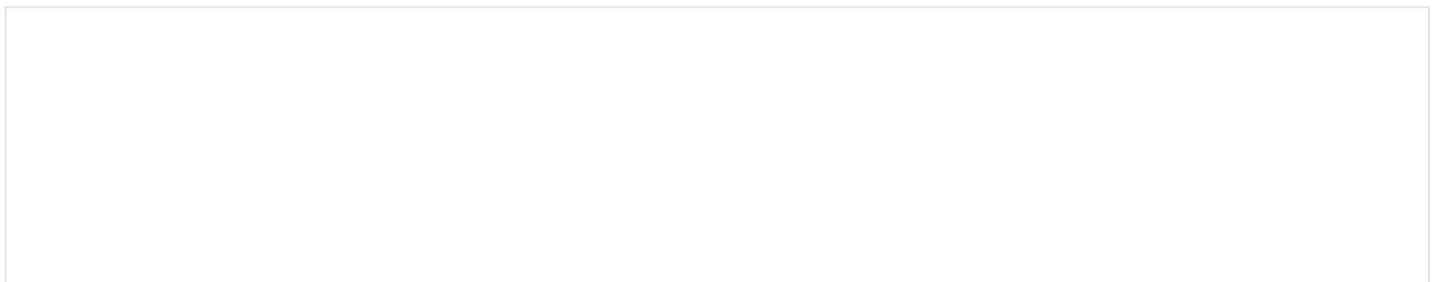
"The light shines in the darkness and God's grace shows up..." Nelson said. "It also shows up at Calvary Presbyterian just up the road and at Holy Family Catholic church, our two other sister congregations here in Florham Park. It also shows up at the Florham Park Rotary, it shows up at the senior citizens center, the light of god shows up at Borough Hall. The light of god shows up at Panera Bread, it shows up in McDonald's, it shows up at Starbucks. The light of God shows up all over the place. For those of us who are ears to hear and eyes to see."

After the service and the dedication of the church, the community remained gathered for food.

Rev. Nelson and other officials with the church mingled with the congregation as old friends and new talked. Representatives of the wider community were present for the special day, including Florham Park Mayor Mark Taylor.

"I think it's great to see the re-risen church that it is, that it comes back and serves the community and beyond," Taylor said. "Of course, Morristown coming into Florham Park now as well. I think it's great that we're having both congregations coming together and that Florham Park sees this church again rise."

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