



Chris Flynn / The Forum

The Grace Lutheran Church Sanctuary is seen Jan. 4. The church is having a special service at 2 p.m. Jan. 22, with a reception to follow, to celebrate its 125th anniversary.

## »» 'SMALL BUT MIGHTY' ««

Grace Lutheran to celebrate 125th anniversary with special worship service

**Fargo**  
When Grace Lutheran Church, then a German-speaking community, began meeting officially as a church body in

1898, it had to appeal to neighbors for worship, borrowing space from the nearby Swedish Baptist and Norwegian Lutheran Free churches.

But in 1905, the community happily celebrated its new church at Fourth Street and First Avenue North, a structure costing \$4,631.73. It relocated in the early 1930s to its current spot at 821 5th Ave. S., welcoming St. Peter's Lutheran Church for the Deaf to share its home for its weekly worship.

The amalgamation of cultures testifies to the Christian landscape of Fargo at the turn of the century, mainly comprising European immigrants. Though English eventually became the dominant language in all, the



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Pastor David Suelzle talks with Sherri Kalash during Bible study at Grace Lutheran Church in south Fargo on Jan. 4.

### IF YOU GO:

- ▶ **WHAT:** Grace Lutheran Church "Generations of Praise" celebration with service and reception
- ▶ **WHEN:** 2 p.m., Sunday, Jan. 22 ▶ **WHERE:** 821 5th Ave. S., Fargo
- ▶ **INFORMATION:** Visit <https://www.gracefargo.org/125th-anniversary.html>

feeling at Grace Lutheran has always been one of home and family, say its members.

"We're small but mighty," says Jan Brelje, who's currently involved in community outreach. "We try to

be a friendly church with a very small-town kind of feel."

But in the last couple years, the community has experienced some surprising growth, she notes, with younger couples and families

joining them, seemingly searching out caring relationships and support like those in their hometown churches.

Currently, the community comprises about 300 people,

with varying levels of attendance at their Wednesday and Sunday services.

### Family in the truest sense

Few in the 150 years of history of Grace Lutheran, however, probably understand the reality of "church as family" as intimately as Corey Isaak.

Former president

of the congregation, current trustee, and member for over 40 years, Isaak was schooled at the connected Grace Lutheran parochial school through eighth grade, and remained close to the community even while in college at North Dakota State University.

**125TH:** Page B8



Contributed / Capturing Butterflies, Megan Grefrud

Back, Brianna and Corey Isaak; Front, Sheryl Jones, Evelyn (Evie) Isaak, Mark Jones, Gwendolyn (Gwen) Isaak

## Winter Woodturning Extravaganza planned Saturday in Moorhead

By Forum staff

**MOORHEAD** — The public is invited to learn about woodturning at a Winter Woodturning Extravaganza planned from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 14, at In the Chips, 303 21st St. N.

This free event will feature several skilled turners demonstrating multiple projects and techniques, including tops, bowls, goblets, vases, hollow forms and spindles. Visitors will also get

a chance to try using a lathe.

The event is being hosted by the Minn-Dak Woodturners Association, a chapter of the American Association of Woodturners. The group meets monthly to exchange ideas, share projects, and learn new techniques from fellow members and guests. For more information, visit [www.minndakwoodturners.org](http://www.minndakwoodturners.org).

In The Chips is a one-stop-shop for wood carving

and wood turning enthusiasts of all skill levels offering classes, special events, and handmade gifts created by local artists. It also serves as the meeting and class space for the Minn-Dak Wood Turners Association. For more information, visit [inthechips.weebly.com](http://inthechips.weebly.com).

For more information about this event, call Roy Jacobsen at 701-866-9920 or email [roy@willowlake-woodworks.biz](mailto:roy@willowlake-woodworks.biz).



Forum file photo

Visitors look over Larry Longtine and Ruth Severson's carvings during the Red River Valley Woodcarvers Show in this Forum file photo.

# No business between neighbors

**Editor's note:** The following column was originally published in 2020.

**D**ear Annie: My spouse and I are in our 70s, with numerous health issues. We decided we needed to sell our large home and move to something easier to maintain. We made the mistake of hiring the younger brother ("Jim") of our best friend and neighbor "Jane." Both assured us this business relationship would have no impact on our friendship. After four months with no activity and a flare-up of health concerns, we asked Jim to terminate our selling contract. (We called Jane to let her know of our decision.) Jim had said he would end the selling contract that day, but then sent a text saying he couldn't. We contacted his boss, who said it wouldn't be a problem — and ended the contract. Now, Jane is no longer speaking to us. We have called and written,



**ANNIE LANE**  
Dear Annie

seeking a chance to talk with her further. Last night, we received a vile letter in the mail from her, saying we were never her friend if we could do such an awful thing.

Ironically, we now feel we must sell and will put the house on the market again as soon as our health and stamina permit. But we are grieving the loss of this dear friend. Please let your readers know the dangers of doing business with friends — or their relatives. — Mourning in Madison

**Dear Mourning in Madison:** Working with friends can be risky business indeed. That being said, you might want to examine the terminated

contract to ensure there are no clauses that would prevent you from listing it with another real estate agent within a certain time frame. I'd hate for this sticky situation to become even messier.

**Dear Annie:** Concerning the letter from "Parents at a Crossroads," whose son has mental health issues and is unemployed: Please advise the parents to encourage him to explore vocational rehabilitation services that are available for persons with disabilities. Each state has an organization under the U.S. Department of Education, which can provide evaluations and assistance in locating and maintaining employment to persons with disabilities. A variety of services can be provided at no cost to him including interview training, resume preparation, job-seeking assistance, job coaching and follow-ups after securing employment.

The names of the organizations vary by state but should not be difficult to locate. Typically, they are called Vocational Rehabilitation or something similar. I am a certified vocational evaluator. I evaluate persons with disabilities to make recommendations to such agencies concerning potential training or services that may be of assistance to help secure employment, identify and recommend types of positions and evaluate possible supports or accommodations that would be helpful. — Debra M.

**Dear Debra M:** Thank you for sharing your expertise and offering potential resources at the federal and state level.

**Dear Annie:** I love your column! Often, it seems writers of advice columns overlook a suggestion which would assist many writers. The letter from "Parents at

a Crossroads" prompted me to write. He seems a fine candidate for applying for Social Security Disability benefits. As you can imagine, it requires significant medical documentation. And often takes many appeals and more paperwork, but it's a great benefit for people struggling with medical issues that prevent them from holding down a job.

A look at the [ssa.gov](https://www.ssa.gov) website would assist such readers about these benefits. One of the best aspects of this benefit is the access to Medicare benefits after two years on SSDI roles, regardless of age. — PNW Reader

**Dear PNW Reader:** Thank you for raising another important potential resource for this family. Readers can visit <https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/disability> for more information.

Send your questions for Annie Lane to [dearannie@creators.com](mailto:dearannie@creators.com).

## 125TH

From Page B7

It was during those young-adult years in the early 2000s when tragedy happened, causing the church to become not just a place to go on Sundays, but a vital healing force in his life. Both of Isaak's parents died suddenly within two months of each other, he shares, and "(Grace) became my sole support system."

With emotion, he recalls how, after his mother's death, his former junior-high teacher Marlene Hanson accompanied him to the funeral home. "She drove me there, and drove me home," he says. And on the way back, asked if she could be his "acquired mother."

"I was assimilated into her family after that," Isaak says, noting that Hanson had three children who were mostly grown by then. When she moved closer to one of them, he bought her house in Moorhead. "It shows how intertwined God is in all of this."

By his early 20s, Isaak jumped into the role of elder, and was leading a Bible study for men; "men who had been through far more life than I," he says. "Not to discredit what I'd been through."

In the various roles he's gladly taken on, he says, he brings the Biblical adage with him: "Steel sharpens steel," noting the need we have for one another as we walk out our life in Christ.

### In his father's footsteps

Jon Smelser became acquainted with Grace Lutheran in 2001 when his father, the Rev. Todd Smelser, became a pastor there, serving until 2005. "He passed away from lung cancer, so my mother and my sisters and I stayed around."

His life has been centered on Grace Lutheran ever since. Smelser met his wife, Megan, at church, their two children attend Grace Lutheran School, and he currently serves as director of church ministry.

"My main function is to help the pastor (the Rev. David Suelzle), and sometimes, I'll fill in for him—he'll leave a sermon for me to read." Smelser also oversees the church's livestream, directs the choir and helps teach Sunday school and confirmation.

He calls following in his father's footsteps through church ministry a blessing. "It's a congregation and community I've grown to love very dearly," he



Contributed / Smelser family  
Jon Smelser and his wife, Megan; daughter Emma, 9; and son Lincoln, 5, are pictured in 2021.



Chris Flynn / The Forum  
Sharon Smelser plays the organ in the sanctuary at Grace Lutheran Church in south Fargo on Jan. 4.

says. "My father used to end every Sunday by telling the congregation that he loved them, but more importantly, that they were loved by the Lord. I have since come to know how he felt and what he meant by that."

Smelser echoes the sentiment that Grace "shines at being a family." "We're not a large church, but our main goal is to hear God's word, receive the sacraments and the forgiveness of sins. And it's nice to do that within a family setting."

That means celebrating regular life together, too. "There's a group of us that gets together to watch Bison games. It's very close-knit," he says, noting that it's also "marvelous" to see younger couples joining the church. "We may not have the big programs as some other congregations, but we're a church that deeply cares about its members."

### Then and now

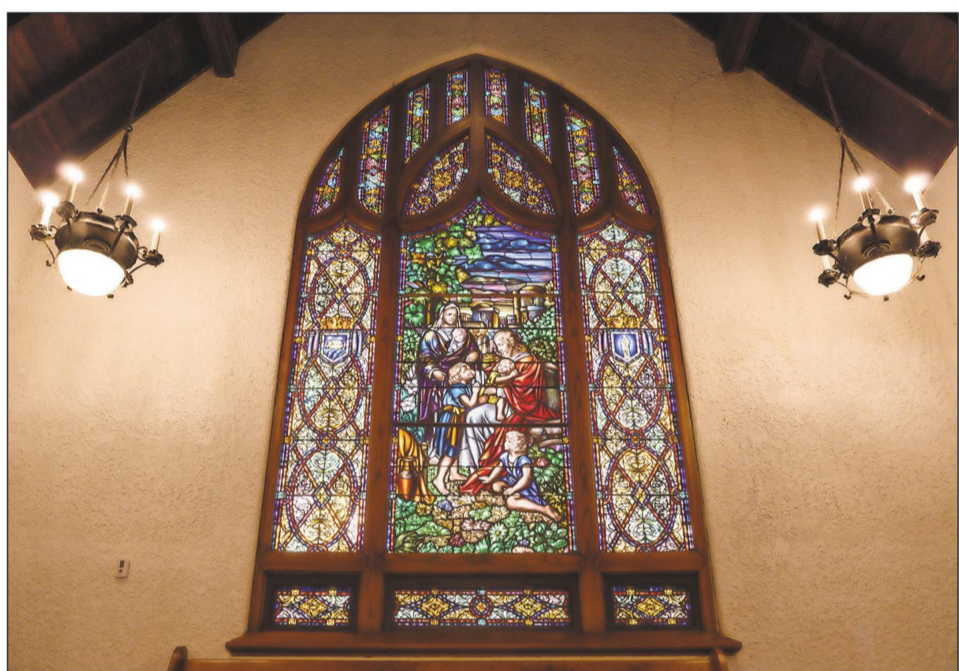
Audrey Nitschke, Smelser's mother-in-law, has been a member of Grace Lutheran for some 73 years. Her mother was brought up in the same tradition as Grace, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, in Richfield, Minnesota.

She recalls the hardship of making it to church every Sunday. "Mom made sure we all got to church, and even when dad had to work on a weekend, she'd be packing up all five of us kids," to get there on time.

They always sat "third pew from the back on the lefthand side," eventually moving pews when her mom transitioned to a wheelchair. "Now that the kids are grown up, and Mom passed away, we've graduated to at least the middle of the church," she laughs.

In those days, she says, "Everyone assumed that you went to church," noting that a mixed marriage was when a Catholic married a Lutheran. "My dad passed away shortly after we got married, and he was probably relieved I met another Lutheran, and even one who was Missouri Synod."

Audrey remembers the original church location, situated near where a devastating tornado tore through the area in 1957. When she married Jim, originally from Moorhead, she coaxed him over to Fargo. "I was a Spud," he jokes, "and had to jump the river to find my bride."



Chris Flynn / The Forum  
Stained glass windows in the Grace Lutheran sanctuary are seen Jan. 4.



Contributed / Grace Lutheran  
Grace Lutheran members Audrey Nitschke, Carolyn Cusher, Linda Sommerfiled and Kathy Kjos are pictured during a Fargo Marathon. The church is along the marathon route, so members have made it a tradition to minister to runners, handing out water, Powerade, and encouragement as they go past, listening to faith-based music by a band or streamed through the church's sound system.



Chris Flynn / The Forum  
Grace Lutheran Church in south Fargo on Jan. 4. Grace Lutheran is celebrating its 125th anniversary in January.

For them, the community has been a binding force, supporting them in raising their family. They've both been active in ministry; Jim as chairman of the elders off and on, and Audrey, as a member of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, which helps keep the church vibrant.

Audrey was pulled in more recently to help organize the 125th-year celebration. "Well, my daughter volunteered me and a couple of my friends," she says. "We'll have events scattered throughout the year."

The main one, "Generations of Praise," will begin with a special service at 2 p.m. on Sunday, Jan. 22, and is open to all.

Though she says the physical structure "isn't overly decked with frills," being "pretty much a straight-forward Lutheran church," it encompasses beautiful stained glass windows, and has undergone several significant upgrades through the years, including a remodeling project in 1968 to enlarge the narthex; another in 1996 to incorporate an elevator; and, in 2016, the addition of an east-

side corridor with a conference room and classroom space for Sunday school.

Brelje says she's proud of the fact that the church "has always stood on God's word, on what the Bible says to us," recalling the significance of the Church's name: *grace*. "For it is through grace that you have been saved; it's a gift from God," she says, quoting from Ephesians 2. "We rejoice in that!"

Salonen, a wife and mother of five, works as a freelance writer and speaker in Fargo. Email her at [roxanesalonen@gmail.com](mailto:roxanesalonen@gmail.com), and find more of her work at Peace Garden Passage, <http://roxanesalonen.com/>.