

## Northlake – Our History



Geneva Community Church first met as an organized body of believers on Palm Sunday, 1952. It was a group sitting two or three rows deep in The Firs Lounge, led by Grant Whipple and rejoicing that the Geneva community now had a church. While that birth date may be viewed as her commencement, in many ways it was merely a continuation of years of faithfulness... the faithfulness of God and His servants. The roots of Geneva Church are worth exploring. They had been spreading out in different directions for many years and provided the spiritual nurturing in the Geneva area that culminated in a new church on Palm Sunday, 1952.

The deepest root spans the century, back to 1915, when a prominent Geneva woman, Carrie Cole, began a Sunday School in her home on Coronado Street for children in the neighborhood. The Sunday School continued over the years, moving to The Firs grounds in 1928 when Otis Whipple moved his family there from Seattle. Its first big impetus came when Grant Whipple, Lois Barrett and other high schoolers, comprising a group known as "Christ's Witnesses," came out to The Firs on Sunday afternoons to help "Aunt Carrie" with the Sunday School and its 15 children who met in the original Lounge Building.

The 1930s and 1940s brought solidification and growth to the Sunday School despite hard economic times. Supplies and materials came from Sunday School offerings which often ranged from 25 cents to 75 cents weekly. Ten percent was taken out for missions faithfully and one month in 1937 expenses were met with two cents left over! Attendance doubled during the '30s as classes divided and a "just for boys" class was formed. The 1940s saw the Sunday School organization strengthen with Margaret Toms beginning her 15 years as Superintendent. Capable, well-led and friendly, Margaret organized teachers and officers who met monthly to plan, report and pray. One yearly highlight was the annual Christmas program, recalled by one worker as "a riot with husbands of all teachers taking part, dressed in artificial beards, bathrobes and all. These times drew us together as friends and Christian workers."

1952 saw the Sunday School become part of the full church organization as Geneva Church was born. Its long taproot, digging down through parts of five decades, provided a deep source of organized education for the new church.

A second root forming Geneva Community Church also originated with children. Margaret Toms, in response to the desire of nearby mothers, began a kindergarten at The Firs, complete with sandbox, teeter-totters, preschool curriculum and Bible stories. Used for conferences on the weekends, the dining room was transformed each week into a highly successful and sought-after kindergarten program. Its success was such that it became a model for others, drawing educators from the Northwest United States and Canada to observe it. Yet its impact was another spiritual outgrowth designed to serve the needs of the Geneva community.

While the children's Sunday School root was the longest, and the kindergarten root highly acknowledged, Bible classes throughout the community provided the broadest roots, reaching out to many hungry to learn of God's Word. In the early 1930s, Ruth Walter and Doris Coffin came on staff at The Firs with a mind to establishing Bible classes for women in the area. As an outgrowth of this, Helen Rutledge began midweek Bible studies in her home located just east of the present Firs bookstore. When Ruth returned in 1946 as a Whipple, she took over Helen's classes and began one on Euclid Ave. The Euclid study was comprised of two Christian women, Dorcas Evich and Betty Wyndham along with a number of "smoking, society people." The class flourished, women came to know Christ, and as a result, their husbands couldn't understand what was happening. In response to their questions, Grant Whipple began a men's class which thrived into the wee

hours some nights. Dale Frisbie was one of the originals of the Euclid Avenue Men's Class. Momentum in these studies was growing in the late '40s and early '50s and several women in town heard about them and were interested. Advertising their class in a dance club, these women convinced Ruth to begin a Bible study in town for them and soon Grant had another class as well with their husbands. This second men's class was unique in that many of the men were athletes among whom were Bob Bray, Hank Chamberlin, and Sid Van Sinderen. It was at this point that Mildred Zeufeldt raised the question to Grant Whipple that many were murmuring ... we have a Sunday School, a kindergarten, many Bible studies, yet no place nearby to worship on Sunday mornings. Why can't there be a church in Geneva?

Most seemed confident that the Lord's timing was apparent. It was a church primarily of new converts, won to the Lord through the Bible classes or their children's participation in the children's ministries. Grant recalls the new church didn't publicize in town. He didn't want dissatisfied people from other churches spreading their discontent among Geneva's new believers. There was a strong feeling that the time was right for a church in Geneva, and by starting one themselves, the deeply grounded Firs staff could mold and nurture the new harvest of Christians into a solid body of believers.

In a way, the most comprehensive root of Geneva Church was The Firs itself. Since the 1920s, the conference ministry had shepherded the various roots which were to become Geneva Community Church, the Sunday School, the Kindergarten, the Bible classes. At the church's inception, there were no strong Christians to lead the new body apart from The Firs' staff. So the new church began, though a completely separate organization, with The Firs lending its staff; Grant Whipple as pastor for 20 years, and Doug Anderson as his assistant for 15.

The subsequent years were good to Geneva Community Church. The morning services were held in The Firs Lounge; Sunday School was everywhere, including the nursery in Grant's basement! The chapel was built in 1962, followed by the Rutledge building in 1983. Five senior pastors followed Grant as he retired in 1973; and several interim, associate and youth pastors. In 1958, Geneva Church wrote and adopted her constitution. These past forty years have been clear indications of God's blessing and provision for His church in Geneva.

In the year 2000, God's plans and leading led to the building of our current facility, and the church became "Northlake Community Church." With this came a renewed passion to reach into the community immediately surrounding our facility, along with a continued desire to impact the world. Today, Northlake is laser-focused on its mission: Making Disciples of Christ both here in Bellingham, and around the world.