

The Story of Sovereign Grace Church

The founding of Sovereign Grace Church is the story of one church, but it's the same story of every Christ-centered church founded down through the ages. In every time and every place, the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts and minds of believers. They feel inspired to move from the safety, comforts and fellowship of their existing church to give life to another church and bring the Gospel to another set of people—some of whom are believers, while others are not, and still others who may even be hostile to the Lord.

This is the story of one such Spirit-led endeavor. While large parts of it are easy to explain and straightforward, other parts of it are unexplainable. Where now stands a 33,000 square-foot-church, there once was a family farm. Where now hundreds of people gather on a Sunday to worship, learn and teach, there was only a small but dedicated group meeting in homes and public-school buildings.

This is the story of how a small group of believers came from a sending church to start another church, enriching the lives of hundreds in the process. It's the story of how Sovereign Grace Church in Marlton, NJ came to be.

Where it all started

In the summer of 1992, members of Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, PA had an idea to plant a church. It's easy to say that the Holy Spirit had raised up the idea for this in their minds. But at a fundamental level, what does that mean?

Certainly, it wasn't an idea that the church elders arrived at easily. At the time Warren Boettcher, now Senior Pastor at Sovereign Grace, was a young dad working two jobs. He was a full-time teacher at Delaware County Christian School (DCCS) and a part-time Singles pastor at Covenant Fellowship.

It was enough to keep the young father and husband busy. He and his wife, Kim were already parents to four young children, two girls and two boys. Warren is nothing if not a prayerful man and even the idea of becoming a pastor was not one that he arrived at easily. He had been teaching and coaching at DCCS for nine years while attending Covenant Fellowship. He was affected by two things at his church. First, the preaching was, in his words, "good and godly." But it was also the transparency of the pastors and how they conducted themselves with an inspiring humility and led their congregation with what Warren terms, "a joyful seriousness of following God." The pastors led by example, teaching men how to follow God and at the same time be better men, better husbands and better fathers. "It was the wedding of preaching and practical application that really got my attention," he says.

Then came a Sunday with a particularly affecting sermon. In Warren's words:

"I went home, then Kim and I took a long walk. And I said to her that I just felt that I am being called to ministry." But he also had strong and inspiring thoughts about what a local church could look like.

"You know," Warren said in a recent interview, "the only institution that God created in the New Testament is the Church. It's the only organization with complete instructions

regarding mission and discipleship, for example. As good as parachurch organizations are with specific missions, such as education, they are not charged with the role of developing family discipleship. The Church is charged with that. The Church is the living witness of Christ in the earth. It is the Body of Christ. As much as I love Christian schooling, it's not the living Body. That's the Church."

So Warren became a part-time pastor at Covenant Fellowship while finishing his teaching contract, and when that expired, he began a life of full-time pastoral ministry.

He and the elders of Covenant Fellowship were meditating on the idea of the church plant and after a prayer meeting about it, they arrived at the decision to hold off. Then Lattie McDonough, a native of Webbers Falls, OK, and a southern minister gifted in prophesy rose, and declared that he had a strong sense from the Lord that the church plant should move ahead. "You can't keep him," he said, referring to Warren. That word from the Lord was enough.

By the end of the year, and after holding several meetings, it was clear that sufficient numbers of people were interested in the idea. On Sending Sunday, January 24, 1993, a group of pioneers set out to begin a new church. At this point, about all they knew was that they were determined to spread the Gospel somewhere in southern New Jersey. If that sounds a bit vague, that's understandable. But believers know that God moves in mysterious ways to accomplish His purposes.

The group was known as the Plant Team and they began meeting in the home of John and Carol Orr and their two children. Everybody stuffed themselves into the Orrs' living room while children's ministry was held in the basement.

It may have been cozy, but it wasn't practical. The Orr's living room was meant as nothing more than a starting place. A larger space was needed and that's what the Lord provided in the form of James F. Cooper Elementary School in Cherry Hill, NJ, on Greentree Road about two miles from the location that would become Sovereign Grace's current home. The church planters gave their gathering a name, Community Life Church and the little church was soon to get its own secretary to help everything and everybody stay on track.

The great adventure

Wendy Wilson was a faithful Christian woman who had been raised in a Christian home in southern New Jersey. She had a sense even from a young age that a person should be at the disposal of the Lord, to do his work. "I was very missions-minded," she recalled in a recent interview. "I believed that God wanted me to go anywhere in the world."

Wendy was still a relatively new member of Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, PA and was happy there, yet with an adventurous spirit. So she responded readily to the call to plant a church in Charlotte, NC. She was excited to move south and loved the friendly southern culture she found there. "The further south you go, the friendlier it gets," Wendy said.

Things were going well for the intrepid Wendy in the Tar Heel State, although she struggled financially. After a year and a half of helping the fledgling church get on its feet, the phone rang, and it was Warren Boettcher asking her to come north to serve as church secretary.

Wendy said she listened politely and even answered affirmatively but said to herself, "Nooooooo." Looking back on those days and that specific conversation, she reflected paraphrasing the book of Job, "'That which I feared most had come upon me...' But I prayed about it. God changed my mind, and I actually got excited about moving back north. It was

nothing short of a miracle. You see, that's the part of you that God wants most," Wendy said. "It's the part that you're most hesitant to turn over to Him. He wants all of us."

Taking the Steven Curtis Chapman song, "The Great Adventure" as her anthem, she headed north, straight into the final weeks of one of the worst winters in decades.

Valentine's Day conjures up images of soft music, romance and a candle lit dinners. For many New Jersey couples on February 14, 1993, that's exactly what it was. But for Wendy driving slowly north from Charlotte, NC in a U-Haul truck towing her car, romance was the last thing on her mind. She steered the ponderous vehicle into a rest area to take a break only to find that the facility had been discontinued and was unplowed. And there she was stuck fast. She was praying for help when an off-duty police officer showed up to assist her in getting unstuck.

The average person would have been tempted to turn around and head back down I-95, but in this phase of her life, this young woman was a pioneering church planter and wasn't about to back down.

Having met and become friends with the Baillie family at its care group at Covenant Fellowship, she accepted their invitation to live with them as she re-established herself in New Jersey. And she soon found enough work to support herself financially. She worked three days a week as the church secretary while working two days a week at an architectural firm.

Shortly before her father's birthday, her mother asked her to come to church—the same church she grew up in and the same one that Wendy had left because she felt it wasn't feeding her spiritually. "Do it for your father," her mom urged. So being a dutiful daughter Wendy went to church that evening and sat down in the front row with her sister who was running the overhead projector. Wendy turned around and noticed an old friend and his wife enter. She and her sister were waving to get their friend's attention when a man who was entering at the same time mistook Wendy and her sister's waving as a kind overture to him. He looked to his left and to his right, shrugged and returned an enthusiastic wave.

Wendy asked her sister, "who is that?" Her sister responded, "Oh, we call him Irish Kevin." More precisely, the man who was a recent Irish immigrant was Kevin Hunt. Ten months later he became Wendy's husband and more than 20 years of marriage later the father to three great kids and Wendy's partner in a truly great and wonderful adventure.

Life at Cooper

On March 7th, the hardy little group of church planters gathered as Community Life Church in Cooper Elementary School—35 people in all. They met in the so-called "cafetorium," one-part cafeteria and one-part auditorium. When the kids were dismissed for children's ministry, a mere seven adults were left.

That may not seem like much, but the Lord weighs the intentions of the heart and He knows that although strength may be found in numbers, it's more specifically located in the heart of even a single believer.

Anyone who has ever been involved with a church plant will tell you that it's not easy. It's a nomadic existence. Everything the Plant Team needed was stored miles away at the church office in Cherry Hill, requiring trips up and down one serious flight of steps. Mark and

Kathi Baillie climbed the stairs to gather the musical and sound equipment every Sunday in order to set up for Sunday service.

If that had been the only thing the Baillie family and the other pioneers had contended with, their lives would have been pretty easy. Set up. Take down. Repeat the next Sunday and every Sunday thereafter. But the winter of 1993 was one for the record books.

The startup team had put the word out that they were planting a dynamic new church and announcements aired on KYW 1060, an AM News Radio station that to this day is a well-known news source in the Philadelphia region. The first public meeting was to be March 14th.

The startup team was ready to crash the Gospel into southern New Jersey, but a storm of epic proportions crashed the area instead. Record-breaking snow fell as far south as Alabama, and even the Florida panhandle received four inches. The storm swept up the eastern seaboard, laying waste to scores of electrical systems, knocking out power to 10 million households and causing or contributing to 208 fatalities.

The so-called '93 Superstorm had only temporary delaying power, however. A week later, on March 21st, appropriately the first full day of Spring, the startup team of Community Life Church had its first public gathering. Members took this delay simply as the Lord declaring that this was His church and it would open to the public on His terms. As Isaiah had declared seven hundred years before the birth of Christ (Isaiah 14:27): "For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?"

The first months of the new church's life rolled by and eventually, even as harsh as that winter was, it released its grip. The snows melted, and the little church celebrated its first Easter on Sunday, April 11. The first birth in the congregation occurred the next month when Josh McMann was born.

Other firsts soon followed. There were small impromptu Sunday picnics that spring and summer and a large annual summer picnic was held at the home on the Marcucci family property until 2014.

In September, the church members gathered for apple picking at the famous Linvilla Orchards, a 300-acre farm, orchard and recreational area in Media, PA that's been in business since 1914. As of 2018, Linvilla is still in business and going strong.

Nobody remembers whether the apple picking was particularly good or not that fall, but even twenty-five years later many people still recall Lisa Mitchell, the church's first convert. Lisa was converted to belief in Christ during a craft night.

In 1994 the congregation was blessed by the addition of an unassuming couple, a homeschooling mom and a radiologist dad, Sheila and Mark DiMarcangelo. Both have been and continue to be productive for the Lord and a massive blessing to the larger congregation as community group leaders, in music and in food ministry.

Mark had received classical piano training since childhood yet in the church's early days, he functioned as a percussionist on a digital drum set. Today he plays the keyboard and serves as a vocalist and worship leader. But he also functions as the church's informal physician advisor. "God has enabled me to use the gifts that He has bestowed on me," Mark said recently. "There have been any number of opportunities to provide medical advice and recommendations for people with medical concerns and questions. Having a background in radiology allows me to review medical images with them, such as X Rays. This helps them to be

better informed about their care and to interact with their doctors at a higher level. Sometimes, it just provides them peace of mind.”

Sheila has blessed the congregation with a food ministry that’s a wonder to behold in its productivity. “I’m amazed how the Lord planted a small idea in my heart and how it has become a formidable blessing to God’s people,” Sheila said, pointing out that it’s also a blessing to her: “it’s a pleasure to work with so many passionate and industrious volunteers.”

She began the church’s food ministry in 2008 to serve a handful of people. Today it serves 90 families and requires input from 45 volunteers gathering food from local retailers such as Trader Joe’s. Any Sunday will find the volunteers packing boxes of fresh fruit, vegetables, cereals, prepared foods, meat, milk and other dairy products. The abundance of it is hard to believe.

1994 also marked the church’s first marriage retreat, “The Intimate Marriage” and the choir made its first appearance outside the confines of the church when it sang during December weekends at the Cherry Hill Mall.

It was also an important year for the Boettcher family when it moved from Media, PA to Cherry Hill. Kim explains it this way:

“Our hearts were in New Jersey in January 1993, but it wasn’t until a year later in January 1994 that our bodies and belongings finally arrived! That whole year Warren and I felt like we gave birth to a baby who had to stay in the hospital while our hearts longed for the day we would finally all be together as a family! We moved in a scary ice storm but that didn’t deter the warmth in our hearts—we were headed to our new home. Homeschooling three children and supervising a very active toddler had its own challenges, but our life at home was joy. Warren did a great job of reminding us that we were all part of the church planting team and the part we played was vital. Whenever the doors of Community Life Church were opened, the Boettcher family was there!”

By the mid-nineties, the church was growing steadily. New families and individual members were being welcomed into the congregation, existing families were growing, and home-schooling moms were getting together with their kids for a little moral support. That’s when Sue August, then a young mom, and Sheila DiMarcangelo, already a seasoned home schooler, launched the church’s Homeschool Support Group and Co-op where parents would come in to teach the group. The two also hatched the idea for Home Schoolers Day Out, a weekly trip for children to do something fun and get some fresh air while learning.

Sue August looks back on 25 years of home-schooling success and the Lord’s provision in it:

“Sovereign Grace Church has always offered support and vision for homeschoolers but plays no official role in overseeing the group. Our pastors have been available to offer insight and clarity when we needed it. But the very nature of homeschooling is that it’s parent directed. In the late 90s, quite a few families were active in the local homeschooling community. At the time, Warren was the only pastor, and also a homeschooling dad. He loved the idea of us forming a support group, and he provided pastoral oversight. We published a newsletter, held an annual meeting to encourage homeschooling families, organized field trips and started a co-op where moms and dads offered to teach classes one day a week. We even had a Ski Group that every

winter would spend six consecutive Tuesdays skiing and snowboarding in the Poconos. The friendships our students formed are strong and lasting, and a handful of marriages in the church probably began from friendships formed on Homeschoolers Day Out (HDO). By the time our son Jack graduated 12th grade, we had 50 families participating. Today, homeschooling moms lead the group. They started as students more than 20 years ago!”

Late in 1995, in early December, the church conducted its first marriage ceremony as members Steve and Karen Gregory were wed. They remain active members and participated in planting Christ Church in Philadelphia.

The late 90s

The life of a church is a series of small events. Some of them—such as cookie exchanges, picnics and Christmas plays—help bind the congregation together and build memories. Weddings, funerals, and the gathering of people to assist in planting other churches are more significant events, both for the individuals and the life of the congregation.

The next years passed smoothly, quickly, and well with all the activities that a healthy church exhibits. There were youth outreach events, another marriage retreat, a Father-Daughter Valentine’s Day banquet among other activities and outreaches. The choir performed at the (then-named) Echelon Mall in Voorhees, NJ. If you were looking for a church in which to be an active member, Community Life Church was exactly the place to be.

In 1997, Community Life was still barely planted when it began to participate in spreading seeds of the Gospel far from home. About 15 people gathered to form an “E-Team” (the “E” was for evangelism) to minister in partnership with Sovereign Grace Ministries. This team travelled to San Diego, CA for a week-long outreach, preaching the Gospel and serving others alongside local believers from Sovereign Grace.

The next year, a young man from Aston, PA was graduated from the Sovereign Grace Pastors College, at that time located in Gaithersburg, MD (today, it’s located in Louisville, KY) and came to Community Life Church as a pastor.

Today, he’s known simply as “C.B.,” and he’s Senior Pastor at Christ Community Church. This was the first church planted by Sovereign Grace Church, Marlton. CCC is located in Sinking Spring, PA, a small but beautiful town in Berks County, PA, about seven miles from the city of Reading.

During his ministry C.B. started the first Youth Camp at Community Life Church, a life-changing summer event for many of the kids who attend. At first, the effort was a rather modest affair. For two years, kids and parents attended the Youth Camp hosted by Covenant Fellowship. By 1999, Community Life kids and parents partnered with Chesapeake, MD Church under the leadership of a young man who would later become better known to the congregation as one of its current pastors: Jason Reyes. Another young pastor who was a guest speaker at that Youth Camp is today known for his beautiful exposition of the Gospel and for the way he’s brought clarity to how our failings are covered by the redemptive grace and work of Jesus, especially as that relates to our marriages and families. That gentleman was Paul Tripp, now an internationally-known pastor with a bushy mustache and, at times, a brutally humorous and self-effacing manner.

When C.B. left New Jersey to plant Christ Community Church, pastor Ken Diaz teamed up with Warren to be the other half of a two-pastor team. Ken was the first person from the

church sent out to the Sovereign Grace Pastors College. “Ken had various ministry responsibilities in the early 2000s, but his greatest mark was on our youth-parent ministry,” says Warren. “Ken’s godliness and devotion as a husband and father had a great impact on our church and continues to be a great example to us.” Ken later left the demands of ministry for health reasons but Ken and Maira and their family continue to sacrificially bless the congregation, serving in a variety of capacities with characteristic good cheer, great faith and extraordinary, loving warmth.

Turn of a century

Momentum. It’s what people call the gathering force behind a moving object. And that’s exactly what Community Life Church was experiencing as the new century and millennium dawned and the next three years passed as the Gospel was preached.

Sound preaching is relentless in a healthy church, a church that keeps its hearts and ears attuned to God’s Word, values it and doesn’t shy away from it. The Lord takes care of the rest. People repented of sin, learned and grew; homeschoolers steadily grew, blossoming into young adults; babies were born and dedicated, men and women were baptized. Still more people joined the church.

In December 2003, original church plant member Tom Machowski who was serving as worship team leader and an advisor to Warren on a lay advisory board, became unemployed and began volunteering at the church office as an administrative intern. Before long, it became apparent that this was to become a permanent, full-time calling for Tom, who had been Warren’s good friend ever since Warren was his Singles pastor back at Covenant Fellowship.

By then it had also become clear that the church had outgrown its home in Cooper. The congregation had gotten used to sitting on folding metal chairs, which needed to be put out before the service, and folded up at its end. Cooper is typical of a small elementary school built in the 1960s school building boom. It’s long on sturdiness and short on amenities, one of which was air conditioning—there was none. The school only had ceiling fans.

Something had to be done. The solution was not only to find a bigger venue but one that was more comfortable. And as obvious as it sounds, seating was a priority. Folding and unfolding, carrying and stacking metal chairs is no small job when it’s repeated week in and week out. Sunday, after all, is supposed to be a day of rest.

The solution that presented itself came in the form of Cherry Hill High School West. Like many school buildings from the 1960s, it had been expanded as the decades rolled by and as Cherry Hill was transformed from a rural place to a suburban one. Most importantly, the school was equipped with a new auditorium equipped with air conditioning and a white solar reflecting roof covering, not black tar. Suddenly, church members were cooler and a lot more comfortable with their Sunday gathering.

But another transformation had taken place--something more substantial than increased comfort. On New-Member Sunday, Warren asked all new members to come forward from the audience and stand before the congregation. When the group was assembled, the audience members looked around and felt blessed: there were more new members standing in front of them than there were members in the audience!

The step to move to the brand-new West Auditorium required faith as the rent payment to the Cherry Hill school district tripled. But, God faithfully provided the resources and the

church continued to grow in the larger, cooler space. A decision was also made to change the name of the church from Community Life Church to Sovereign Grace Church, a theologically robust description of the people God was building together.

In 2005, Tim Wolf was graduated from the Sovereign Grace Pastors College in Maryland and was without an assignment. Sovereign Grace interviewed him, and it was clear from the beginning that this young, dynamic pastor was a great match to head up and grow the parent-youth ministry which flourished in those years, in addition to the young adults ministry. Tim later went on to Maryland to plant a new church and many people, young and old, look back with fond remembrance and gratitude for the impact Tim made on their lives.

And that wasn't the only change afoot. Elders and deacons and many of the original church planters were praying because they had a big idea and a yearning for a permanent place that they could call their own.

Building for the Lord

Comfortable as the surroundings were at Cherry Hill West, it still wasn't a home for the congregation and by then as many as 400 people were attending Sovereign Grace each Sunday. It was time to look for land, as Warren explained to the congregation in a Mission Fund appeal in 2006. It was time to build.

A search for land on which to build a church had begun several years earlier and the team investigating a property purchase looked at every type of location imaginable: warehouses, former garden centers, even a synagogue.

Eventually, the Lord directed the team to the Stow family, and their 11.6-acre Christmas tree farm on Greentree Road, not far from Cooper School. This was an old south-Jersey farm family who remembered when the Route 73 corridor was all farmland and orchards, and they hadn't even listed their property for sale yet. But the Lord moved their hearts and after several conversations with church members, the family felt it was the best use of the property. In 2006, Sovereign Grace closed on it, making a \$600,000 down payment on the \$1.5 million asking price. After securing a loan for \$900,000, miraculously, the church collected in offerings and pledges, \$973,000, enabling the church to pay off the loan within one year. The final amount collected in the first year was over a million dollars, and miracle of miracles, the regular operating budget also grew at pace.

But getting the funding together for the building was daunting. Initial construction costs in 2007 were estimated at \$8 million. Of that, the church needed to raise a minimum of \$1.25 million to begin the construction process—in cash. The balance of that original amount became its mortgage. So, the church continued its Mission Fund. Tom Machowski notes that “The congregation gave generously and sacrificially. The message that encapsulated the response was ‘Not equal giving, but equal sacrifice.’ That was the heart behind what this amazing congregation did. They worshiped God in giving. God amazed us all by surpassing all of our giving goals.”

Construction was up next. The church hired Michael Brady Inc., an architect firm based in Knoxville, TN and they drew up a set of plans for a 33,000-square-foot structure. Tom Machowski, who managed the project for the church said, “We wanted the church design to reflect the history of architecture in our area which was known primarily for farming. We also wanted the building concept to capture the warm and friendly personality of our people. So, we

decided on a design which mimicked a farm house with a front porch, white rocking chairs, natural stone, brick and wood finishes. We also incorporate Victorian elements reflecting our proximity to Cape May and the Jersey Shore. So, the cupola and gingerbread accents were added. Mike Brady created a masterful design that was both welcoming and inspiring to worshipers.”

Another subtle but significant milestone that occurred in 2007 was the beginning of the church’s mission statement which was completed and approved in 2008. Its goal was to work in tandem with the mission fund so that fund giving, construction and the building would be properly rooted in Gospel mission. The first of its three parts read: “Loving God: God is the center of all we do and the object of our greatest hopes and desires. He alone, in all the universe, is worthy of our worship.” The second part stated “Growing Together: By growing in Christ, we don’t live for ourselves. As members of God’s family, we care for one another in true, biblical community.” The third and final part finished with “Sharing Christ: We want the whole world to know Jesus and to hear the good news of the Gospel as we love and serve our neighbors.”

Looking at the celebratory ground-breaking picture in May 2009 you see a big group of people standing at the ready, sinking chrome-plated shovels into the soft ground. The day is slightly overcast as the earth moving machinery stands at the ready. What you can’t see are countless other people who faithfully transmitted the Gospel message down through the ages since the beginning of time; all of whom contributed in some way to directing the message to the people shown in the photo. The writer of the book of Hebrews called them, “the great cloud of witnesses.”

Almost exactly a year after the ground breaking, Sovereign Grace Church held its Grand-Opening Sunday, May 2010 with special guest C.J. Mahaney, founder of Sovereign Grace Ministries, delivering the first sermon. Years of struggle, prayer, hard work and sacrificial giving had resulted in a beautiful, brand-new building that would help spread the Gospel in southern New Jersey and beyond.

In the same year that Sovereign Grace opened, Jeff Boettcher, Warren and Kim’s oldest son, was hired as a pastor and four years later was sent to plant a church in the urban ministry context of South Philadelphia. In a place scoured by drug abuse and violence, Christ Church members minister to many there, both the desperate and addicted and, simply, those who don’t know Jesus.

As church needs grew, many godly men were brought on to serve the congregation including Bryon Lockhart, Scott Faris and Peter Privitera who went on to be the Senior Pastor for an established sister church near Lancaster, PA. Pastor Jason Reyes was hired from the Chesapeake Church in 2012 and pastor Joe Carnuccio was added a year later to serve as a pastor while maintaining a significant Christian counseling ministry in the area. Pastor Joshua Gilmore and Andrew Kalvelage came aboard in 2015. While Andrew continues to teach and preach with wit, insight and a refreshing Midwestern humor, Joshua recently returned to South Carolina in 2018 to take up ministry at his alma mater.

Twenty-five years may not seem like much in the face of eternity, but the small group that set out to plant a church succeeded, by God’s grace seeing many turned to the Lord in the process, certainly a movement of eternal proportions. The church they planted and the lives that were affected fulfilled the Lord’s Great Commission, as recorded in Mathew 28:19-20: “Go

then and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. Amen.”