

*The Early History of Spirit of Grace Lutheran Church  
And The Amazing Story of our  
Founding Pastor, Joseph L. Carucci*



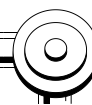
Joe & Sandy Carucci



Phil & Barbara Eaves



*"May God always keep us in a spirit of grace" ~ Pastor Phil Eaves*



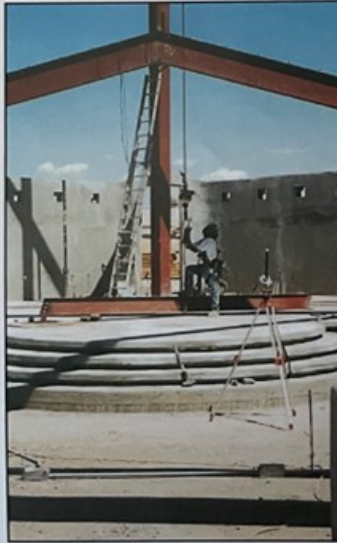
*Groundbreaking*



*Construction*



*Palm Sunday 2002, A New Beginning*



### **Current Church & Charter Members**

**REV CARLYLE & SHARON SMITH**

**RICHARD BOSSE**

**BARRY & JOAN GOODKIN**

**RON & CINDY HEDWELL**

**VERNON KENNY**

**MARGARET MCCLINTOCK**

**BARBARA SCHILIE**

**LINNEA ANDERSON**



## ***The early history of Spirit of Grace and its founding Pastor Joseph L. Carruci begins...***

In 1996, Pastor Joe was offered the opportunity to develop a new church for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) by Bishop Howie Wennes, of the Grand Canyon Synod. There were two new churches to be developed in the Valley of the Sun -- one in Scottsdale and one in a new Del Webb development to be built in Surprise. Pastor Joe chose the

latter. His first ministry following graduation from seminary as a developmental pastor. As his last challenge before retirement, Pastor Joe was to become, yet again, a developmental pastor for the Lord, spreading the *Good News* and bringing together a new community to worship together.

He established his office in the Lutheran Thrift Shop in Youngtown and began his final ministry. During the process he became good friends with the leaders and volunteers at the Thrift Shop, a relationship that would become very valuable for this new church.

In 1996 there were no homes in the Del Webb Grand Avenue Project. In its master plan, Del Webb offered 4.5 acre lots for church development **and on July 1, 1996 the ELCA Division of Outreach purchased the land where the church stands today.** Pastor Joe knew the site of the future home for the church, but had much work to develop the church community.

**His first decision was what to name this new community of worshipers. He and his wife, Sandy, prayed for guidance and ultimately, Pastor Joe felt "*Spirit of Grace*" was a perfect name.**



He spent his initial days sending letters, walking door to door in the surrounding areas and when homes started being occupied in Sun City Grand, he became a street walker there too.





Worship Sites  
Sewing Room 9/7/97  
Sonoran Plaza - Meeting Room  
Auditorium

Pastor Joe gathered together the first group of worshipping members (65) and they met in the Grand Stitchers room in the village center at Grand. The membership, however, grew so quickly that

soon they moved into one of the larger community rooms in the Sonoran Plaza ballroom. The Baptists were worshipping in the room next door and



members recall that occasionally their service would come through the Del Webb speakers into their room. Spirit of Grace had its own sound system that was brought in each week, so the reverse never happened.

**January 10, 1998** was the Spirit of Grace ***“Organizational Sunday.”*** There were 178 Charter members in attendance. Spirit of Grace became an official organized church of the ELCA. Pastor Joe was called as its first leader, the first Council was elected, and the church constitution was adopted by a unanimous vote. A motion was approved to request Pastor Joe carry a wooden cross to St. Andrews Lutheran Church, one of our mission founder congregations, in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Pastor Rod Anderson, a friend of Pastor Joe’s was the presiding minister and became a valuable connection when fundraising started for the new church building.

**Speaking of crosses**, the first cross used on those early Sunday worship services is this one. According to Pastor Joe, it is a cross made from the skeleton of an agave cactus. Pastor Joe still has the cross hanging on his wall at his assisted living condo in Walnut Creek, California. The cross provides him with wonderful memories of his last ministerial position and it has been a constant companion over the years.





On June 4, 1999, Spirit of Grace was officially received as a congregation of the Grand Canyon Synod at the American Synod Assembly. ***At the event, Spirit of Grace thanked its founder congregation in Eden Prairie and the local partner congregations: Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Sun City West, American Lutheran Church in Sun City and Shepherd of the Valley for their support throughout the developing years.***

When asked how he was able to lead the congregation to commit to construction of a church building; he replied, ***“it was the members.”*** They were people who came together to worship the Lord and they became a close-knit community.

***“They wanted a church home.”***

About two months after the organizational meeting on **March 29, 1999**, the new church council voted to take title to the land at 15820 W Clearview Blvd from the Mission Investment Fund of the ELCA. A loan for \$332,300 was approved to pay for the land.

**By November 1999**, the congregation voted to hire architect, Tom Hunt (Hunt Architects) to design the building. **The next month, December 1999**, the **Building Committee** was established.

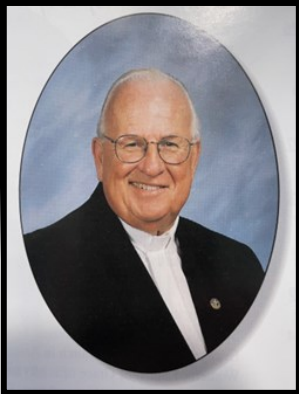
At the first annual meeting on **Sunday, January 30, 2000**. A ***“not to exceed” budget of \$2,500,000 was approved, and the congregation got the first look at the Master Site Plan and Building drawings.*** At the meeting the ***“Grand Opportunity,”*** or as it was called, the ***GO Capital Campaign Committee*** was organized.

***Remember Pastor Joe’s relationship with the Lutheran Thrift Shop? They contributed \$90,000*** to give the campaign a good jump-start.



***God’s Work! Joe’s Heart & Hands! By the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, thanks to the time, talents, and treasurers of many members, the debt has been reduced to \$480,000.***

Eight months later on **September 24, 2000**, a special congregational meeting unanimously approved to begin construction of the church building.



On **December 17, 2000** the congregation called its *first Associate Pastor, Phil Eaves*. In jest, *Pastor Joe introduced Pastor Phil as the new "Youth" pastor*, a title that stuck and became a source of much humor. In **November of the same year**, the official dedication of the church building was conducted with many guests and the attendance of the Bishop of the Grand Canyon Synod.

Barbara Eaves, the Pastor's wife, became the first Office Manager. Barbara organized the office and established processes that are still used today. Sharon Smith also became the first Choir Director.



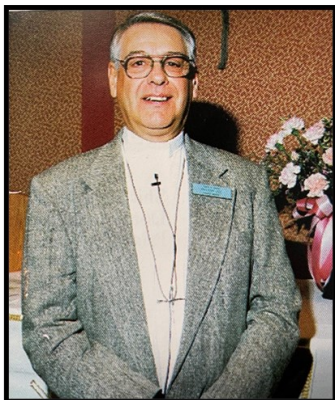
Barbara Eaves  
Office Manager



Sharon Smith  
Choir Director

On Palm Sunday, **March 24, 2002**, Pastors Joe and Phil conducted the first worship service in the new church building. A great day of much joy and celebration with a warm, loving, and cohesive *community of God's people*.

A long-time member of the church shared that Pastor Carruci claimed to be a *'salesman'*— selling the *'Good News'* and providing the necessary leadership to move the members through start-up to the construction of the new building.



**At the congregational meeting in February 2003**, three months after the dedication of the church building, Pastor Joe, at the age of 68, announced he would retire on June 30.

**Founding Pastor Joseph L. Carucci** provided the congregation with adequate time to establish a Call Committee and Select a new pastor to carry Spirit of Grace through the next stage of the journey.



Pastor Joe's daughter, Melissa, shared ***"you can't say 'Joe Carruci' without saying 'baseball'.*** Pastor Joe is an avid baseball fan and was **one of the first inducted in the Grand Hall of Fame at Home Run field on Mountainview Drive.** His favorite team is the Arizona

Diamondbacks. He probably knew Del Webb was the owner of the New York Yankees and builds a baseball park in each of his developments. He recalls that he conducted a few funerals for fellow baseball players at home plate during his days at Spirit of Grace.

***In Pastor Joe's first annual report to the congregation in early 2000, he started his report as follows:***

***" I, Joseph, a servant of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Surprise, and Spirit of Grace, in Sun City Grand: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of Grace."***

***I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." *Philippians 1:3-5****

Sounds like he is speaking directly to those of us who worship together today -- almost 25 years later.

***Pastor Joe, the first "Hand" at Spirit of Grace to begin "God's Work," sends greetings and congratulations on the church's celebration!!***



**\*\*\*Due to uncertain health, Pastor Joe and his physician daughter, Melissa, do not believe he will be able to attend on January 14, 2024.**

**Those wishing to send him greetings may do so at:  
1400 Montego, Apt 340, Walnut Creek, California 95498.**

**EDITORS NOTE: *This wonderful narrative was submitted by Ellie Brooks. Thank you Ellie!***