

Zion Lutheran Church: 125 Years of Grace

A Century and a Quarter of Blessing

On Reformation Sunday, October 25, 2026, Zion Lutheran Church of Kerrville celebrates 125 years of worship, witness, and service. It began in January 1901 with seven charter members, a borrowed building, and a young pastor who walked 25 miles to reach his first call. Today Zion is a congregation of hundreds, with two sanctuaries, a Children's Center in its seventh decade, and a long record of caring for its neighbors.

This history draws on the congregation's own records: Robert Saenger Sr.'s handwritten recollections for the 35th anniversary, Church Council minutes dating to 1909, the centennial history compiled in 2000, and 25 years of annual reports. Across every era one thing holds steady. In the words Pastor Ermisch sent home for the 40th anniversary, "People have changed; but the Head of the congregation and His Gospel have not changed: Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."

Before the Beginning, 1885 to 1900

By the late 1890s Kerrville was a busy town of about 1,400 people, soon to be known as the Wool and Mohair Capital of the World. It had no public place of worship until 1885, when Presbyterian Mrs. Whitfield Scott led a drive to build the Union Church, a \$190 frame building shared by several denominations at Main and Clay streets.

Many German families lived in the area, but they did not attend English-language services. As Robert Saenger Sr. later wrote, many English speakers assumed the Germans "had no religion whatever," when in truth they simply could not understand the sermons. A Missouri Synod pastor tried to gather them in 1897, but the effort stalled when nearly every man present refused to give up his lodge membership.

Rev. Johannes Michael Haag of Cave Creek held a service in the Saenger home in 1898, attended by the Saengers and five others. Then in 1900 the Iowa Synod sent a newly ordained graduate of Wartburg Seminary, Rev. Karl Ermisch. Warned he would face hard work in Kerrville, he set out on foot and walked the 25 miles to his assignment. He preached his first sermon on August 5, 1900, in the Baptist Church, and by Christmas the congregation was ready to organize.

The Early Years, 1901 to 1929

Pastor Ermisch was installed on January 20, 1901, in the newly repaired Union Church, and Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church became a mission congregation of the Texas Synod. The charter members were Robert E. Saenger Sr., Carl Martin Heimann, Heinrich Ehlers, Heinrich Nuernberger, Johann Boeckmann, Johann Westenfelder, and Pastor Ermisch. Their families brought 14 children, so a Sunday School began at once, led by Saenger for more than 20 years. The first baptism was month-old Harry Louis Mosel on March 17, 1901.

The young pastor walked to preaching points in Harper, Sisterdale, and Turtle Creek, and once won a footrace against two members on the way home. When he finally got a horse named Button, it threw him on the road from Harper and galloped home alone, sending a worried search party out to find him. They met him “in good spirits, a few scratches on his face and his spectacles broken.”

After Ermisch left in 1902, Zion was served for a decade by pastors riding in from Comfort, Albert, Doss, and Harper, with services once or twice a month. Rev. Bartholomew Schleifer arrived in 1912. Lots at Sidney Baker and Barnett were bought in 1913 for \$300, and businessman Charles Beitel paid the last \$60 on the spot. Zion's first church, a frame building with twin towers and 12 pews, was consecrated on September 10, 1916, at a cost of \$1,793. Captain Charles Schreiner donated the bell, which still rings today.

In August 1918, during World War I, the Kerr County Council of Defense urged Zion to make English its language. The congregation agreed, though German services continued for years. Pastors Ludwig Nikolai and Walter Wolf served Zion from Harper through the lean 1920s, when members voted to turn off the lights and water unless rates came down. By 1929 the congregation had raised enough to build a two-bedroom parsonage beside the church, and with it came Zion's first resident pastor.

Building the Foundation, 1929 to 1952

Rev. Walter Carl Probst Sr. arrived in 1929, and his call came with one condition: he had to be married. He wed Adele Pfluger on June 2, 1929, honeymooned in a cabin on the Guadalupe, and moved into the new parsonage. His starting salary was \$400 a year. He would serve 22 years, the longest pastorate in Zion's history, and the congregation grew from about 40 members to 284.

The Probsts carried Zion through the Great Depression. In 1933 there was not enough money for salaries, and Probst offered to serve for whatever the congregation could raise. The family kept a garden behind the parsonage to make ends meet. Mrs. Probst later recalled driving home from Harper with the children, finding homemade sausages left in the car by a grateful member: “The Lord will provide and He did.”

The era brought lasting firsts. Women gained the vote in 1929. A Junior Mission Band began in 1935, and Zion became one of the first Lutheran congregations in Texas to offer individual communion glasses. E.E. Saenger became the first elected Church Council president in 1936. A parish house went up in 1937, and the Brotherhood organized in 1940. After Pearl Harbor, the congregation resolved in January 1942 that all services would be held exclusively in English.

In 1945 Zion voted to become self-supporting, ending decades of mission board aid. A second church, a stucco building seating about 250 with a bell tower, was dedicated on December 3, 1950, at a cost of about \$45,000. Member Erich Riesel forged the cross atop the tower and climbed up to set it himself. Zion members also helped found Camp Chrysalis that year. When Probst accepted a call to Bartlett in 1952, more than 300 people attended the farewell, and both of his sons became Lutheran pastors.

The Growing Years, 1952 to 1975

Dr. G.S. Kuhlmann, a Texas Lutheran College professor, served from 1952 to 1958. In 1953 Edna Griggs and Elvira Brehmer proposed a half-day Christian kindergarten, the seed of today's Children's Center. The Wende property next to the parsonage came to Zion as a gift from Mrs. Augusta Wende, and the Wende House would serve the congregation for decades.

Rev. Clarence Ehler arrived in 1958 and stayed 16 and a half years, during which membership grew from 427 to 645. On June 26, 1960, Zion burned its building notes ten years ahead of schedule. The Building for Christ campaign followed: a new education wing and a remodeled, stone-faced church were dedicated in November 1961, and 1,500 people toured the open house. A full-time parish worker, Bobby Menix, was hired, and the half-day kindergarten restarted as the first of its kind in the county.

In 1967 a custom 16-rank Reuter pipe organ was installed, with council members helping lift it into place. Many called it the finest organ in Kerrville. Zion also reached beyond its walls. Pastor Ehler led the first service of a new congregation in Bandera in 1965, and Zion gave the young Grace Lutheran Church its communion set, windows, and Erich Riesel's wrought iron altar rail. In 1972 the congregation dedicated a Zion cabin at Camp Chrysalis.

Two Luther Leaguers held high office in 1970: David Ehler as district vice president and Chris Jarvis as national president. That same year youth gained the vote when the voting age was lowered to the age of confirmation. Pastor Ehler resigned in 1975 to become full-time chaplain at the Kerrville VA Medical Center.

Forward in Faith, 1975 to 2000

Pastor Glenn Bundy served from 1975 to 1978, and the nation's bicentennial in 1976 took the place of a 75th anniversary celebration. Pastor Will Bigott joined as visitation pastor in 1977, and more than 85 members took the Bethel Bible Series. Pastor David Lilley arrived in 1978, and the two pastors shared the ministry as Zion passed 500 members. That year Zion bought the Community Christian Church building at Clay and Barnett, which became the Zion Lutheran Preschool Center.

Pastor Henry Schulte came in 1983 and launched an intern program in 1985, bringing seminarians such as Luke Bowman, who designed the church's logo. The Building on the Past for Tomorrow campaign raised more than \$563,000, and a new education and office wing was dedicated on May 21, 1989. That same year lightning burned the Children's Center, yet the staff moved all 81 children into the Fellowship Hall the following Monday. A new center opened that December. In December 1986 the congregation approved the merger that created the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and in 1990 Pastor Schulte was elected bishop of the Southwestern Texas Synod.

Pastor Douglas McBride arrived in 1991 and led what he called "an unprecedented period of growth and development." The building debt was retired in 1992, the Christian Counseling Center opened in the Wende House, and Pastor Steven Qualben served as associate pastor for youth from 1993 to 1999. The Vision for the Future campaign raised more than \$800,000, and ground was broken for a new sanctuary on October 17, 1999.

On October 29, 2000, the congregation gathered at the old church and processed to the new one singing This Is the Day. They carried a baptismal certificate signed by Pastor Ermisch in

1901, the earliest communion ware, and the old altar book. The new 400-seat sanctuary of Arkansas ledgestone and stucco holds 33 stained glass windows by IHS Studios of Fredericksburg.

A Second Century Begins, 2001 to 2008

Zion marked its 100th anniversary with four Jubilee Sundays in January and February 2001 under the theme Faith Alive! A Century of Blessings. Former pastors and sons of the congregation returned to preach, and the new sanctuary was dedicated. The Sunday School children collected 37,096 pennies, more than one for every day of Zion's first century, for Russian seminary scholarships. Council President John Miller Jr. wrote, "We have the facility, the staffing and enthusiastic members ready to continue proclaiming the Gospel for our second century."

Pastor McBride retired in July 2001, and Pastor Ron Walter served as interim. Pastor David Chancellor began his ministry on April 1, 2002. When floods struck Kerrville that July, Zion helped every member whose home was damaged and gave seed money to the new Kerr Interfaith Disaster Response team. The Stepping Up for Tomorrow campaign of 2003 helped cut the sanctuary debt in half within five years. In the early 2000s Zion added a contemporary service, led by the new Zion Lutheran Praise Team, and it continues every Sunday in the Chapel today. Screen projection arrived in 2003, and live broadcasts made Zion the only Hill Country church on television on Sunday mornings. Attendance rose to about 350.

In 2005 the congregation voted to leave the ELCA and join Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). The final vote came on Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2005, 154 to 30. That same year the old sanctuary and fellowship hall were renovated, and its balcony ironwork was saved and displayed. New ministries followed: a rotational Sunday School, a prayer shawl ministry, a deaf ministry, and youth mission trips to Arizona, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Mexico. Pastor Chancellor concluded his ministry in 2008, and Pastor Donald Rauhut served as administrative pastor through the interim.

Debt Free and Reaching Out, 2009 to 2022

Pastor Michael Williams was installed on August 30, 2009, at a Super Sunday service held with the church picnic. In 2011 the congregation paid off the sanctuary mortgage and burned the note, and the stewardship report announced in capital letters: "WE MET BUDGET AND PAID OFF OUR MORTGAGE!!" Pastor Mike wrote, "When God says 'Yes' to a congregation anything is possible." That year Zion also supported Springs of Grace, a new LCMC mission in Dripping Springs, and sent relief to two Lutheran churches in Bastrop after the wildfires.

Pastor Mike's vision turned Zion outward. New traditions took root: the Cowboy Service beginning in 2010, Next Gen youth services, Trunk or Treat, and a Festival for the Lord neighborhood picnic first held in 2013. The picnic later moved to Carver Park as a shared celebration with Barnett Chapel and Mt. Olive Baptist Church. In 2013 Kathryn Chapman was honored for 62 years of teaching Sunday School, and in 2014 the oldest member, Gert Crooks, turned 100.

On June 26, 2016, lightning struck the church, destroying the sound boards, cameras, projectors, phone system, and fire alarm. Worship moved to the old sanctuary until September while the campus received new metal roofs, LED lighting, and media equipment. The aging steeple was removed in 2017, and a new cross was installed on the sanctuary front in 2019. Zion marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017 with a ten-week sermon series on the Augsburg Confession and festival services with brass.

In March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic made Zion “an online only church” for the first time in its history. Worship went out by radio, television, Facebook, and YouTube, and Easter 2020 was a drive-in service in the parking lot, with “lots of honking!” The church and Children’s Center kept every employee on full pay. As Pastor Mike reminded the congregation, “the church is not a building, it’s people!” Office secretary Judy Sharp retired in 2021 after 24 years, and Pastor Mike retired in August 2022 after 13 years, staying on to preach through Christmas Day.

Renewal and Resilience, 2023 to 2026

Pastor Caleb Williams was called by a vote of 102 to 5 and installed on April 16, 2023. The next two years brought rapid growth: 40 new members in 2023 and about 160 in 2024, with Sunday attendance back to levels not seen in a decade. New ministries multiplied, among them worship at Mo-Ranch and Schreiner University, Haircuts for the Homeless, Zion Recovery, the ZMOB men’s group, the Holy Casserolers, a youth praise band, and the first Reformation Fall Festival. In July 2024 Zion hosted the 15th LCMC Texas District Gathering.

The campus was renewed as well. The original sanctuary, now called the Chapel, was restored with new carpet, paint, and altar rails, and its original altar was returned. After a 2024 hailstorm, every roof on campus was replaced, almost entirely through insurance. The Children’s Center earned Texas Rising Star Level 3 certification.

The congregation entered 2025 in a season of unexpected pastoral transition. Lay leaders, the council, and guest preachers kept worship going until Pastor Bobby Vitek, newly retired from Holy Ghost Lutheran in Fredericksburg, arrived as interim pastor that spring. A Call Committee led by Shelby Balser was elected on June 29, 2025.

Then, on July 4, 2025, catastrophic flooding swept the Guadalupe River valley. Zion became a hub of relief. Members carried supplies to first responders in Hunt and Center Point, and the Flood Relief Committee distributed more than \$357,000 from LCMC churches and donors nationwide. Gifts went to every volunteer fire department and to 29 households in need. Pastor Vitek told the congregation, “Zion Lutheran Church has shown that you are a resurrection people.” As one member put it, “It was humbling to receive hugs and tears of gratitude for something as simple as a shovel.”

In June 2026, after a year of faithful interim ministry, the congregation called Rev. Dr. Timothy Sternberg as pastor. He leads Zion as it celebrates 125 years and begins the next chapter of its story.

Ministries That Shaped Zion

Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Sunday School met every week from 1901, even on Sundays with no worship service. Alta Bridges taught for 25 years and remembered

classes around the potbellied stove in the first church. Kathryn Chapman began assisting as a teenager and was honored in 2013 for 62 years of teaching. Vacation Bible School grew into a community event, drawing more than 100 children from 11 churches by 2000.

Music. Music has filled Zion since the Saenger family's twilight songfests drew neighbors to their porch. Edna Saenger Griggs served as organist for decades and taught many young organists free of charge. The 1967 Reuter pipe organ was rebuilt into a pipe and digital instrument for the new sanctuary in 2000. Hand bells were dedicated in 1985, and the Zion Lutheran Praise Team has led contemporary worship since the early 2000s. Judy Johnson, who began leading the choir in 1992, was honored in 2019 for 50 years in music ministry.

Women of the Church. The Ladies Aid organized in 1915 and met in homes, with dues of ten cents. Its members painted the first church, paid down debts, fed visiting choirs, and baked hundreds of dozens of cookies. Today's Women of the Word continue Bible study circles and quilt for Lutheran World Relief, often more than 100 quilts a year.

The Brotherhood and men's ministry. The Brotherhood organized in 1940 and lent its hands to countless projects, from the Bandera altar rail to the Camp Chrysalis cabin and a trike trail for the Children's Center. Freddie Hannemann cooked the Easter sunrise breakfast for 20 years. That spirit lives on in today's ZMOB.

Zion Lutheran Children's Center. From the 1953 kindergarten of 14 children grew a state-licensed center that now serves families from 18 months through pre-kindergarten. It survived a 1989 fire and a pandemic, and in 2026 it is in its 64th year.

The Altar Guild, the Quilters, and more. The Altar Guild, organized in 1951, has prepared communion and decorated the sanctuary for every season. The Zion Quilters, begun in 1980, gave nearly \$16,500 from their stitching toward stained glass, the kitchen, and the Children's Center. The Chrismon tree, the white lights outlining the church since 1993, and the Christian Counseling Center founded in the Wende House in 1992 all reflect the same care for neighbors.

Pastors of Zion

These are the pastors who have served Zion, from the founding mission years to today.

Years	Pastor	Notes
1898	Johannes Michael Haag	Preached before Zion organized
1900 to 1902	Karl Ermisch	Organized Zion; installed January 20, 1901
1902 to 1912	Simon Zettner, Heinrich Kupfernagel, Friedrich Muerdter, Carl Stadler, Dietrich Meyer, C. Paul Leonhard	Served from Comfort, Albert, Doss, and Harper
1912 to 1918	Bartholomew Henry Schleifer	Built the first church, 1916
1919 to 1925	Ludwig Nikolai	Served from Harper

Years	Pastor	Notes
1925 to 1929	Walter Otto Ludwig Wolf	Served from Harper
1929 to 1952	Walter Carl Probst Sr.	First resident pastor; longest tenure
1952 to 1958	Gerhard S. Kuhlmann	
1958 to 1975	Clarence Calvin Ehler	Building for Christ; Bandera mission
1975 to 1978	Glenn L. Bundy	
1977 to 1982	William Frank Bigott	Associate pastor
1978 to 1983	David Lawrence Lilley	
1983 to 1990	Henry Schulte	Elected bishop, 1990
1990 to 1991	John Warren Auer	Interim
1991 to 2001	Douglas Hugh McBride	Built the new sanctuary
1993 to 1999	Steven J. Qualben	Associate pastor for youth
2001 to 2002	Ron Walter	Interim
2002 to 2008	David C. Chancellor	Zion joined LCMC, 2005
2008 to 2009	Donald Rauhut	Administrative pastor; later assisting pastor
2009 to 2022	Michael Williams	Mortgage paid off, 2011
2023 to 2024	Caleb Williams	
2025 to 2026	Bobby Vitek	Interim
2026 to present	Rev. Dr. Timothy Sternberg	Called June 2026

Sons of the congregation who entered the ministry: Donald Luckemeyer, Charles Dudley Probst, Walter Carl Probst Jr., Marcus Bigott and Billy Frank Metting.

Into the Next Century

For 125 years Zion has been built by ordinary people giving what they had: a \$60 check for the last of the lots, a pot of coffee warmed on a wood stove, a cross set by hand atop a bell tower, pennies counted by children, and shovels carried to flooded neighbors. The buildings have changed three times and the language of worship once, but the mission written into the first constitution in 1901 still stands: “to glorify God, and to help in the extension of His kingdom among men for their salvation.”

As the congregation said at its centennial, Zion moves forward “realizing that it has been truly blessed to be a blessing.”



125th Anniversary Celebration
Zion Lutheran Church
1901-2026 *Kerrville, Texas*