A Faithful Witness:

St. Mark Lutheran Church Celebrates 147 Years of Ministry

Shared by The Rev. Wanda Childs



On June 7, 2026, members, former members, pastors, friends, and neighbors gathered for one final worship service at St. Mark Lutheran Church in Willis, Virginia. The Service of Leave-Taking marked the conclusion of 147 years of faithful ministry while giving thanks for the countless lives shaped by this small rural congregation.

Tracing its roots to 1879, St. Mark was built through the vision, sacrifice, and devotion of generations of families in the Willis community. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, and weekly worship formed the rhythm of congregational life for nearly a century and a half. The church became more than a building; it was a place where faith was nurtured, neighbors became family, and God's love was shared through ordinary acts of worship and service.

For many decades, St. Mark partnered with Zion Lutheran Church in Floyd, sharing pastoral leadership, ministries, and traditions. Together the two congregations served their communities, and supported one another through seasons of joy and challenge. In recent years, as many rural congregations have experienced declining membership and changing demographics, the two churches grew even closer, worshiping together while discerning the future of St. Mark's ministry.



In January 2026, after much prayer, conversation, and careful discernment, the St. Mark Church Council announced the difficult decision to close the congregation. While acknowledging the grief that accompanies such a decision, members also recognized the many blessings of their shared ministry and expressed deep gratitude for generations of faithful witnesses who had gone before them.

The final worship service reflected the many people whose ministries have shaped St. Mark through the years. Former pastor Rev. Paul Pingel returned to preach, while former pastor Rev. Linda Motley participated in the liturgy. Current pastor Rev. Wanda Childs presided at the service, and Assistant to the Bishop Rev. John Wertz led the Service of Leave-Taking, offering prayers of thanksgiving and

commendation as the congregation entrusted its ministry to God's continuing care. Former member River Smith, who now serves on the Virginia Synod Council and leads the Virginia Synod LGBTQIA+ Inclusion Thread for Tapestry, offered a moving solo, reminding those gathered that the faith nurtured at St. Mark continues to bear fruit far beyond its walls.

The service was not simply an ending but a celebration of God's enduring faithfulness. Hymns were sung with full hearts, Holy Communion was shared one final time, memories were exchanged, tears were shed, and gratitude filled the sanctuary. It was a day of both farewell and promise, honoring the past while entrusting the future to God.



Although St. Mark's ministry as a congregation has come to a close, its legacy continues. Many members now worship with Zion Lutheran Church in Floyd, where familiar friendships continue and new ministries are taking root. The faith planted by those who built and sustained St. Mark for nearly 150 years lives on in the lives of those they nurtured, in the community they served, and in the ongoing mission of the church.

The story of St. Mark reminds us that the Church is never defined only by its buildings, but by the people whom God calls together. Congregations may complete one chapter of ministry, but God's story is never finished. We trust that the One who was faithful to St. Mark for 147 years will continue to lead God's people into new chapters of ministry with hope, courage, and grace.