Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church at 1200 W. 11th in Liberal is in the process of opening a child care facility. Pastor Andrew Wehling said the church building should be ready for such use by the day after Labor Day. L&T photos/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

Earlier this year, Liberal's First Baptist Church announced it would be closing the doors of its day-care facility, leaving a gap in the community for many local families.

In September, another Liberal church will help to partially fill that void when it opens a new child care center.

Providing care for youth is not new to Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, as the building has been used for such purposes throughout much of its history.

“For five or six years, we had a preschool and kindergarten through sixth grade,” said GELC Pastor Andrew Wehling. “That eventually stopped. We couldn’t keep enough kids in enrollment to keep it going.”

Another preschool later opened at the church, and in the 1990s, Head Start began renting the building. That agency did so until January when Head Start officials decided to consolidate all locations in a building near Billy’s Blue Duck BBQ in north Liberal.

Wehling said this left GELC with a great facility which had been used for preschool.

“The question for us was what are we going to do with this,” he said. “How can we use it best, or what would be the best use of it not only for our congregation but for the community as well?”

Wehling said after the First Baptist announcement, plans for child care at his church were somewhat sped up.

“We made a decision in June to offer a child care to the community, not a preschool,” he said. “As we talked with parents, we heard that the primary need is child care. Maybe down the road, we can do preschool, but to start with, we’re going to go with child care ages 3 through 5. We’re starting small and starting simple.”

Wehling said the plan at present is to provide child care for a maximum of 24 kids.

“Once you hit that 24 number, the state radically increases their requirements for your building,” he said. “They want a code footprint. They might come back and say, ‘You need to do major

renovations.' There's a big unknown there, so we decided to go ahead and start at 24 or under."

Wehling said GELC officials could later choose to bring in more children, and they can then proceed with state requirements.

"We feel our building is ready," he said. "We've got a playground ready. We've got the equipment. We've got the sun shelter, all of this that Head Start had already been using. Everything is here that we need."

Wehling said Grace Evangelical is looking for two full-time employees, one of whom would be a director, and a part-time employee.

"We are striving to open by the day after Labor Day," he said. "It would be a Christian child care. It would be faith-based. It would include Bible stories. It would include Christian holidays being observed. It would include weekly chapel services for the students in our sanctuary. We would be open 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday."

Wehling said budget has been set up for the child care facility.

"Currently, we are planning to charge $125 a week per child," he said. "The church is contributing the use of the building rent free. The renovation that will be required to get it started and the furnishings, we're in the process of pulling that together."

Wehling said the primary concern at this point is finding a director.

"We're in the process of interviewing four right now over these next couple weeks," he said. "Applications are still available on our Web site or by calling the church. It's not too late to apply, but we are in the process of interviewing right now. Once we get that done, we can have a director kind of help us as to exactly what furnishings and so forth he or she would want."

GELC is located at 1200 W. 11th in Liberal. Applications are available at www.gracelutheran-ks.org or by calling 624-5900. The deadline for applications has been extended to Wednesday, July 24.