

THE HISTORY OF
CHRIST EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
EDEN PRAIRIE, MINNESOTA:
A REASON FOR PRAISE, A PATTERN TO FOLLOW

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The history of our only church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota is both interesting and exciting. It is interesting because by looking at the history of this congregation one can see the wisdom of God directing man's hand and it is exciting because, in the opinion of this writer, it is one of the best examples we have of carrying out the Great Commission. For those reasons, as we examine the history of this church, we will find in it both a reason to praise God and a pattern for us to follow in furthering the growth of his kingdom.

The Lord's hand was present already at the birth of this congregation, although some might not have thought so. A combination of factors came together at the same time so that this church was born.

The first of those factors was the desire of Bloomington Lutheran Church to do something special to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary of existence. Bloomington Lutheran had begun as a daughter congregation of Pilgrim in Minneapolis. The pastor of Pilgrim at that time, Roman Palmer, was said to have a unique and some say uncanny ability to recognize places where a congregation would flourish. Pastor Palmer was reported to have put some of his own personal money into the birth of Bloomington Lutheran, despite the fact that he was also head of the Mission Board at that time. Apparently, the Mission Board did not agree with his view of Bloomington at that time. This fact would prove to be an interesting parallel later. Pastor Palmer's vision of Bloomington as a fertile mission field had indeed

proven correct and twenty five years later, in appreciation for the Lord's blessings that had been showered on that congregation during those years, the idea of a daughter congregation of their own was born.

The second factor that fit favorably into this picture was the calling of Pastor Mark Liesener to Bloomington Lutheran in 1973. Pastor Liesener seemed to be the right man at the right time at the right place. He had started his ministry in North Platte, Nebraska following his assignment there from the Seminary. North Platte was a struggling mission congregation and being in this situation gave Pastor Liesener the idea that he would like to start his own mission congregation. After spending some five years in North Platte, Pastor Liesener accepted the call to the Christ the Lord in Brookfield, Wisconsin. Here he had the opportunity to start a mission congregation under the auspices of the mission board in Sussex, Wisconsin. Here was born the desire to start a daughter congregation somewhere where one could conceivably begin a church without the red tape that accompanies the usual method of beginning a mission. When he received the call to Bloomington, that desire became a reality.

The final factor involved was the right combination of laypeople. At the time Pastor Liesener arrived in Bloomington, there were problems with the Christian Day School. Good problems, but they were problems none the less. When he arrived the school had an enrollment of 160 children served by seven teachers. The problem was that all of this was happening in a four-room school. Due to its location, the school was not able

to be expanded and land was relatively difficult to come by in the eastern part of Bloomington. For two years the church rented a public school but still continued to look for land to build a larger school to meet its needs. All of this attention on the school put the idea of starting a daughter congregation on the back burner for Pastor Liesener. That is, it did until a member called him and asked why the congregation couldn't build a school and start a daughter congregation at the same time. After, that particular phone conversation took place, the idea again started to take shape.

The community of Eden Prairie was chosen because of a number of key factors. An important factor was the fact that there were ten to twelve families who were members at Bloomington Lutheran who lived in the Eden Prairie area. Eden Prairie is approximately fourteen miles from Bloomington Lutheran Church. Those families would give the new mission a built-in nucleus. More important was the inkling that Eden Prairie was going to be the next suburb of Minneapolis to explode in terms of population. At that time, Eden Prairie was not a suburb but a member of Bloomington, Mr. Arvid Schwartz was working for Group Health, a medical services corporation and was sometimes involved in land acquisition. Through his connections in City Hall, he had discovered that Eden Prairie was the next municipality to be connected to the water and sewer system. Together with this was the study done by Dayton Corporation, a Minneapolis based department store that said that Eden Prairie was bound to grow by leaps and bounds and to back it up. built a shopping center in Eden Prairie with its department store as a anchor store.

Bloomington Lutheran thus had a number of favorable indications that this city was going to grow.

Thus Bloomington Lutheran, or more specifically, Pastor Liesener and his vicars began conducting exploratory services in the community of Eden Prairie. They first met in the cafeteria of the public high school. They then moved services to the Eden Prairie Health Center and then to a small strip mall along the main highway in Eden Prairie, Highway 169. In the meantime, Bloomington Lutheran had built their school seven miles west of the church on the west side of Bloomington and approximately seven miles from Eden Prairie. They then began to use the new school for worship.

While this was going on, the members of a Bloomington Lutheran who were on a committee specifically formed for beginning this daughter congregation were involved in a search for land. After numerous conflicts with zoning ordinances and developers, they finally located the present site which appears to be ideal, at the intersection of County Road 4 and State Highway 5 in the heart of Eden Prairie.

The exploratory work continued to go on with less than the full approval of the Mission Board at that time. Eden Prairie was not a field that they had chosen to do work in at that time. Bloomington offered the mission board the "deal" that they would underwrite all of the costs incurred with running this exploratory venture for four years. If it turned out to be a viable mission, they would turn it over to the mission board, if not, it hadn't cost them anything. This was turned down for the

stated reason that other congregations had had grand schemes of doing the same thing but had run into financial difficulty. When that difficulty occurred, the congregations would often wind up abandoning that mission and the Mission Board was left to pick up the pieces.

Another deal was offered to the mission board as well. Bloomington still owed \$125,000 to CEF for their school. They offered the mission board the option that if they would turn that 125,000 over to the Eden Prairie congregation, they would run that mission. This was also turned down as the policy of CEF was that you had to wait your turn and Eden Prairie was not the next in line to receive CEF money. In both instances, the decisions made on behalf of the mission board seem to be rather foolish but that is an evaluation made on the basis of hindsight. Despite that fact, the congregation continued to grow.

In a way, the decisions made by the Mission Board at that time seemed to be just the beginning in a comedy of errors. By 1978 Pastor Liesener and his vicars had been serving the congregation for about two and a half years and planned to do so for another year before they would request a man to serve the field full-time. It seems that in the spring of that year, there were again more candidates graduating from the Seminary than there were assignments available. The Director of the Board for Home Missions at that time, Norm Berg, had knowledge of the Eden Prairie congregation, but he had not received a request for a candidate to be assigned to that field. Despite that fact he submitted Eden Prairie as a name for assignment. Candidate W. Paul Brinkmann was assigned there. Pastor Brinkmann said that

this situation had him facing a rather difficult reception as the new pastor of the congregation.

Despite the confusion, the Lord again placed the right man in the right place at the right time. After working on his own for about a year, Pastor Brinkmann was frustrated because he didn't know exactly how to proceed. Because Bloomington hadn't expected to be handing the reins over to someone else, the transition was less than smooth. In the midst of his frustration, Pastor Brinkmann received a telephone call from Pastor Liesener. After they discussed the situation for awhile, they decided that they would conduct a kind of "shared ministry". Pastor Brinkmann exchanged pulpits at Bloomington with Pastor Liesener and his vicars. He also taught evangelism at both congregations while Pastor Liesener taught stewardship at both congregations. There were a number of pluses to this method of doing things. The former members of Bloomington made the transition to Eden Prairie more easily since they still had contact with their former pastor. Both pastors in their evangelism calling were able to offer the people they visited two different kinds of congregational situation, both a young mission and an established church. The people could make their choice as to which they felt more comfortable with. Eden Prairie also did not have to concern itself with a Christian Day School. They were just as close to the Bloomington School as the majority of the members at Bloomington. The shared ministry at this point was a real benefit to both congregations.

During Pastor Brinkmann's time at Eden Prairie, 1978-1983,

the congregation grew from 46 souls and 34 communicants to 132 souls and 80 communicants. In 1981 a worship-education-fellowship facility was erected. At this time the shared ministry concept was in full swing with Bloomington. By 1982, the congregation was able to eliminate operating expenses from the support it received from the Synod and went to interest-subsidized status.

In 1983, Pastor Brinkmann accepted a call to Resurrection Lutheran Church in Milwaukee where he and his family moved over the summer. In September, Pastor Gregory Lenz and his family moved from Ann Arbor, Michigan to serve at Christ Lutheran. He was installed on October 2 of that year.

Once again the hand of the Lord was guiding the placement of the men working in his harvest field. Pastor Lenz was not inclined to join in the shared-ministry concept. He felt that independence was necessary for the congregation in Eden Prairie if they were going to continue to grow. The population growth in Eden Prairie and the corresponding growth of the church indicated that an expansion of the facilities for worship would be necessary. In 1984, the congregation had 173 souls and 107 communicants. Plans were started in that year for the expansion.

That expanded facility was completed in 1986. The new worship facility was designated as a Phase IIB chapel and was connected to the existing W/E/F unit. This was a distinctive design. It had a long sloping roof and was designed so that one wall was of temporary construction. This was so that that wall could be removed and that the existing space for worship, at present 2400 square feet, would be doubled and the addition would

be a mirror image of the present layout. For additional information confer Appendix 1.

In that year, 1986, the congregation numbered 226 souls and 146 communicants. At that time, it was the first congregation in the Minnesota district to move out of its W/E/F unit. It was also experiencing unprecedented growth for the missions at that time.

At the time of this writing, the congregation numbers 276 souls and 184 communicant members. The congregation is also in the planning stages of competing the addition to their chapel. The Lord is still guiding them and still blessing them.

We have seen why there is reason to praise the Lord for Christ Lutheran church in Eden Prairie but let's reexamine the pattern there is to follow.

I believe that there were a number of factors which contributed to the success of this mission. First of all, it was begun as a daughter congregation. There are a number of things involved with this. First of all, Bloomington Lutheran had begun as a daughter congregation and at the time she undertook to venture in Eden Prairie she was only 24 years old. It was and still is a congregation with a zeal that is relatively hard to find in other congregations of its size. It is similar to the zeal of a new convert to the church. Very often, they are the ones who are the most effective at carrying out the Great Commission because of that great zeal.

Secondly, as a offshoot of an existing congregation, the field that was chosen was chosen through the insights and

knowledge that comes from the connections of proximity. The people who developed the idea into a reality knew the community of Eden Prairie and knew the demographics of the Twin Cities area. It is difficult to estimate how much that played a part but it only stands to reason that they would have better knowledge of where a congregation would grow.

Thirdly, the fact that the nucleus for the new congregation came from the mother congregation helped the people at Bloomington Lutheran to take ownership of this new mission. It helped for people who were members of a larger self-supporting congregation to be involved in the struggles, disappointments, joys and successes involved in the beginning of a new mission. As a result, there was a ready-made group of people to do the initial, time-consuming, nitty gritty work of initial canvassing of the community and follow-up calls. This also saved the Synod some time and money because a man who was already being supported by a congregation was doing the brunt of the work at the start. The Synod therefore did not have to spend the money at that time to build or rent housing and pay a man to do the initial work in the area.

Perhaps the most important factor to add into this plan that might be a pattern to follow is the shared ministry concept. Not only did it allow, in this instance, a man from the Seminary who had been trained as a pastor to do some of the work of a pastor rather than just that of a missionary, but it allowed the period of adjustment necessary for the nucleus who had previously been under the spiritual care of the mother congregation.

An incidental blessing from this arrangement was the

excellent training that it must have been for the vicars involved in those congregations during those years. Not only did they have the usual contact with a well established congregation and its programs, but they were also involved with the beginning of a mission. That experience is probably one of the best that a vicar could hope to have.

All of these things combined in Eden Prairie, Minnesota to produce a congregation that ranks near the top in terms of percentage growth. It took them a relatively short period of time to progress from mission status to interest-subsidized status and soon hope to be self-supporting. These things are reason for us to praise God in heaven above and may also be a pattern for us to follow so that more may join us in praise of our God in heaven. To God be the glory.

This paper was written from interviews conducted with Pastor Mark Liesener, currently pastor at Bloomington Lutheran, Paul Brinkmann, who is serving as the Development Director at Martin Luther High School in Greenfield, Wisconsin, Pastor Greg Lenz of Christ, Eden Prairie and Mr. Arvid Schwartz, a member at Bloomington. Statistics are from the District Convention Proceedings of the Minnesota District the years 1976-1986. The present statistics of the congregation are from the Statistical Report of 1989.

Appendix 1

