

A Journey of Faith:

An Analysis of the Relocation of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kiel, Wisconsin

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12/13/04

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven...a time to tear down, and a time to build.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,3b) In 1997, these words from Solomon may very well have been on the minds and hearts of the members of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kiel, Wisconsin. The congregation found itself at a crossroads in its ministry of the Gospel in Kiel. The pastor who had served them for twenty-two years would soon leave to serve in the mission fields of Malawi. It would be some time before Trinity had another shepherd to lead them. It was time for reevaluation, a chance for the members of Trinity to redefine and clarify, for their own sake, what their purpose for existence as a Christian congregation was. In the midst of the congregation’s reassessment of its mission and goals, an opportunity arose, an opportunity that was not seized and realized until seven years later. This document seeks to outline the progress of that journey of faith.

Already in early 1997, the thoughts of some of the members were drifting toward the long-range planning of the congregation. At the annual meeting in January, a discussion was held on future long-planning for the congregation. The church council was directed to discuss it in detail and then bring recommendations before the voters.¹ The minutes are silent as to whether any recommendations were brought in 1997. Any ideas that were being contemplated were most likely put on hold when Rev. Richard Warnke took a call to Malawi towards the end of 1997. But even as he left, Rev. Warnke had words of encouragement for the future of Trinity, offering the suggestion, “When the new pastor arrives, the congregation will want to give serious consideration to utilizing the service to help in establishing goals for Trinity and in designing

¹ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 1997 Annual Report, 2.

plans, under God, to meet those goals.”² The service that Rev. Warnke writes about is the Parish Assistance consulting service that the Synod offered. In December 1997, several members attended a workshop which gave them information about the service.³ It was decided to wait to utilize the service until a new pastor would come.⁴

Even though the congregation was in a holding pattern, an opportunity arose. The Land Committee, charged with evaluation of the land the church was on and with identifying possible new sites if the need arose, came upon a land offer they felt compelled to share with the congregation. Over the course of 1997, two parcels of land near the church had become available, but they had been, “determined not to be in the best interest of Trinity to acquire.”⁵ Now there was a parcel of land, some acres of farmland southeast of town. In late 1997, they were still waiting on a price. They would have to wait even longer to put the purchase to a vote while they undertook the task of calling a new pastor.

The first call was extended on January 28th, 1998. It was extended to Rev. John Carter, who declined. A second call was issued on March 12th to Rev. Bruce Janisch, who also declined. April 23rd marked the third call, Rev. William Mayhew. The fourth call, issued on June 7th to Rev. David Laabs, was finally accepted. Over the six-plus months of the calling process, little progress was made in pursuing the purchase of new land. With the relief of knowing there would be a shepherd to lead them, the members of the Land Committee felt confident to once again bring their recommendation before the congregation. A special voters’ meeting was convened on

² Ibid, 5.

³ Ibid, 5.

⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁵ Ibid, 12.

July 19th to discuss their report.⁶ There was some support for the purchase, so a motion was made and carried to look into payment options and to have another meeting in a week to vote on whether to buy the land.⁷ That meeting took place as scheduled. Now was the time for the congregation to make its choice. Should it buy the land, and then begin thinking about the future plans of the congregation, or should it wait and set some plans and goals for the congregation first so it would know if it really needed to move? The motion was made and seconded to buy the land. With thirty-three voters present, the tally was eighteen to fifteen to wait.⁸ For the time, the voices advocating a move seemed to be silenced. The Land Committee didn't even file a report for the 1998 annual report.⁹

Even though thoughts of moving had to be put on hold for a while, there was still activity in the congregation and a new face to get to know. Rev. David Laabs had accepted the call. He was installed on August 23rd.¹⁰ Already in his initial assessment of the congregation, Rev. Laabs realized that there were great opportunities for ministry. He also recognized that Trinity seemed to need some help identifying and prioritizing its future ministry needs and goals. While not saying that the then-current facilities were insufficient, Rev. Laabs directed the congregation to begin thinking about its future already in his first pastor's report: "We need to continue to look at our facilities to see that, in function, they can support the ministry that we plan to carry out."¹¹ With the help of Rev. Laabs, Trinity began to do just that.

⁶ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 1998 Annual Report, 6.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁹ Ibid, 17.

¹⁰ Ibid, 8.

¹¹ Ibid, 9.

One of the first steps in that process was the formation of a long-range planning committee, which held its first meeting in October 1998.¹² In its early meetings, it was doing the work of organizing itself and identifying the areas of ministry it would study. More than just a study group for building and moving, its subcommittees included mission and program, outreach and membership.¹³ The last few weeks of 1998 were spent developing a mission statement for the committee, which read, “The mission of the long-range planning committee is to use God’s divine guidance to identify future needs and to promote spiritual and physical growth within Trinity Evangelical Church.”¹⁴ They would be charged with the task of formulating a mission statement for the entire congregation.

Meanwhile, the life of the congregation went on. Work was still being done to maintain the facility they were using. But, very slowly, some things started to change. One of the changes was establishing regular quarterly voters’ meetings.¹⁵ Previously, voters’ meetings had not been called unless there was specific business to vote on such as membership changes. While these small changes were going on, momentum was beginning to build for doing something regarding the congregation’s facilities. Even though the long-range planning committee was still working on goals for their subcommittees, Rev. Laabs and some members were openly speaking about the future of the facilities and the need for some sort of action. In his 1999 pastor’s report, Rev. Laabs writes, “I believe that we must act quickly to begin specific planning to improve and expand our facilities if we are going to seize the opportunities that God is placing before us.”¹⁶

¹² Ibid, 11.

¹³ Ibid, 12.

¹⁴ Ibid, 11.

¹⁵ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 1999 Annual Report, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

At this point, the focus of the congregation was still on its current facility. In 2000, while the long-range planning committee was holding informational sessions on call procedures, the Building and Repairs Resource Committee was advocating some redecoration inside the church and an update to the sound system.¹⁷ But as the year 2000 went on, it became more and more apparent to the long-range planning committee and others that something in the way of facilities expansion needed to be done. Even as the principal Terry Paul took a call and the process for calling a new principal began, the move toward change was undeterred. A mission statement for the congregation was finally established and adopted, "It is the mission of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church of Kiel, Wisconsin, to SHARE the Good News of Jesus Christ, to TEACH people to obey what God has commanded, and to GROW in God's grace according to His word and command."¹⁸ Along with that mission statement came a goal and a proposal that was presented and accepted at the annual voters' meeting in January 2001.¹⁹

The proposal that was made and accepted was to expand the facilities in some way. To help determine what the best way to do that, the long-range planning committee interviewed Hoffman Corporation, "a design and construction management firm headquartered in Appleton."²⁰ The member of the Hoffman Corporation who worked with them was Martin Sell, a registered architect and WELS member at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Beaver Dam. Over the next months, Mr. Sell conducted an analysis of the facilities. His report was presented at the quarterly voters' meeting held on April 29th, 2001.²¹

¹⁷ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2000 Annual Report, 10.

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2001 Annual Report, 1.

²⁰ Martin Sell, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church and School Report and Analysis for Long Range Planning, 2.

²¹ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2001 Annual Report, 2.

The report listed strengths and weaknesses of the current facility and then offered pros and cons and cost estimates for each of available options. Among the strengths were: a strong and growing congregation, an established day school and pre-school program, good buildings and a prominent location in Kiel, and all the facilities were located on a single site.²²

Then came the weaknesses, listed as challenges in the report. First, there was a lack of space for educational programs. As a result of growth in enrollment, new classrooms had been needed. At the time of the report, the building was set up so that one had to walk through one classroom to get to another. Mr. Sell refers to the classroom situation as “cobbled”.²³ Another challenge was lack of outdoor space for playground and for parking. Located in downtown Kiel, Trinity had become landlocked by the properties surrounding it, limiting the space for expansion. Another major concern was traffic flow in the building and on the site. One of the traffic flow issues inside the church was the narthex. According to Mr. Sell, the current rule of thumb is that the narthex should be at least one-third the size of the nave to be an effective space for fellowship and movement.²⁴ Trinity’s narthex was less than one-tenth of the nave. The other traffic flow issues mostly had to do with stairs. There were stairs in the chancel that members had to climb to commune; there were stairs to climb down to get to the church offices which were in the basement; there were stairs inside the building to get from level to level. There was “no way for handicapped persons to go from one floor level to the other without going outdoors.”²⁵ In the final analysis, it seems as though the space was in reasonably good condition and very well utilized, there just wasn’t enough space to do everything the congregation wanted to do.

²² Sell, Trinity Lutheran Church and School Report and Analysis for Long Range Planning, 8.

²³ Ibid, 6.

²⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵ Ibid, 6.

So building options were presented to the congregation. At the time of the report, one of the commercial buildings adjacent to the church property was for sale. So two of the options presented to the congregation involved the purchasing of the property. One option was to purchase the building, and remodel it and the church according to need. This was the least expensive option and could be implemented in the shortest amount of time.²⁶ A second option was to buy the building to make it easier to build a new school building in that direction. This option also involved the removal of a parsonage located in between.²⁷ The pros for both of these options were that no moving was involved, and they were relatively less expensive. But the cons to both of these plans were also very much the same. Neither plan addressed the playground needs, the parking needs, of the problems associated with the different floor levels.²⁸

The third option was to move. For the first two options, the list of pros and cons was fairly balanced. But when the pros and cons were listed for moving, the score was nine to two in favor of moving. The two cons listed were the high cost and the loss of history and tradition associated with the current site.²⁹ But Trinity wasn't ready to move yet. When presented with the options, a motion was made and carried to buy the building west of the church for \$100,000.³⁰ A fund drive was formed to pay off the expense. It was good practice for the months to come.

Even though the building had been purchased, the weight of the pros and cons of the moving option was still being felt. And so, at a special voters' meeting in February 2002, Trinity passed the Church/School Relocation Recommendation by a ballot vote of 51 to 7.³¹

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁷ Ibid, 11.

²⁸ Ibid, 11.

²⁹ Ibid, 11.

³⁰ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2001 Annual Report, 2.

³¹ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2002 Annual Report, 2.

Now things began to move very quickly. Everyone realized that wherever they moved to, it was going to take a considerable amount of money to accomplish their goals. So another fund raising drive was passed, and in April it was approved to go with Resource Services, Inc. as the capital fund raising firm.³² Since it was acknowledged that this endeavor was a journey of faith, that was chosen as the theme of the capital fund drive. Members quickly subscribed to the program, and already by July there were 40-50 members in leadership positions within the drive.³³ They were ready to start when the resolution for the capital fund drive passed in October.³⁴

October also marked the acquisition of the property that would become the new home for Trinity. Dan and Ruth Kuester donated a 10-acre parcel of farm land almost directly across the street from the parcel that had been considered in 1997 and 1998. The land was approved for use in November 2002.³⁵ By then there were 140 members enrolled in Trinity's "Journey of Faith".

Now that the funds were beginning to come in and the land was picked out, plans had to be made for what kind of new facility would be built. This was the goal of 2003. By April, twelve different architects had been interviewed for the project. In May, Jim Pankow, Inc., a design-build firm from Plymouth, Wisconsin, was chosen to design and build the new facility. By July, proposed plans for the project were promised to be coming soon.³⁶

While the plans were being put together, the congregation began to deal with what to do with the old facility. The first building to be put on the market and receive an offer was the office building purchased in 2001. Other buildings remained on the market longer.

³² Ibid, 2.

³³ Ibid, 3.

³⁴ Ibid, 4.

³⁵ Ibid, 4.

³⁶ Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church 2003 Annual Report, 4.

By the time September came around, plans were ready to go forward. The capital fund drive was well under way, the land and the plans were in place, and all that was needed was a resolution to begin construction. That resolution came on September 21, and ground was broken a week later on the 28th.³⁷

The construction phase ran very smoothly with over 7,000 hours of volunteer labor contributed to bring down costs.³⁸ Included among the members who volunteered their service in the building phase were a roofer, a ceramic tile layer, a ceiling specialist, a mason, an electrician, and landscapers.³⁹

Construction continued through the winter of 2003 and spring of 2004. During the winter months, a special enclosure was constructed on the roof so that shingles could be warmed for installation.⁴⁰ The cornerstone laying ceremony was held on July 25th, and the first worship services were held on Sunday, August 15th.⁴¹ The dedication service was held on October 3, with synod president, Rev. Karl Gurgel, as the preacher and special musical guests from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.⁴²

To fully understand the history of this move, I conducted interviews with different members of the congregation who were instrumental in the motivating for, planning for, and carrying out of this project. I wanted to get their perspective on how difficult it had been to set goals for their congregation and to achieve those goals. These next pages, then, are a condensation of the perceptions of the members of Trinity who led that journey of faith.

³⁷ Ibid, 5.

³⁸ Our Journey of Faith: Dedication Service Worship Folder, 5.

³⁹ Ibid, 5.

⁴⁰ Journey of Faith Commemoration Video.

⁴¹ Our Journey of Faith: Dedication Service Worship Folder, 5.

⁴² Ibid, 11.

The first thing I asked members to reflect on was why the land purchase in 1997 was voted down. Most of the responses mentioned the congregation not being quite ready for such a decision. Dr. Gene Tipler, a member for about twenty years, spoke about how quickly that opportunity came about. It came as a sort of a surprise and there was a rush to make a decision.⁴³ According to Mr. Richard Rahmlow, a member of the Facilities Subcommittee of the long-range planning committee, when they found out about the opportunity, they had about three weeks to make a decision.⁴⁴ Rev. Laabs added that another church was interested in the property, and the Kuesters, as members of Trinity, wanted to give the congregation the first chance at the land.⁴⁵ Even with the rush, the vote was almost split evenly at 18-15. Mr. Rahmlow commented that given a different group of voters (some were absent from that meeting) that the purchase could very well have passed.⁴⁶ But without more time to consider all the ramifications of such a decision, the members felt they couldn't go forward yet. Jerry Vandermause, a member of the building committee, saw, as he looked back, the Lord's hand keeping them from something they were not yet ready to do.⁴⁷

Eventually, the Lord's hand guided the congregation to realize that it was ready to do something. So what tilted the scales in favor of moving and starting over instead of staying and remodeling? At first the congregation was divided almost down the middle.⁴⁸ But as the options were weighed and the bottom financial lines became almost identical, it was apparent the money couldn't be the determining factor in the decision. According to Mr. Tipler, the report

⁴³ Audio Interview of Dr. Gene Tipler conducted 10/14/04.

⁴⁴ Audio Interview of Mr. Richard Rahmlow conducted 10/28/04.

⁴⁵ Audio Interview of Rev. David Laabs conducted 11/17/04.

⁴⁶ Audio Interview of Mr. Richard Rahmlow conducted 10/28/04.

⁴⁷ Written Interview of Mr. Jerry Vandermause conducted 12/1/04.

⁴⁸ Audio Interview of Mr. Richard Rahmlow conducted 10/28/04.

from the consultant in April 2001 went a long way to determining what the course of action would be.⁴⁹ Some of the members, especially those of the long range planning committee, had already come to the conclusion that moving was the best option. The challenge, and so to their credit that it was accomplished, was for the committee to convince the congregation as a whole to look far enough in advance, to do something that would benefit the congregation for years to come instead of taking an intermediate step, only to have the issues of space and location to come up again in about ten to fifteen years.⁵⁰

As the consensus built over time, things began to move along. But this didn't mean that there were no obstacles to overcome along the way. A major hurdle was the amount of money required for such a project. In the 2001 consultant's report, the estimated cost for relocating church and school could run anywhere between two to three million dollars.⁵¹ For a congregation of approximately five-hundred communicant members, this was no small undertaking. It also took some time for consensus to be built. In part, the capital fund drive was begun before any vote was taken so that those who were concerned about the congregation's commitment to pay could see that there was broad-based support for the move.⁵² Once the decision was made, the last hurdle to overcome was the planning. No major hurdles were encountered in the building phase of the project.⁵³ The only hurdle left would be to say goodbye to the old facility.

So how hard was it for the congregation to let go of its home, a building it had worshipped in since 1919?⁵⁴ It seemed to differ depending on whom one was asking. Even some

⁴⁹ Audio Interview of Dr. Gene Tipler conducted 10/21/04.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sell, Trinity Lutheran Church and School Report and Analysis for Long Range Planning, 11.

⁵² Audio Interview of Rev. David Laabs conducted 11/17/04.

⁵³ Written Interview of Mr. Jerry Vandermause conducted 12/1/04.

⁵⁴ Trinity Lutheran Church Facilities Survey, 1.

members who had belonged to Trinity for twenty, or even thirty years, seemed to find it not too difficult to leave it behind, realizing that great opportunities for ministry were waiting for them at their new facility. Most remarked that those who had grown up and gotten married in the old facility had the hardest time letting go, but that these members were also ready for the future.

So what impact has this process had on the current ministry of Trinity and what implications does it hold for the future? At this recording of history, the answers are still a little vague. A few things have been noted, and a few are on the horizon. The most often reported benefit to this project was the stronger bond it forged among the members of the congregation. It allowed people to show their common bond of unity in the Gospel by working together.⁵⁵ The amount of volunteer man hours given to the project is a fruit of faith remembered often. Dr. Tipler summarized it well by saying that the congregation grew closer, the members reevaluated their commitment to the congregation, and it focused the congregation as a whole on its mission.⁵⁶ The challenge now, as Rev. Laabs noted in his interview, is to find the best way to use this new space to carry out Trinity's work of sharing the message of salvation in Kiel.

How do you eat an elephant? This was the question put to the members of the newly-formed long range planning committee at its first meeting in October 1998. The answer? One bite at a time. And that's exactly how, through God's grace, this project was completed. The patient waiting for the right time, the consensus building, the careful planning, and the building were all little bites of the bigger meal, little steps along Trinity's journey of faith. The next years will, by God's grace, allow Trinity to take more steps, to grow in faith and ministry through the preaching of the Gospel in their new facility.

⁵⁵ Audio Interview of Mr. Richard Rahmlow conducted 10/28/04.

⁵⁶ Audio Interview of Dr. Gene Tipler conducted 10/21/04.

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