

FOX VALLEY LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOL

A STUDY OF THE PROCESS RESULTING IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
THE SCHOOL DEDICATED ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2000.

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In 1946 Lutherans living in the Fox Cities area at the north end of Lake Winnebago had few options for the Christian schooling of their children once they finished elementary school. Public schools were an option, however, this would mean that the children would not be taught the pure Word of God as part of the curriculum. Winnebago Lutheran Academy was in existence in the city of Fond du lac. This, however, was a difficult commute in the times just following the second World War, which meant that students from the Appleton area wishing to attend there would need to use it as a boarding school. To try to solve this problem, discussions began in 1946 to open an area Lutheran High School of both the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. When the two synods split in the early 1950's, the decision was made to make Fox Valley Lutheran a school of the WELS.

When Fox Valley Lutheran High School opened for its first school year in 1953, it consisted of one full-time teacher and eight students. At that time the school did not even have its own building. The facility, which FVL used until it could have a building of its own, was the former Jefferson Elementary School. The Appleton School District had discontinued the use of this school and had abandoned the building. The lease price agreed upon between the city of Appleton and FVL was \$1 per year.

Ground was broken on August 5, 1956 at the site where Fox Valley Lutheran High School would operate from 1957 - 2000, at the corner of what is now Northland Avenue and Oneida Street in Appleton. The school opened its doors to students in September of 1957.

The process which brought about the new Fox Valley Lutheran really began only five years before the doors of the new facility opened to students in August of 2000. In 1995 "Challenge 2000" was written up as a vision document for the school. The purpose of this document was to assess the needs of the school for the coming years. Challenge 2000 showed

that the school would need extensive remodeling as well as additional land to expand the facility. A Site Selection Committee was selected for the purpose of purchasing additional property for sports facilities. At the time, Fox Valley Lutheran had approximately 13 acres to work with and the committee was looking to purchase an extra 20-30 acres. The old facility was located on a corner of a busy intersection and was bordered on the other two sides by houses and businesses making it somewhat limited in terms of potential expansion. Upon further examination, it was determined that at least forty acres should be acquired to facilitate the needs which the school would face in the future.

Land was not the only issue which needed to be overcome. The school itself was by this time over forty years old. The building would need to be remodeled in the future to allow Fox Valley Lutheran to continue to operate effectively. The cost of this remodeling was estimated to be many millions of dollars, and it was possible that the remodeled school would still be insufficient. Paul Hartwig, the principal of Fox Valley Lutheran during this period notes:

We needed at least 40 acres to expand our facility and needs for athletic fields, we had no modern auditorium, our heating system was ancient, our wiring for our computer system was hodgepodge at best, our roof needed about \$150,000 of repair or total replacement—the list goes on and on—and we estimated that we needed a remodeling and additional plan of about \$5 million dollars.¹

With the expected needs for the future, the need for a new facility, and the fact that adequate expansion at the old site would be very difficult, if not impossible, the decision was made to look at the possibility of purchasing a new site and building a new school. The search was on for a new site.

¹ Hartwig, Paul, interview by author, 13 November 2003, e-mail interview, Appleton, WI.

Initially, eight different sites were looked at in the area around Appleton. The majority of these sites were located to the north or to the west of the city, as these areas would be able to provide sufficient space and a suitable location for the envisioned school. From these eight possible sites, the field was narrowed down to three, all of which were located north of Appleton.

At this time, an interesting offer came from an unexpected source. When the Appleton Catholic Education System (ACES) learned that Fox Valley Lutheran was looking for a different site on which to build a school, they approached Principal Hartwig to inquire whether Fox Valley Lutheran would be willing to sell the facility it was using at the time to the ACES to be used as a middle school. Having received the nod to look into the viability of such a deal, Mr. Hartwig began to meet with members of ACES to see what might be worked out.

As this was taking place, a local donor stepped forward with a generous offer. The local businessman indicated he would be willing to donate \$600,000 to Fox Valley Lutheran for the purchase of a new site upon the condition that the school “would seriously begin negotiations with ACES”² in trying to come to a deal on selling the school to the Catholic organization. Mr. Hartwig informed the members of the Fox Valley Lutheran Federation of Churches of this offer. This federation consisted of the group of churches which supports Fox Valley Lutheran in its work. The Federation granted Mr. Hartwig authorization, with the aid of a lawyer, to begin the negotiation process with ACES for the sale of the property which was being used at the time. These negotiations took place during 1997. A price of eight million dollars was finally agreed upon for the sale of Fox Valley Lutheran’s facility located at the corner of Northland Avenue and Oneida Street.

During the course of the negotiations with ACES, the effort had begun in earnest to finally decide on the appropriate location for the new school. This became all the more urgent

with the deal which was now struck with ACES over the sale of the old facility. ACES had agreed to buy the school upon the condition that they would be in possession of the old facility by June of 2000. The new school would need to be started very soon, and that meant, first of all, the Federation needed a place to build.

Of the three sites to which the field had been narrowed for the building project, the current 63-acre site was chosen. The committee assigned the task of investigating possible sites rated this site most highly. The land belonged to the Wilbert Rahmlow family. Negotiations began with the family for the purchase of the 63-acre farm on which the school now operates. It was now the early months of 1998, and the new school was only a couple of years away from opening its doors to welcome in new students. Despite this, there was still a tremendous amount of work to be done before the actual building of the new school would even take place.

Things seemed to have been moving along quite smoothly. A good site had been located on which to build the school. Fox Valley Lutheran had actually found a buyer for its old facility, which was an interesting situation in and of itself. However, as in any large project involving lots of people, there are plenty of roadblocks which one must negotiate to reach the destination.

The site which had been decided upon was the Rahmlow farm, located just to the north of Appleton. It was a suitable site as it had plenty of space (63 acres), good visibility, and easy access, as it was located just off a main county highway and was not surrounded by the congestion of a city. At the same time, the proximity of the school to Appleton was still near enough so as not to require excessive commuting time.

As Fox Valley Lutheran was negotiating the price for the acquisition of the land, Mr. Rahmlow died. The negotiations continued with the sons of Mr. Rahmlow. This posed a bit of a delay in that the price had to be renegotiated. Obviously, with ACES wanting to take possession

² *Ibid.*

of the old Fox Valley Lutheran facility by June of 2000, time was of the essence in coming to an agreement. A final price of \$775,000 was agreed upon. Mr. Hartwig recalls coming to this agreement “with them [the sons] and Mrs. Rahmlow on a Saturday afternoon sitting in the farmhouse on the site.”³ Fox Valley Lutheran now had a property on which it could build its new school and still have room for any needed expansion.

The site had been purchased, but the challenges were far from over. One of the basic procedures which had to be undertaken was to obtain approval from the DNR to build on the site. The land had been farmland for many years. Now the plan was to build a new, large school on the site. This would change the landscape of the area greatly. Soil testing had to be completed and the plans for the new school had to be approved by the DNR so as not to negatively disturb the surrounding countryside. This was of special concern as the new school was to be located very near to Apple Creek, a tributary of which runs through the site of the new school. All of the tests were completed and the DNR approved the site plan.

As ideal as this new location was, there was one drawback. As mentioned above, a positive quality was the fact that it was located just to the north of the city of Appleton. It was close to the city, but still enough in open country as to not pose a problem with too much congestion, which had been a bit of a problem at the old facility. The difficulty arose in that it was not actually in the city of Appleton, but in the town of Grand Chute. Such a large school would obviously need to have the use of city sewer and water services. This meant the site and the surrounding area would need to be annexed to the city of Appleton. This meant conflict.

Annexation to Appleton would mean higher taxes as well as a high level of cost since the city would now be bringing in new water mains and sewer to the vicinity. Approval of such a major move would require authorization from those living in the area who would be affected by

³ *ibid.*

the change. Of those whose approval was needed to go ahead with this annexation, many were opposed. It was early 1998 and the clock was ticking.

The job of convincing the neighbors of the then future Fox Valley Lutheran fell to Mr. Hartwig. As noted above, many did not want the school to be built on this farmland site. They would have preferred it to remain as it was. An open forum was held at the Grand Chute town hall with 280 residents in attendance. Instead of merely trying to convince the residents of the needs which Fox Valley Lutheran High School was facing, he decided to show them first hand.

I spoke to about 280 of them [residents of Grand Chute] at a Grand Chute town hall forum and invited them to visit our old school while it was in action, and some of them did. They told me that changed their mind. Others opposed the annexation into Appleton, and it was hard to convince them otherwise. Many wanted the site to remain farmland, but other developers were hoping to purchase the site for development.⁴

Principal Hartwig met with all of the neighbors to talk the situation over. One of the neighbors filed for a vote on it. There were twelve people at that time who were eligible to vote on the annexation needed to go ahead with the project. Of these twelve, eleven cast their vote. The vote passed in favor of Fox Valley Lutheran for the annexation of the area to the city of Appleton. The decision was not unanimous, however. The authorization for annexation passed with six votes in favor of annexing the land, and five opposed. Appleton could now install the water and sewer system on the site which would allow work to begin.

Once this process had been completed, the next few months required numerous meetings, including many Appleton City Council meetings, to take care of all the necessary negotiations and plans which needed to be thought through to make it all happen. The list of issues included in these discussions is large. Included in this list were municipal services, appropriate water

⁴ *ibid.*

pressure to the site, basins for storm water, police services, fire services, as well as numerous other considerations which had to be taken care of.

Now that everything had been cleared, preparations for the actual construction could take place. This would end up being an enormous project, and everything would need to be coordinated well so that there would be no delay in getting the school finished, as it needed to be operational in approximately two years.

Since we had so many Federation contractors involved in the bidding process, we let out bids for each area from masonry to finish carpentry. We reviewed more than 400 bids for various areas, and selected each company and awarded them the bid. We did not use a general contractor, but hired a construction manager who oversaw the construction of the building. I served as the FVL representative and worked closely with the construction management firm. I met every day with them and every week with all the sub-contractors. I was at the site about every day of the process—splitting my time between that and work as principal.⁵

The man to whom the job was given to be in charge of the overall design of the new school was architect Michael Kadow. He was chosen to be the lead designer and Project Architect. Mr. Kadow had been named secretary of the Fox Valley Lutheran Board of Regents about a year before the major donor for the project mentioned above stepped forward with his generous offer. A 1974 graduate of Manitowoc Lutheran High School, he graduated from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning in 1979. He was more than qualified to fill the difficult position of being in charge of such a project. He was a senior architect in Somerville, Inc., an architectural and engineering firm in Green Bay, WI. Mr. Kadow was no stranger to working on large projects. He would also work on the renovation of Lambeau Field (a 295 million-dollar project) as well as working on the reorganization for the

⁵ *ibid.*

site of Bellin Hospital in Green Bay. Moreover, he was President of the Wisconsin Architects Foundation and a member of the American Institute of Architecture.

As a member of the Board of Regents, and with two daughters attending the school, this position was not without its pressure. Mr. Kadow remarks, "I could not afford at any time to err in judgment because I was so close to the school and the people involved."⁶ He also knew the future implications of the project in which he was taking part. "The stakes were very high also from the standpoint that my decisions would affect our federation for the next 75 years. My performance should be judged by others, however."⁷

As with the other steps of the project mentioned above, there was a great deal of planning involved and this would include many meetings with various parties to make sure everything was done correctly and on time. When it came to the design of the building, this task was even more difficult in that the school was not being designed merely for the present time, but an eye had to be kept on the future needs of the school as well. In recalling this time, Mr. Kadow recalls:

I personally met with the entire administration, faculty and staff of FVL, many times individually and sometimes in small group work sessions in order to glean the necessary input and develop the program statement, which is a listing of the space requirements including individual room square footages for the new high school based upon the defined present and future needs. It was determined to construct a prototypical high school for 750 students, which would meet not only the academic needs of the 21st century high school student, but also uniquely express a physical representation of our religious beliefs and our federation of area congregations...this was not to be just another high school...it was an opportunity to publicly witness our common faith and our emphasis on Christian education to the community at large through the architecture which I designed.⁸

⁶ Kadow, Michael, interview by author, 15 January 2004, e-mail interview, Green Bay, WI.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

It is difficult for one who was not deeply involved in such a project to fully understand all of the considerations which needed to be taken into account. To build a school which would be functional, meet all the necessary codes, be a viable facility for years to come, and to take into account the considerations of so many various individuals is no small task. Besides this, the architect even allowed for flexibility in the project. This flexibility would allow the school to be built within the budget which was available at the time as well as allow for other additions should the funds become available during the course of the building project.

The project needed to meet an established budget, yet be flexible enough to allow us to add pieces if fundraising efforts were blessed beyond our expectations. Some of these were: a bell tower above the entrance, a semi-circular welcome wall which included stones with each federation congregation's name incised, a secondary gymnasium which would allow the holding of simultaneous athletic events and practices, a plant and animal room, etc. By God's grace, almost all of these optional design features were able to be constructed. The building is designed to allow for additional classroom expansion.⁹

The year 1998 was the year of preparation. The negotiations with ACES had been completed and the old school had been sold. The Rahmlow property had been bought. The Fox Valley Lutheran General Board had approved the construction of the new school. Now the work of actually constructing the building had to begin. It was now 1999. According to the deal which had been made between ACES and Fox Valley Lutheran, the school would have to be turned over to ACES in about a year and a half. The new campus needed to be built and it needed to be built quickly. Ground breaking for the new school took place on March 21, 1999. Construction began the following month.

The project moved along at a very quick pace. As mentioned above, the school had to be built within the budget, which meant that the project had to be done well, but without any

⁹ *ibid.*

wasting of funds. Since the school was being built from scratch, there was a plethora of decisions dealing with design and function along the way. Among the concerns which had to be dealt with ranged from major design plans such as how to have an open commons area where the students could enjoy fellowship but without taking away the ability of the teachers to control any problems which might arise to how windows might be placed so as to produce the optimal lighting of certain rooms. The cornerstone of the school was laid on May 2, 2000. On June 14 of that same year the old school was turned over to ACES. Finally, on August 25, 2000, the new Fox Valley Lutheran High School opened its doors to welcome 605 students to a new school year in a new school. The dedication of the school took place on September 10, 2000.

Today, Fox Valley Lutheran High School stands as a monument to the many who labored in this work to glorify God with their abilities. The final cost for the school came in at just under \$18.5 million dollars. At the time of its completion, it was the largest single building project for a Lutheran area high school in the history of the Wisconsin Synod in terms of cost. Approximately two-thirds of the funds which needed to be raised came from individual donors and from the churches which made up the Federation. This left six million dollars to be borrowed for the project.

After all of the labor and all of the money which it cost to build the school, expectations were high once the doors were opened. So far, the school has lived up to those expectations. Today, Fox Valley Lutheran is able to accommodate up to 750 students. It sits on a beautiful 63-acre plot of land complete with a nature conservatory. The larger site serves the school well and will provide space for any necessary expansion in the future. What else does the school offer?

Computer technology in our building is cutting edge. All voice, data, and video are carried on the same digital wire throughout the building, a first in Wisconsin. It is the same technology as used in

main offices of Texas Instruments and IBM...FVL's auditorium offers theatre seating for over 900 for worship, performances and presentations. There is over 8 miles of wire in the auditorium alone. The custom cherry woodwork on the balcony and around the stage was a generous donation. The stage over the orchestra pit retracts for musical performances. An 18-foot long screen drops from the proscenium for video presentations.¹⁰

When asked about his thoughts on the comparison of the old Fox Valley Lutheran in comparison to the new, Paul Hartwig had this to say:

There really is no comparison. We are in a state of the art building, an excellent design, and people can't use the building as an excuse to not send their kids here. Everything is available on campus, from athletic fields, to practice fields, parking for 800 cars, tennis courts, a Fox Tail meadow [the previously mentioned nature conservatory], the list goes on and on. We don't miss the old school. What goes on in the building hasn't changed – a Christ centered education for teens.¹¹

Finally, it must be said that after all of these changes, Fox Valley Lutheran High School is still, at its roots, the same as it was back in 1953 when it first began. It is a school run by Christians who care deeply for the Christian young people who are enrolled at the school. In this school are teachers who have devoted their lives to teach young men and women the skills they need to succeed in the world. At the same time, and most importantly, these dedicated teachers bring the Word of God to their students on a daily basis. They impart to the students not only worldly wisdom, but also that knowledge which comes only from the Word of God revealed in the Holy Scriptures, which, as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:15, “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” This is the mission of Fox Valley Lutheran High School.

¹⁰ Fox Valley Lutheran High School, *Fox Valley Lutheran High School: Dedication & Open House, September 10 & 17, 2000*. Official Commemorative Program. (Appleton, WI: Custom Printing Corporation, 2000), 3.

¹¹ Hartwig, 2003

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