

Christ Lutheran Church Transition Team 2020 Year End Report

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Team Mission: The mission or goal of the Transition Team was to:

- Develop the story of our congregation's history, or roots.
- Explore the resources of our congregation and the mission we are involved in.
- Poll the members of the congregation and surrounding community in order to develop a vision plan for our mission into the future.

This vision plan will also recommend the type of pastoral call needed to achieve the goals of our new plan. At the completion of the vision plan, the Transition Team was charged to submit a report of our work and our recommendations to the Church Council.

At our first meeting of the Transition Team in February of 2020, we started to rough out a plan to reach our objective. From then on, COVID-19 became an obstacle that slowed our progress and eventually made it clear that how we do our ministry in the future will probably look different from this point forward.

Due to the pandemic, we started the process with a series of meetings via Zoom. We interviewed a number Pastors of various Lutheran Churches in nearby Minnesota. These churches had a history of struggling with shrinking memberships and finances, then through various methods of redevelopment again became vibrant and growing congregations. We met with the following Pastors (see notes from the various meetings):

- Lutheran Church of Peace, South Maplewood, Pastor Liz Eide
- Christ Lutheran Church, Marine On The St. Croix, Pastor Joel Martin
- Resurrection Lutheran Church, Woodbury, Pastor Paul Dean
- We also met with Trinity Lutheran Church, Stillwater, Pastor Chris Bellefeuille

We continued to have meetings with Rev. Erin Nelson, Director for Evangelical Mission, Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. This became a difficult time as we found ourselves confused with the changing landscape in the midst of this world-wide pandemic. Ministries around us were all but shut down, including Christ Lutheran Church. We struggled with the congregation to find a path that would become clear and guide us to our goals. During this time, we reached out to the Transition Team of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Burkhart, as they are going through the same process we are. We had a joint meeting of the two Transition Teams sharing information and talking about possibilities of a two-point parish. This appears to be a viable option for both congregations and something we may return to discuss further. We were also contacted by Faith Lutheran Church in Balsam Lake to talk about a two-point parish with them.

Our next step in the process was to poll the congregation as to what path we, as a congregation, are interested, or moved to pursue.

As part of this polling process, the Transition Team hosted a number of congregational meetings held over the next couple of months. The meetings were mostly on Zoom, but some were also made available for in-person discussions. Due to the desire to hear from our congregation on different topics, the meetings were organized as two separate series of presentations. The first series of presentations was led by Scott Wells and Paul Nasvik, titled “Living in an Ice Age”, and adapted from a presentation by Rev Laurie Skow-Anderson, the current Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. It was a discussion about how we should think differently if we are aware that our world is changing in a dramatic way. Do we plan our future differently if we are heading into a Blizzard, a normal Winter, or an Ice Age? We hosted three separate meetings on the following dates:

February 10, 2021 @7:00 pm on Zoom

February 16, 2021 @7:00 pm on Zoom

February 21, 2021 @11:00 am in the church and on Zoom (this was an in-person and Zoom meeting)

Minutes of these meetings are included.

The second series of presentations were held the following month (March 2021) and were powerpoint-driven discussions called “Holy Conversations”. This was a presentation from the ELCA that outlines what options we as a congregation can choose for our future Ministry. The Synod outlined the options available to us in a document entitled “Holy Conversations” which can be found here: https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.cloversites.com/0a/0a854394-3a19-4d9f-b1ae-f93021508921/documents/Holy_Conversations_Booklet.pdf

These meetings were critical for the future of Christ Lutheran Church, for our members and for our communities and much was done to allow as many people as possible to attend. At each meeting, a number of questions were presented to help each participant to think about what they want to see happen in their church, and discuss whether or not we have enough resources to achieve that vision. This was the list of questions that were presented for thought and response from anyone willing to answer:

Holy Conversations Questions:

What are the major challenges you are facing?

What are the bright spots of your ministry?

What are your hopes of the future?

Key Questions:

Use the following questions as a springboard for further discussion, answering each with a simple "yes" or "no."

1. Do we have a pattern of growth in attendance?
2. Will our trend of growth, plateau or decline allow us to thrive and develop ministry for the future in this place?
3. Can we maintain our own existence as a congregation and provide ministry in the community, synod, and across the ELCA?
4. Can we survive without some form of life support from bequests, special gifts?
5. Do we have sufficient numbers of people to volunteer for ministry within the congregation and outreach into the community?
6. Are new efforts in evangelism and Christian education feasible?
7. Are there sufficient funds and interested membership to do ministry within the congregation as well as outreach and evangelism into the community and world?
8. Are we experiencing the presence of first-time visitors on a regular basis?
9. Do they return for a second or a third visit?
10. Do 20-25% of our first-time visitors eventually join the congregation?
11. Is the congregation's main focus on outreach/evangelism?
12. Is the congregation striving to do more than trying to survive/keep the doors open?
13. Has the congregation grown in the last five years?
14. Do we have enough members to do ministry well?
15. Does giving in the congregation enable "Great Commission" work, or does most of the giving go towards maintenance and survival?
16. Are there young families active in the church?
17. Are the demographics (age, race, gender, etc.) of your congregation reflective of the community you are located in?
18. Has the congregation maintained a good level of stewardship including several families (10-12) who give faithfully to the congregation?
19. Is the congregation willing/able to adapt its ministry and lifestyle in order to develop the ministries that will meet the needs of a changing community?
20. Is the present facility physically adaptable for use?
21. Can the congregation afford the repairs that are needed to use these facilities for ministry?

- If you marked five or more answers No, we suggest you contact the Director for Evangelical Mission to discuss the trends that were revealed.
- If you marked eight or more answers No, this may suggest a serious condition of decline for your congregation. It is time to look courageously and honestly at your situation, and consider what options you have as a congregation.

As this was intended as a self-exercise for the participants, summary results are not available, but this process clearly confirmed to all that we as a church need to look honestly at our situation and consider the best options moving forward.

Questions:

What is our Purpose? Are we clearly living out our purpose?
Do we only exist to continue our beloved community and traditions?
What is the meaningful work God has given us to do now?
What gifts do we have to offer the community?

The final part of the Holy Conversations presentations went through the options that Christ Lutheran Church has available. Here is a brief description:

1. Choosing Transformation

- a. Full time Redevelopment Pastor
- b. Making significant change to current context from within to connect with God's mission.
- c. Options include: intentional vitality process, redevelopment, sale of building, and lay leadership.

2. Choosing Partnership

- a. Engaging in shared ministry with another congregation(s) for the sake of the gospel.
- b. Options include: yoking, merger, consolidation, and anchor church models.

3. Choosing Resurrection

- a. Embracing the end with belief in the promise that God is doing a new thing.
- b. Options include: closing and re-opening, word and service mission post and holy closure.

The final discussion of each of the second series of meetings reviewed these options. We answered questions about each of the possibilities and collected their comments. Our final question was: What option would you choose for the ministry of Christ Lutheran Church for the next 5 to 10 years? The follow-up question was: Would you approve of using monies from the Endowment Fund to finance the option you chose?

See the notes from the Holy Conversations meetings.

Breaking Down The Information Learned

The first thing we want you to understand is that with all of our efforts to get as many of our members to participate in these meeting, we were somewhat discouraged to have marginal

participation from the members of our congregation. We are very thankful for the members who did participate and the information they shared was critical for our purposes.

Pastor Interviews

In the beginning to the process, we interviewed 3 neighborhood church pastors. The messages that they shared with us were as follows:

- Find a Pastor with energy and has good preaching skills.
- Make sure your new ministry is committed to building strong community.
- Be creative, don't do things just because that is how you have always done things.
- Don't just rely on the synod for finding a new pastor. Be proactive, visit churches, and send a letter of call to a pastor you like. We don't have anything to lose.
- Don't do things that do not bring joy as a church volunteer.

Being involved in the community cannot be overstated. That was a key part of all of their congregation examples. The pastors working with all missions of the congregations worked to find ways to work community into all aspects of their churches. A common thread in this group of pastors was their redesign of Sunday School or Wednesday School. Another was finding new ways to create an enjoyable learning experience for families. All of the pastors mentioned that High School Youth seemed to be the hardest to engage; some have worked to keep that ministry going, others have put it on the back burner.

Our interviews took place at the beginning months of COVID-19 pandemic isolation and all of the churches were working as virtual ministries. It would be a good thing for us to follow up with them to see how they are doing, and how they are planning on coming out of the pandemic. They were all very gracious and were more than willing to help us with whatever advice they had offer.

Blizzard, Winter, Ice Age Meetings

We presented Blizzard, Winter, Ice Age four times in February. This was a good introduction to the bigger questions about the future of Christ Lutheran Church. The questions we asked involved personal feelings. Questions like: What they missed most about church? What are their fears of our current church situation? What would you like the future Church to look like? It became clear during these conversations that the Transition Team research happened at a critical time, as the reality of COVID-19 shutting down our church and isolating our congregation at a time when our membership and participation was dropping was obvious. There was a lot of fear shared that our church will not be able to survive the pandemic, and that we won't have the resources available to recover from the impact of our year of separation. The Ice Age presentation suggested that things may not ever be like they used to

be, but if we are willing to adapt, think creatively, and commit to a plan, there is a vital future for Christ Lutheran Church.

The participants realized that their Church has a place in the Somerset community and would be missed if it was no longer part of Somerset. Our members want a more community-involved ministry. A congregation that is more diverse. More younger families. Different music options, better video and sound options. More evangelical and mission driven ministries. These are things that Christ Lutheran has been involved for many years, but we need to change our standard way of doing things and find new ways to make them successful. The discussion over the four different meetings revealed a dichotomy that we are facing. Everyone wants the isolation to end and have things go back to normal. At the same time, everyone knows that if we want to survive, or better to flourish, we have to change and do things differently.

Holy Conversations

The final part of public input was the three presentations/discussions of “Holy Conversations.” This is where we eventually asked the following hard questions:

What are the major challenges you are facing?

What are the bright spots of your ministry?

What are your hopes of the future?

What is our Purpose? Are we clearly living out our purpose?

Do we only exist to continue our beloved community and traditions?

What is the meaningful work God has given us to do now?

What gifts do we have to offer the community?

These were difficult questions for many to think about and harder to answer, but they gave insight and direction to the questions that we have worked 14 months to finally ask.

- The most common response for the question “What are your hopes of the future?” were to be more community involved and have a vital and active congregation. If these hopes become important goals, achieving them requires a redirection of energies. It won’t be enough to have diners and parties, but a more intimate knowledge of who are our neighbors are and what we can do to serve them. Having a vital congregation means that the spirit of God is excited within us and we then become engaged in the mission that God has called us to do. That is going to take a pastor that’s so full of God’s energy that he infects the rest of us.
- The participating members all seemed to realize the situation we are in and there is a genuine desire to see this congregation move on to more fulfilling ministries. They want to see more active child education. They want the church full of members. They

want all kinds of members: young, old, and middle aged. They want to have a choir that reaches the congregation.

- The Transition Team made it clear that in order to choose some of the options available in the Holy Conversations guide, we would need to commit some or all of the Endowment funds. That created a challenging element but played with some of the members.
- The two-point parish option was popular because it had worked before and should work again. At the same time, most participants realized that it presented a less likely possibility of growing our membership. An interesting surprising thing was that the three of the four high school participants thought a two-point parish with Burkhardt seemed the best option even though they were challenged to explain how would the church grow and become a place people would want to be involved.
- The two possible options that resonated with the most members participating in the discussions were 1) bonding in some way with an Anchor Church, and 2) having a full-time Redevelopment Pastor. Both of these options require a commitment from the congregation, not just a financial commitment, but also commitments of time, talents and dedication to a defined mission. They will take years to show progress and it would probably require investing most if not all of the endowment funds. In the discussions about the choices, there was doubt that the NW Synod would have pastors with the skills needed to succeed and we would have one more pastor that hasn't made a difference and the security of the endowment fund will be gone. There is a lot riding on choosing one of these two options.

Transition Committee Recommendations

The members of the transition committee are all active participants of Christ Lutheran Church who have had committed involvement in the ministries of the church. Throughout this process, each of us have been challenged, confused, and prayerfully open to where God is leading us. Of the options available to us, a few were eliminated without any real consideration. Choosing Resurrection was considered too drastic and no one that we talked to felt that the Congregation was in such a dire situation that we should close the church. Similarly, selling the church was considered premature and a last resort. We have better options and more work to do then to give up. The other options that don't seem to fit at this time are: Lay-Led Ministry, Merging, and Consolidation.

The three options we spent a lot of time discussing as a Transition Team were "An Anchor Church Model", "A Redevelopment Pastor" and "Yoking, A Two Point Parish".

- A long part of the history of Christ Lutheran Church was a "Two Point Parish", and involved sharing a pastor with Redeemer Lutheran Church. This resonated with a number of our members who thought that it would be an easy transition as it worked before and should work again. When asked if they thought this would help the

congregation grow, there was hesitation. In this type of ministry, the Pastor has to be organized and be very good with people and there has to be a strong support group in the congregation. Congregational growth will be difficult if there are competing Churches with more resources available. Most participants didn't see church growth happening with this option, but it would be the easiest to move into.

- Redevelopment was attractive to number of participants as it gives the best path to accomplishing the goals of the Transition Team. It commits the congregation to a 3-to-5-year plan of redefining who Christ Lutheran Church is and commits us to a path of serving our neighbors and outreach to our community and beyond. This is also the most expensive alternative and requires an exceptional Pastor to make it work. Christ Lutheran Church does not qualify for a Synod Redevelopment Program, because of our proximity to area churches, but we could require our pastoral search process to search for a pastor with Redevelopment training or history. This would require the use of our Endowment Fund to finance a full-time Redevelopment Pastor. There was concern about getting a qualified pastor to serve in this role. Going back to our conversations with the three Pastors, we were told not to totally rely on the Synod for finding a pastor, and instead to go out shopping to check out churches and Pastors. If we find one we like, we can make a call. We do not have anything to lose by making an offer to a Pastor we like and we may be surprised at how many Pastors are interested in a good and challenging mission.
- The Anchor Church model was the other most popular option. Working with a nearby church to benefit from the strengths and resources of a larger congregation could bring instant energy and excitement to our congregation. There is no base plan that outlines how this option works. We would have to be an active participant to negotiate and working with the anchor church. We do not have a good understanding of how much this option will cost and the Synod was not able to guide us, but it is assumed that we would rely on at least some of the endowment fund.

The Transition Team recommends the following:

We recommend a two-point plan for our pastoral search process, to include work with the Synod and neighboring churches to identify potential options with an Anchor Church and, at the same time, interview and search for a full-time Redevelopment Pastor. Working with these two options gives us some flexibility and the ability adjust to what presents itself. The best of both worlds would be to find a pastor that we like and a congregation that we can partner with for joint ministry. But if we cannot find a pastor that we are impressed with or willing to take our call, then working with an Anchor Church may work until we find a Pastor of our own.