

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
St. John Lutheran Church – Dunlap, Iowa
Bethesda Lutheran Church, Moorhead, Iowa
Site Visit: September, 2006
Nancy Anderson, Case Study Researcher

INTRODUCTION

I cross the great Missouri River just outside Omaha and head north on I-29, meandering up out of the river valley on Hwy. 30 through Logan and Woodbine, eventually arriving in Dunlap, Iowa. The whistle of the train can be heard every 15 minutes and I soon learn to leave extra time to sit at the railroad crossing, counting cars and reflecting on the hope that came to rural America with the laying down of tracks. I turn east on Hwy 37, gradually ascending into the rolling hills and arrive in Moorhead, Iowa, gently nestled in the Loess Hills. Long before the Native Americans or Danish immigrants came to this land, the glaciers and southwesterly winds formed this spiritual landscape that reminds me of God's creative presence.

Yes, it is late summer in western Iowa where the morning mists rise up from the valleys, where the spirit of the immigrants still moves among the hills, where there are horse auctions and tractor rallies, where good-natured teasing is part of the culture, where tomatoes grow in cars, where sleepy towns.....wait, where tomatoes grow in cars? Yes, "where tomatoes grow in cars", says Pr. Carla, the energetic young pastor shared by Bethesda Lutheran Church and St. John's Lutheran Church as she describes the care extended to her in her first call to ministry. "I park my car and when I come back to it, there are tomatoes and other produce in the back seat," she says with delight at the little ways that people share their bounty with her.

St Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead (population 264) and **St. John Lutheran Church** in Dunlap (population 1,500), yoked in 1989, have shared a pastor since that time. There have been three pastorates and short interims since the yoking—Pr. Steve Solberg and Associate in Ministry, Marcia Solberg, who served as ministry team from 1989-94, Pastors Paul and Margo Fohs, a clergy couple who shared the call from 1994-2000, and the current pastor, Pr. Carla Ingebretson, a first call pastor serving both congregations since July, 2001.

Economic realities of the farm crisis of the 1980s, especially devastating in western Iowa, precipitated the yoked relationship. Each congregation decided that it could best minister to its people and community by sharing a pastor. "The first four years were pretty rough but now we

really work very well together,” said a long-time member of St. John. It appears the tension had less to do with sharing a pastor than reactions to a pastor’s authoritative style thrust upon the congregations. “Sometimes pastors come in thinking they’re going to change everything,” says an elder. “We have to help them see what is realistic.”

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Bethesda Lutheran Church – Bethesda Lutheran Church celebrated its centennial on February 5, 1995 with the theme “O God, our help in ages past; Our hope for years to come.” Two banners hang on either side of the altar bearing these words in the current church, built in Moorhead in 1948. Nearby is the refurbished song board listing the songs under Danish words which even the elders no longer speak. Nonetheless, it reminds them of their Danish heritage, of the immigrants who settled in the valleys close to water and the adversity endured by their ancestors in the late 1880s. Bethesda has its roots in the Ingemann Danish Lutheran Church built outside Moorhead in 1884 on 20 donated acres. The cemetery holds the stories of hardship and faith, none so heart-wrenching as the loss of six children in one family in thirteen days to the diphtheria epidemic of 1890. Even today as the story is re-told, the voice softens and tears well up in the eyes of a long-time member of Bethesda.

Ingemann prospered until 1895 when dissension arose and some families and the pastor left the congregation to organize Bethesda Lutheran. Land was purchased, money was raised, and each member was asked to donate one week of labor. The new church was built on a hill only a mile away, named Bethesda Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was organized according to the model constitution recommended by the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church and dedicated in 1897. Ingemann continued separately but by 1918 the congregation could no longer support a full-time pastor and services were held on a monthly basis. The last recorded baptisms and confirmation were in 1954.

At the same time Bethesda Lutheran prospered and grew, although they faced discord from within. From the Centennial booklet, “The very thing that had brought and knit this group together was now in part dividing them as there were new members who did not know Danish.” Therefore in 1925, it was decided to have English services twice a month and the final change to English occurred in 1926.

The tension of looking to the past, yet needing to look to the future was evident once again when, shortly after the glorious celebration of the Golden Jubilee in 1945, a Lutheran regional committee requested that Bethesda consider reuniting with Ingemann and relocating in Moorhead. At stake was the likelihood that a Missouri Synod church would be built in the growing community of Moorhead. “It was with heavy hearts but prayerful ones,” state the centennial history writers, that the decision to rebuild in Moorhead was made on August 29, 1946. Thus began another search for land, funds to be raised, and labor to be donated. The heavy timbers, Missouri River pilings used in the first church, were hewn and hoisted into place in the new church. The country church bell was brought to town to be built into the bell tower.

Today, on an August day sixty years later, the timbers are the first things pointed out to me on my tour. Fond memories are shared of Pr. Thomsen who led the congregation through this

difficult decision. “He wasn’t so much of a preacher, but he was the right person to lead us through those times,” recalls an elder. He remembers how Pr. Thomsen led them in worship on Sunday and then lent his hands to the construction along with everyone else during the week. He is also remembered for the stained glass windows at the front of the church, designed by him and installed by the congregation. “It was very hard, but, in the end, things turned out good. We grew and some people from Ingemann eventually joined the church in town,” an older member declares with a note of practical acceptance that difficult decisions have been made over the years. The foot print of the church on the hill is still visible but the grass has grown over it and a plaque stands in the cemetery remembering the charter members.

Every Memorial Day Sunday since 1978, Bethesda holds a special service at Ingemann Danish Lutheran Church to remember its roots and celebrate its history. “Whenever there is a rift or a split in a family, and especially within a church family, it leaves deep wounds. It took another generation of forgetting, forgiving, praying, and intermarriage between the two church families before healing could take place,” wrote centennial history writers. Documents describe how friends, families, and former members came to the memorial service and recalled the faith that sustained people through hardship, separation, sacrifice, reunification, and healing. “O God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come.”

St. John Lutheran Church – St. John celebrated its centennial in 1998. From 1895-1898 a group of Christian believers, most of German ancestry, gathered on Sunday afternoons and worshipped under the leadership of supply pastors from neighboring towns. In 1898, the congregation was organized as St. Johannes Lutherische Kirche. In 1902 this Lutheran group purchased a little red brick church built by the Baptists. The church grew and, by 1906, was incorporated as the Evangelical St. John Congregation. The congregation came on tough times as WWI reached back to this German community in Dunlap, Iowa. They abandoned worship in German and related in their history losing members to neighboring congregations. The congregation languished from 1914-1924 for lack of a resident pastor. By 1931, they left the American Lutheran Church to join the United Lutheran Church of America, Iowa Synod. There were periods of shared pastors from 1932 through 1948. At various times, St. John benefited from having students supplied by nearby Central Seminary in Fremont, Nebraska.

By the 1950s, St. John flourished and outgrew the little red brick church. Funds were raised by women serving food at farm sales and men rented an 80-acre farm for several years, raising cattle and produce for sale. Eventually these collective efforts resulted in enough money to buy property where the current church stands. By 1956, St. John hired an architect and made its dream of a new church come true. Ground was broken in 1958 and the church was dedicated almost exactly one year later on May 24, 1959. As recorded in the centennial history:

That day dawned clear and warm as the congregation met at 9:00 am at the little red brick church on Iowa Avenue and one member described it as a “most glorious day as we processed, and sang the two blocks north to the new church.” There were services at 10:00 am, 2:00 pm, and 8:00 pm with an estimated total attendance of nearly one thousand souls.

The 1960s and 1970s brought continued growth with increasing space issues. A committee formed in 1981 to evaluate options. Current members remember the congregation’s resolve to

not borrow money for the addition of the education wing and to build it only as the pledges came in. The featured speaker at the ground-breaking in 1984 was an Assistant to the Bishop who disagreed with their plans. He stated emphatically that “this method would not work and we would have an unfinished building on our hands for years.” This made the members more determined to see the project through. Three years of fund-raising (some of which continue to this day in the Shrove Tuesday Pancake Breakfast) resulted in the completion in November, 1987 of a debt-free building. Even today people remember this decision with great pride. “It was truly a labor of love, and the benefits of this labor went far beyond having a new building with more space. It strengthened the congregation and gave us new confidence to meet the challenges of the future,” was stated in the centennial history.

Bethesda Lutheran and St. John Lutheran are different in many ways, yet similar in how each of their stories give examples of dedicated people coming together, facing reality, rising to meet the challenges of the times, giving of themselves and resolving to move forward, expressed as “We just do it.” Most of what they “just do” is independent of one another. Even in suggesting that a meeting of the Call Committee be done jointly for my visit, the recommendation was to meet separately. “We just don’t do much together and each one has its own way of doing things,” states a member of St. John.

FIRST CALL

When faced with the departure of Prs. Margo and Paul Fohs in 2000, a joint Call Committee was formed comprised of the Bethesda Council and five people from St. John. “It was just hard to generate interest,” relates a St. John member, reflecting on the difficulty of finding people for this committee.

Both groups remembered how they were challenged by the Assistant to the Bishop to prepare a packet for the first call pastor coming to interview. Some recall the conversation with the synod staff person as a frank conversation, others as a rather harsh presentation of reality, reminding them of what they already knew about rural ministry in western Iowa – that the position could remain vacant for a long time. They only needed to look around to see the long vacancies or short pastorates in nearby churches. They were challenged to give a new pastor a reason to come there.

Regardless of the tenor of the conversation, the congregations responded in ways characteristic of their individual personalities. “I was endeared to these congregations before I ever came to interview,” Pr. Carla shared as she turned the pages of her scrapbook. A letter from Bethesda Lutheran written in first person as “the church on the hill,” tried to lure the expectant candidate with just enough information to leave her wanting to know more. “The church bell is ringing. It’s time to go,” wrote Bethesda Lutheran. The contribution from St. John took me back to when I was a child, when you interlaced your fingers and recited, “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people,” accompanied by a DVD with pictures – the women in the kitchen, the children in Sunday school, the church building.

The interview was set. With a clarity as if it were yesterday, members of the Call Committee recalled the interview. “We knew right away that Carla was the right one,” recalled a Bethesda

member. The sentiment was echoed by a St. John representative, “I just knew she was the one. There was something bigger going on.”

There was little discussion or argument on the Call Committee. The ground for a woman pastor had already been broken by Pr. Margo. The only point of debate and contention was determining the pastor’s salary. It was resolved seemingly without difficulty. Now five years later, they acknowledge that each of the congregations has taken its turn with financial hardship. “Bethesda had money in reserves at the time and St. John was a little more strapped. Now it is reversed. They are stronger and we are using up our reserves,” related a Bethesda Council member.

The call was extended and accepted by Pr. Carla, surprising people not so much because she accepted, but that their fears of a long vacancy were unfounded. Pr. Carla moved her belongings directly from Seminary and recalled that the St. John council president took time off to help move her into the parsonage, even down to the detail of putting together the beds – an act of care greatly appreciated by this young single woman. Pr. Carla relates, “I moved in, then left right away and took a month off before returning to Dunlap/Moorhead to begin my call.”

Ordination took place in Minnesota with two St. John members attending, bringing with them a gift of a cross. Pr. Carla returned to find the parsonage equipped with the basics – milk in the refrigerator and jello, macaroni and cheese in the cupboard. “It meant a lot to me,” she said.

Installation took place at St. John because it was the second service, followed by a luncheon. Several people from Bethesda attended the luncheon, she remembered. Five years later a St. John member on the Call Committee reflected, “I want to be involved the next time around.”

While there have been solo pastors in the past, the most recent experience was with a clergy couple – Pr. Margo in Moorhead and Pr. Paul in Dunlap. During this time the parsonage located in Dunlap was sold, leaving some member to mourn the loss of its “resident pastor.” With Pr. Carla’s arrival, the reality of sharing a solo pastor set in again. According to some older members, that loss still holds some pain. It is important to them to see Pr. Carla around town and feel like they have a resident pastor even though they accept that she lives in Dunlap. Pr. Carla holds hours at Bethesda and makes efforts to be in Moorhead, but she acknowledged that Bethesda gets shortchanged at times. For others it is irrelevant, expressed as “I don’t need to see her every day. As long as she is here when I need her, that’s fine with me.”

Early in Pr. Carla’s call, a small group of members at Bethesda scheduled lunch with Pr. Carla. A long-time Bethesda member recalled, “We were given tips by Pr. Margo (the previous female pastor). She sat down with us and helped us understand how we could help the new pastor.” Later some of these people became an informal Mutual Ministry Committee. Pr. Carla appreciated that this support was developed informally. “It’s not how synods tell you to do it nor is it how the seminary prepares you for it,” she said. “And I don’t think the congregations are the ones to lift it up.”

According to Pr. Carla, building trusting relationships and getting sincere feedback has made the relationship with Bethesda successful. “It was important for me to have people I could go to who would tell me how things were going, especially at Bethesda where I had a harder time

reading people. That was invaluable,” she related. A similar relationship with a small number of people exists at St. John. “It’s not always the people you think initially will be the ones you can go to for advice and support,” Pr. Carla admits. She tells about a younger couple who were not as well integrated into the church but seemed to want to get close to her. She had to respectfully resist some of their actions at the same time that she found two older couples with whom she could confidentially seek support and feedback. “You have to feel your way along.”

WORSHIPPING IN BOTH CONGREGATIONS

Mini Case: Worship

It is Sunday morning, the last Sunday in August, and I arrive at St. John around 8:15 to have coffee and meet some people. Friendly chatter raises the noise level noticeably. At 8:45 people begin to make their way to the pews, with a dull hum still in the background. Just when it quiets, the “noisy offering” is announced. It can’t get much noisier than pocket change clanging in tin bread pans. The weekly offering, begun in 1995, is for World Hunger.

Pr. Carla approaches the lectern, waits for the noise to subside and in a commanding voice says “Good Morning! And what time is church next week?” A little slowly, the congregation responds, “10:30!”

After announcements, we greet our neighbors and sing “For the Beauty of the Earth.” I follow the liturgy printed in the bulletin and sing the songs, some from the Lutheran Book of Worship and some from With One Voice. A layperson reads the lessons. Pr. Carla reads the Gospel and, with only a few notes, gives her sermon from among the people. They are attentive. The themes – looking back where we have been and looking ahead – are repeated several times: “...but for me and my household we will serve the Lord,” says Joshua as he looks back. “Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life,” is Peter’s response as Jesus asks the disciples if they want to turn back. Prayers are said and the people to be remembered during the week are listed in the bulletin.

I gulp down a cup of coffee and pull out behind Pr. Carla as we weave our way to Moorhead. The geography makes it much more than a 16-mile drive. I can see why the distance is more than miles and appreciate the countless hours that Pr. Carla has logged. We turn up Pine St. and arrive at the church at 10:20 am. I enter the church. Most people are seated and a few talk quietly at the back of the church. As the last people arrive and slip into the pews, it is quiet. The church bell rings three times. I am taken back to the church of my childhood. Something sacred is about to begin.

Pr. Carla says “Good morning! And what time is church next week?” She repeats, “And what time is church next week?” The response, “8:45.”

After announcements, we greet one another and then sing “For the Beauty of the Earth.” The heavy timbers shudder. This is a singing church! We proceed with Setting II in the LBW. There is the familiarity of the responses and the plea, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” I hear the same sermon, with few changes and Pr. Carla once again delivers it from among the people. They seem comfortable. As we end, we proceed to

the basement for coffee. Quiet conversations occur in twos and threes, except for our corner where I visit with two new members, one of them a mother with four lively children. But that is a story for another time.

The covers of the bulletins are the same; the songs and prayers of the church are the same, and yet the worship experience is very different. “I am glad they are different. I would get bored doing the same thing twice,” said Pr. Carla. It is apparent that she customizes the experience to the community, duplicating where she can, but being respectful of what each congregation needs, whether it is in the weekly worship, the newsletter, or the Annual Report.

Communion is celebrated once a month at Bethesda and twice a month at St. John. “I haven’t felt compelled to push weekly communion and no one is asking for it,” she said, knowing that it would probably create conflict. More significant to her is the reality that it would add time to each service and would require giving up other things during worship, like youth involvement.

The Sunday before Labor Day marks the changing of worship times for a year, a visible symbol of how these two congregations have found a way to manage the challenges of two worship services and one pastor. This change was established in 1990 and reaffirmed in a Joint Council Meeting in August, 2001 upon Pr. Carla’s arrival. It is not without some grumbling from individuals in both congregations that they now need to adjust their lifestyles and settle for their less preferred time of worship for a year. But there doesn’t seem to be an uproar. . It is an example of the relatively straightforward approach that has been developed in resolving issues.

MAKING IT WORK

Early in Pr. Carla’s call it was decided to have two joint Council Meetings per year; one in August or September to review the fall schedule and one in January to set the pastor’s salary – and at the pastor’s urging – to reflect on the year that has just ended. The fall meeting fell by the wayside after about three years.

Another early decision was a process to monitor how the pastor’s time was spent, but that didn’t last long. A hand-written list of the hours spent on various activities quickly demonstrated there was little utility to time-keeping. Now printed in the bulletins are her office hours – Tuesday afternoon at St. John and Friday morning at Bethesda. Participation in text study (with other pastors) held in Council Bluffs every Tuesday morning is a standing item, supported and recognized as important for collegiality.

When asked what makes it work, Pr. Carla responds, “A lot of grace and trust, but it takes time; trust-building is a process, something they don’t teach you at seminary.” After some hesitation, she adds, “And I put in lots of hours.”

Regarding expenses to support the pastor, the parsonage is in Dunlap and St. John is financially responsible for upkeep and improvements. Bethesda pays a monthly rent to St. John and it has not been increased in five years even though there have been improvements. Because of distance, Bethesda pays a larger portion of the mileage expense. Once when the topic of a rent increase was raised by St. John Council members, Pr. Carla reminded the leaders of the mileage

expense paid by Bethesda and advocated against the rent increase. It wasn't the actual dollars and cents that resolved the issue. Rather, it was Pr. Carla's advocacy for each congregation and a fairness principle that emerged as a way to guide the leaders in sharing the pastor.

People acknowledged that both congregations have managed the sharing of the pastor without major problems. When asked what they would do if a larger issue were to emerge, one of the Council presidents said that most likely there would be contact with the other Council president to determine if a meeting with Pr. Carla would be appropriate or if a joint Council meeting would be required. Similarly, Pr. Carla said that she would raise a topic before it became an issue. Pr. Carla manages the relationship with the two congregations and she seems to have willingly accepted this role. There is no interest in making the yoked relationship or the sharing of the pastor any more complicated than it is. The guidelines of, "We don't step on each other's toes;" "We just work it out;" and "We keep our noses out of their business and they keep their noses out of our business," seem to work.

The joint Council Meeting, a joint Confirmation (which includes a neighboring ELCA church in Soldier, IA), and youth activities like Confirmation Camp are examples of shared activities. Pr. Carla encouraged participation between the two congregations in events and projects, such as fund-raisers like St. John's Shrove Tuesday Breakfast. When the congregations participate in things together, it is remembered. Pr. Carla hosted an annual Christmas party at the parsonage for the purpose of fellowship. People ate, played games and, by all accounts, had fun. A joint "Stable Communion," held each Advent in a barn between the two communities, finds people sitting together on bales of straw with flashlights (since candles are too dangerous), celebrating the expectation of the Messiah. Generally cold but well-attended, people talked about it fondly.

People also agreed about having fun planning a surprise 5th Anniversary of Ordination party for Pr. Carla. A letter sent from the synod advising the congregations of the anniversary date and encouraging some form of recognition (beyond the recognition given at Synod Assembly) started the phones ringing between Dunlap and Moorhead. Plans were made for a joint worship followed by a brunch, a roast and fellowship. Since the early worship time was at St. John, members of Bethesda came to worship there.

The "surprise" part of the celebration ended when Pr. Carla looked out from the front of the church and saw her two congregations sitting together in the pews, and declared spontaneously, "Now I think I know how a mother feels when all of her children come home for Christmas." Stories of shared activities between the two congregations are few; however, judging from the many spontaneous comments about this event, it takes its place as Number One in the joy it gave its beloved pastor and the delight it gave others in the re-telling.

MISSION AND MINISTRY – BUILDING COMMUNITY

Bethesda Lutheran keeps its mission in front of them - printed at the top of every Council agenda, in the newsletter, and in the life of the community. **Bethesda's Reason for Being:** "Bethesda Lutheran Church exists to provide a worship center in which to experience God's presence, equip people with a faith that works in real life, send people into the world in Jesus' name to serve."

Older members shared concerns that their numbers are declining, members are aging, and there aren't many new members to replace the people who have died or moved away. They worry that their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will not learn the old songs that have nurtured their faith and will be forgotten in the rush to try new things such as contemporary liturgy and music. Once large, the women's group is smaller yet dedicated, continuing activities such as quilting and focusing outward to collaborate with the Loess Hills Heritage Center. They serve meals for tour groups who come to the Loess Hills, a sign of new opportunities as the agricultural economy changes.

Membership in Bethesda has remained stable with 200 baptized members in 2005 compared to 215 in 1998. Average attendance is also stable at 55 compared to 60 in 1998. The net change in membership has been positive in the past three years, even though the numbers are small.

Pr. Carla took issue with the view expressed by some that Bethesda is on a downward spiral. "Things are changing. There is some new energy," she said with certainty. New members agreed. They don't compare the one-time Sunday school of 150 children to the 12 children in 2005. Rather, they talked about the electric energy of Vacation Bible School with 40 children. Some came from Moorhead Christian Church in town, some from no church, and some from Bethesda, but all were found singing and celebrating in the basement the last day of VBS, giving hope to the elderly woman who walked up the street to participate, "even though I didn't have anyone there."

The declining numbers will likely continue to be a worry. How quickly the financial reserves get used up looms over the leadership, yet the stories of how the money has always been there are replete. The recent \$30,000 project for the design and installation of stained glass windows was paid fully by contributions. The project – honoring the colors, symbols, and design of Pr. Thomsen's windows fifty years earlier – was approved at the Annual Meeting in January, 2005, and by the end of the meeting, \$20,000 had been pledged. This project came not from some strategic planning process but, as described by an elder, "Somebody says, 'Don't you think new windows would be nice?' and people agreed and it happened." Installation began in June with parishioners climbing ladders and contributing their labor to the project.

Much of the money for the windows came from former members, many of them children of the congregation who now live in Omaha or Council Bluffs or further distances. The dedication ceremony on September 11, 2005 was called a Service of Light, perhaps pointing to the light that continues in the people that grew up in Bethesda and who want to show their appreciation for that faith community. There is a similar story about the new organ. Bethesda's Reason for Being....Provide....Equip....Send.

"God calls us to be in community," stated Pr. Carla. There are good collegial relations with the pastor of Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ church. The two churches celebrate a community worship service together and cooperate on VBS. The community of Moorhead recently faced the decision to close its elementary school, made especially difficult when the children were dispersed to seven different school districts and several teachers lost their jobs. People took sides. There was a Dissolution Committee in the town which actively advocated the

closure, produced brochures and held meetings. Although people didn't talk about it much, it was divisive. No meetings were held at Bethesda. The dissension was not allowed to enter the sanctuary. Pr. Carla proclaimed from the pulpit that God calls us to be in community. "It was hard," said Pr. Carla. "It has taken time to heal."

Mini Case: Feeling Accepted

After the worship service, I get my cup of coffee in the Bethesda basement and look around for the two new members I want to meet. I see a woman at the table, baby in her arms, and two boys, about 10 and 14, sitting across from her. I greet her and it's not until then that I notice the little 3-year old girl under the table. She has escaped the clutches of her brothers who are supposed to be holding her. "I am so happy to be here," the mother says. "I feel so accepted. I know that if my kids get rowdy, we will still be accepted. It wasn't that way at my other church."

I have met this woman and her children before...in a story shared by Pr. Carla just yesterday when she talked about the spirit of community at Bethesda. She tells about a new family – mother and children – how the rambunctious little girl always manages to escape her brothers, and on one Sunday morning, made it all the way down the aisle to the feet of Pr. Carla as she presided. "I just scooped her up and put her in the lap of 'one of the Johnsons'," Pr. Carla recalled. "So now you never know whose lap she will be in!" Pr. Carla described how she encouraged this mother. For the commemoration of the baptism of her baby girl she asked a couple life-long, faithful members to be honorary godparents so that the child would grow up with models of faith that she would see every Sunday. On the day of the commemoration, the honorary godfather sang a solo as he held the baby in his hands, asking God to hold her in His hands. "That moment," says Pr. Carla with her voice breaking, "that experience; that could have been all we had for worship that day and it would have been enough."

I talk to another new member, one who has not known Bethesda Lutheran without Pr. Carla. She tells how she came to Bethesda for a funeral and returned to tell her husband he had to come back with her. "Here is biblically-based preaching," she says, something she acknowledges they were missing in their other church. "She's willing to be vulnerable. This is what is meaningful to us," she says of Pr. Carla's sermons. "We feel very accepted. I don't feel the Danish roots get thrust upon me or that one family rules." The passing on of the faith may look different now than from years gone by, yet people acknowledge that they are fed by their experiences at Bethesda.

St. John's Lutheran Church wears its mission on its sleeve – or rather wears it on the shirts with **"Sharing the Joy of Hope Now"** emblazoned right above their hearts. They chose this theme for the church's centennial activities. I saw the blue denim shirts several times in the course of my visit and heard, "eclectic," "crazy," "diverse," "energetic" – words members used to describe themselves, their personality, and their sense of community.

Pr. Carla mentioned almost apologetically that the church is "kind of bare right now, but soon you will begin to see things come out. We have a wonderful decorating committee." She opened the door of a room at the left of the altar. It was full of vines and flowers and colorful

items to enliven the sanctuary. For now, two banners hung on either side of three simple crosses. One read, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble,” and it was offset by, “Give light to this uncertain path.”

The baptismal font, a small wooden structure set off to the left, holds a crystal bowl that Pr. Carla bought to replace the tiny tin that held very little water. They have different bowls and sometimes a new one will show up. People don’t seem to mind the change and even look with curiosity to see if a new bowl had appeared.

St. John had 390 baptized members in 2005 compared to 379 in 1998. Average worship attendance was 69. They had a net change of 7 members in 2005, showing net gains in each of the last three years. “We are much stronger now,” said an older member. “It hasn’t always been that way. Pr. Carla has been good for us and she’s been good for the whole community,” was declared with several heads nodding assent. “She has gotten involved and everybody knows her.”

While Dunlap has not grown much in population, it retains a vibrancy visible on a busy Main Street – the Maytag Appliance Store, Main Street Cakes and Gifts, an insurance agency, the Dairy Sweet and other restaurants, the Fillin’ Station and Sinclair gas station, and the perennial small town bars. Its most visible business, the Livestock Auction, is the first thing you see as you approach Dunlap on Hwy. 30. There are five churches in Dunlap, an ecumenical Bible Study on Wednesday nights that Pr. Carla attends, and a positive working relationship with St. Patrick’s Catholic Church.

It was hard to get people to talk about their recent efforts to send money for tsunami relief or for Hurricane Katrina victims, their Lutheran World Relief efforts or the experiences of the Mission Builders who are members. Pr. Carla remembered the “wash cloth ministry” in which everyone received a wash cloth and was sent out to use it for a month. Upon return, a quilt was made of the used wash cloths and each person wrote on a card how it had been used. She described it as a creative and community-oriented ministry which she appreciated, but which no one else mentions. It is history according to Pr. Carla. It’s not that they are not proud of their efforts. It’s just that they are on to the next thing.

An example of this was that now all they could talk about was the Grill Out and Talent Auction scheduled to begin at 6:00 pm the day of my visit. The church parking lot needed to be paved and members were facing the reality that they don’t have the energy to do it themselves even though their personal labor has accomplished many projects before. Some money was in hand but they needed another \$7,000. Someone came home from a synod event on asset mapping, and from that, the idea of auctioning the talents of parishioners was born. This was the first time that St. John was trying a Talent Auction and it was open to the entire community. Some people seemed anxious, but Pr. Carla persistently said, “It will be great!”

The lawn at the side of the church was transformed by 4:30 pm. Picnic tables, grills, a lemonade table, and a huge tent now filled the yard. Inside the church the promenade to the hot dogs and burgers proceeded past hand-made quilts, offers for babysitting services, pillows, baby blankets, an assortment of bakery items, and Iowa football tickets.

Mini Case: Talent Auction

I set my plate on the picnic table and return for lemonade, observing the festivities and noise. Pr. Carla, miniature gas tank under her arm, is surrounded by animated children, jumping gleefully as they wait for colorful animals made out of twisted balloons. I eat with a group from the Catholic church; they wave at Fr. Paul as he bids farewell to Pr. Carla with a hug. I move among the tables and a woman makes a place for me. To my right another woman says cautiously, "You're not here to steal our pastor, are you?" She knows I am not from St. Peter or the community.

It's time to get your bid number, and items for the auction are carried out to a hay rack next to the tent. The auctioneer introduces the evening by reminding people that the goal of the evening is to pave the parking lot at the back. "But most of all," he says, "we are here to have fun!" He does his part with good-natured humor, breaking into the rapid-fire cadence of a national prize-winning auctioneer. He is a member of the Catholic church and he has brought his family along. They have not only brought items to auction, but bid aggressively for some of the items. It is obvious that this is a community affair.

Pr. Carla has made an apple pie. The bidding is furious; the auctioneer can barely keep up with his spotters. At long last we hear "sold," only then realizing the set-up. Pr. Carla's fiancée has bought an apple pie for \$1,000! With a good-natured grin, he shrugs his shoulders. I learn later that the congregation will pay for the pie, to the great relief of Pr. Carla and her fiancée and with appreciation for the good-natured fun. The experience is priceless.

The sky begins to darken and long-awaited rain is both blessing and curse. The parched land needs the rain but not tonight. People crowd into the tent and the bidding continues, rain beginning to soak the auctioneers. An older gentleman steps forward when a framed picture is to be sold. It contains photographs of the American flag with a poem in the center. He reads the poem in the gentle rain. Soon I come to realize that it is Pr. Carla's father whose poetry finds its way into the church newsletter from time to time.

As the evening proceeds, there are \$50 plates of cookies, a \$100.00 gooseberry pie, and sundry items whose value is measured in fun, fellowship, and a community effort. People come to pay their bills. Pr. Carla's mother dries dishes with the rest of the women working feverishly in the kitchen. It has been a good night; the anxiety of how it would go is now relieved by the \$13,000 raised on a rainy night.

The excitement of a successful first-time fund-raising event for St. John Lutheran is not lost in the excitement of how good it felt to have such obvious community support. That sentiment was expressed over and over as people talked about how the community has come together other times, like the community event that raised enough money in one night to equip the park with state-of-the-art playground equipment.

People take little credit for their own initiatives but quickly refer to the ecumenical spirit of the community, Pr. Carla's involvement, and her embrace of the entire community. "She has a personality you can't say 'no' to. She makes you go beyond your comfort zone, yet you can say anything to her," relates a current St. John Council member. He was quick to continue that St. John needed to be open to change, whether they liked it or not. "We've been found," he states. While Pr. Carla admits to a strong work ethic, and others use the term "workaholic" to describe her, she believes, "If you share your life with them, they will share their lives with you." She lives this philosophy and leaves people wondering how it will change once she is married and has other demands on her time.

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES AT ST. JOHN

As St. John Lutheran became more diverse, it moved away from its German roots and had a more liberal bent, at least according to one long-time member. As he looked ahead at what concerns they may face, he cited the Church's stand on sexuality. "We've already lost some people over that and depending on what else happens, we may lose more," stated a younger member. "We did do the study, however," referring to the study materials prepared by the ELCA. This study was done jointly with Bethesda Lutheran and only ten people participated. From the remarks, it was evident that they didn't want to engage in the study, but since churches were asked to undertake it, they did so. They were aware of the issues facing the larger church and they responded to the study invitation even though there was not great enthusiasm.

While St. John is relatively stable now and is attracting more families, there is still the concern about young people who drop out. "Generally after confirmation, they just stop coming to church," shares a Council member. "We have to find ways to keep them involved." While youth are far more involved now and a young couples' group is forming, it is still a challenge.

St. John has experienced growing pains, states Pr. Carla, as she reflects on the changes in Dunlap and how that has affected St. John. Diversity of cultures has increased in Dunlap and the same kinds of family issues, problems with addictions, and other societal problems that many small towns experience is evident in this community. "There is more diversity among new members too and as they get involved, they come with their own ideas. If people don't fit anywhere else, they tend to fit here. Increasingly people who join the church are not of the traditional Lutheran background, but may be a mixed Catholic-Lutheran marriage or come from a non-denominational background. "Sometimes that creates conflict in the church," she confided.

A younger member who has been involved in the congregation stated that tensions tend to be brushed over and minimized. As in the case of closing of the elementary school, when Pr. Carla sensed the growing tension, she challenged the members, "There will always be issues and conflict. Will you let your issues keep you from worshipping God?" She insisted that animosity not be brought into the sanctuary, disturbing the sacredness of worship.

In the past there was contention about a Council member's unilateral decision to suspend benevolence payments to the synod when there were financial problems. The leadership attempted to rectify the situation and reinstate benevolence payments. Some people felt that this resulted in an undercurrent of internal dissent, even after St. John's financial situation improved.

In whatever way the conflict manifests in this faith community, it does not seem to get in the way of coming together for a good cause, serving people locally and globally.

SUSTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP

Pr. Carla expressed concern and some sadness that she is about the only one of her seminary classmates who is still in her first call. She has heard about bad experiences they have had. In relating this, her buoyant personality became reflective, pondering what has made her experience different and so fulfilling. While she admits to long hours, she also acknowledged that she seeks her own private time and that people respect this. Vacations are taken and books are read that are relevant for her call to ministry. She recognizes that everyone goes through dry times and needs the experience of others to give them perspective. She values her text study group and is glad no one makes an issue of her weekly trip to Council Bluffs.

She gains energy from her scrap booking, but mostly it is the small thoughtful things done for her by people at both Bethesda and St. John that mean the most. “They get me,” she says, “and they do things that I don’t think they even realize mean so much to me.” She described one Christmas party at the parsonage, when people saw the beat-up pots and pans from her seminary days and bought her new pans the next Christmas. She had other examples but is reluctant to share them because, “It might get in the way of them just being themselves.” Then she reminded me with a hearty laugh, “You can’t forget the cars that grow tomatoes.”

Members identified vacation time, support of her need for collegiality, and the anniversary celebration as the most tangible things they have done to support her. They try to let her know they appreciate her ministry and are willing to try new things. “Carla is not pushy, but she pushes us,” said one Council member. They have come to expect someone who is comfortable enough to step out and push them to experiment. That doesn’t mean that they accept everything she tries. Some things work better than others. Each congregation has found its own way to tell her what works and what does not work. They seem to appreciate that every pastor has to start somewhere. “We don’t expect perfection, but we do want someone to be challenging us,” said a St. John Council member.

They have valued the ways that Pr. Carla customizes the worship services, newsletters, and annual reports to meet their needs, sometimes unaware to the degree that it duplicates her efforts. They have appreciated her advocacy for each congregation. Recognizing that five years in a first call is unusual, especially in western Iowa, they expressed hope that “she will celebrate her 10th anniversary with us,” but that “she could be touching a lot more lives in a larger congregation than she is touching here.”

FEEDBACK SESSION

As I wrapped up the site visit, members of both congregations who had been involved and Pr. Carla gathered with me for a meal. It was a time to say, “Thank you,” to acknowledge the gifts of both congregations and to affirm the uniqueness of rural ministry. It was an opportunity for Bethesda members to hear more about St. John, to laugh at the stories of the Talent Auction and listen to the challenges facing St. John. It was an opportunity for St. John members to hear about

Bethesda's Vacation Bible School, sense the energy of new members and the worries of the elders. It was a time to reminisce about the recent anniversary celebration and relive the joy when both communities came together. It was a chance to be in community.