

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
Emmanuel Lutheran Church
LaOtto, Indiana
Site Visit: August 18-21, 2007
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INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Lutheran Church is one of three churches in a Tri-Parish formed in 2001. The other two churches are St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Albion and Mt. Pleasant Lutheran in rural Kendallville. The Tri-Parish is served by two pastors. Pr. Susan Socha was called in 2001 and currently serves half-time as pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran and quarter-time as associate pastor of the other two churches. Pr. Ann Marshall had served St. Mark's and Mt. Pleasant for ten years until she recently resigned to take a call in Perrysburg, Ohio.

As I prepare for my site visit to northeastern Indiana, I pour over the church directories that had been sent to me to acquaint myself with the churches. One directory is dated 2002 and there is also a later edition dated 2007. It is not only useful but fun to put faces to the names of the people that I am going to meet during my site visit. However, before I even open the directories, I find myself mesmerized by the covers. They are not the usual picture of a church building, or in this case, the pictures of three churches. Instead, the cover of the 2002 directory is graced by three baptismal fonts, each with its own sacramental presence – two in rich dark wood, the third in lighter oak; one quite ornamental, the others more simple. My curiosity leads me to turn the page where the heading – ***One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*** – introduces each church and its members with the reminder that:

For as in one body, we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12:4-5 NRSV)

As I pick up the 2007 directory, curious to see how much people had changed in five years, I am once again drawn to the cover before I look inside. It is a rather abstract picture of Jesus holding a lamb, dark robes flowing and his face framed by blue sky and the green leaves of a tree. It is a loving, comforting face of Jesus which I later learn is a compilation of all the members' pictures – "faces" making up the face of Jesus. On the back cover are three crosses, one from each of the churches – different crosses yet the same cross that is the symbol of their faith. ***Three Churches, One Body*** is proclaimed at the beginning of each section. "***We are the body of Christ***" is repeated throughout. What they call themselves – *three churches in one parish, or a Tri-Parish and one Church* – did not seem to matter. All confess the stated mission "United in Christ's Love."

In my first phone conversation with Pr. Sue, she says that St. Mark's and Mt. Pleasant "have made it their mission to help Emmanuel Lutheran," implying that the relationship is more than just financial assistance to Emmanuel or a collegial assistance to Pr. Ann. The relationship has grown out of "mission."

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

LaOtto, Indiana (population 495) is located about 30 miles straight north of Ft. Wayne in Noble County on Highway 3. There is an “old” Highway 3 which goes through the middle of town and the “new” Hwy. 3 about one mile east. Some people identify the construction of new Hwy. 3 as the event that caused LaOtto to decline and become a sleepy little town. However, old-timers, Dick and Carl, say, “It has always been this way. LaOtto has never been much bigger than it is today.”

LaOtto formed where two railroads converged and has never been incorporated, so it has to rely on a volunteer Fire Department and other voluntary services. There is an elementary school in LaOtto; the middle is in neighboring Avilla, and high school students attend either East Noble or Central Noble High Schools.

Noble County is primarily rural with an agricultural economy and light manufacturing that supports the automotive industry. To the east in DeKalb County, the town of Auburn hosts the Classic Car Show and Festival every Labor Day weekend. Thousands of people, including celebrities, descend upon the area to attend the car show and auction.

New Hwy. 3 was built to provide a direct, four-lane route from Ft. Wayne to the northern lake country, a fast and efficient way to get away for the weekend. It bypasses LaOtto. Although a gas station captures some of the travelers’ business and marks the entry to LaOtto, there is little else to cause one to enter town.

My tour guide, Sharon, makes sure to drive me on both of the highways. She points out that, regardless of the growth of Ft. Wayne and the increase of traffic, the small towns of Noble County are still “conservative.” When I ask what she means by conservative, she replies, “We live at a slower pace and we’re slower to change. A lot of people don’t go down to Ft. Wayne much and you sometimes see it with young kids going off to college. It is hard for some of them to adapt to the different pace of life.” By the same token, many people go back and forth a lot, working in Ft. Wayne, living in new developments north of Ft. Wayne and choosing church membership in the smaller churches of Noble County rather than larger churches in Ft. Wayne.

In the course of my three-day visit, others mention the impact of the highway and how it has changed the dynamics of the area. An older woman states, “I just hope that people begin to see the benefits of being small, whether it is classroom sizes in our schools, small churches, smaller towns, and a slower pace of life.” It seems the coexistence of “old” Highway 3 and “new” Highway 3 provides an apt metaphor for the changing landscape of Noble County and the challenges it presents to the churches and the people.

HISTORICAL AND CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT

Emmanuel Lutheran Church was founded on April 15, 1875. The church’s founder and first spiritual leader was the Rev. Benjamin F. Schultz, pastor of the Albion parish (St. Mark’s Lutheran and Mt. Pleasant Lutheran which had been organized separately in 1848 but yoked from the beginning). Most of its eight charter members were former members of the rural Bethlehem Lutheran congregation which had been established four

miles northwest of LaOtto in 1853. Shortly after its founding, the Emmanuel congregation erected a one-room, white frame house of worship on donated land and dedicated it on October 3, 1875. This building continues to serve Emmanuel to the present.

From 1875 to 1877, and again from 1884 to 1890, Emmanuel was part of the Albion pastorate, but between 1877 and 1884, and again after 1890, Emmanuel and Bethlehem comprised a two-church parish. While these alignments and realignments took place, Emmanuel grew to a congregation of about seventy members and made some progress in its financial situation. However, Emmanuel has experienced periods throughout the years when they have been without a clerical leader.

In the 1930's Emmanuel became a member of the four-point Albion-LaOtto parish and the congregation grew by about fifty percent during this time. Committees were organized, Luther League and Ladies Aid Society were formed and refinements were made to the church building. By 1940, Emmanuel was yoked once again with Bethlehem and there were years of joint parish as well as vacant periods, followed by a period from 1950-1955 when Emmanuel was part of the LaOtto-South Whitley parish.

Under the leadership of Rev. Oscar Noren who served from 1956-1970, a major program of modernization and expansion was undertaken and the former one-room church was converted into a large, beautifully furnished house of worship. During this time, further discussions were held which resulted in the merger of Emmanuel and Bethlehem on March 4, 1962. Rev. Noren retired in 1970 and there have been several pastorates and vacancies since that time (paraphrased from the Service of Dedication in celebration of the 125th Anniversary).

In 2001, St. Mark, Mt. Pleasant and Emmanuel entered into a new relationship for the purpose of jointly calling a pastor. There had been a sequence of short pastorates over the past ten years, and Emmanuel had been without pastor for three years. Rev. Sue Socha, a second career seminarian, began her first call in 2001. Her focus as associate pastor at St. Mark and Mt. Pleasant has been youth programming and music/choir. The renewal of the congregational relationship among the three churches is summarized in the last sentence of the history document: "It is a new era in our ministries, and we trust that our mutual witness will continue as long as it pleases God."

There are four ELCA churches in Noble County, three of which are in this Tri-Parish relationship. The fourth church is in Cromwell and is served by a Deaconess. Each church has its own identity and personality and they are just far enough apart that people relate to one church or the other. St. Mark Lutheran is located in Albion, the county seat, and is described as the "town church." An expanded narthex in this church offers space for fellowship and meetings. The spacious basement includes office space for Hand in Hand International Adoptions and meeting space for community groups.

Mt. Pleasant Lutheran is located about six miles to the southeast of Albion and has the look and feel of a "country church," surrounded by large trees, immaculate farmsteads, fields of corn, and the township cemetery across the road. Banners made by the women of this church is a special ministry. One member points with particular pride to the

Spanish banner which will be sent to a church devastated by Hurricane Katrina. As I tour the churches I see firsthand the baptismal fonts and crosses that had caught my attention in the directories. All three churches have made building improvements to be handicap accessible.

Emmanuel Lutheran reported baptized membership of 92 at the end of 2006. Average worship attendance is 53, a significant increase from the average worship attendance of 12 in the years before Pr. Sue's arrival. When people were leaving due to the pastoral vacancy, faithful lay leaders remained. These leaders stepped in and the church continued.

The "alignments and realignments" referred to in the anniversary booklet seem to have filled a need and the churches have not seemed unnecessarily preoccupied with structure, bylaws, and constitutions. Each church has maintained its own Council but the lines of the organizations blur in other ways. They have been willing to try new things as change occurred.

From the time of my first contact in June to my site visit in August, change had happened again. Pr. Ann Marshall, still in her first call, had accepted a call to Perrysburg, Ohio. Her last day was July 29. The annual Tri-Parish outdoor worship service was held to celebrate Pr. Ann's ministry among them.

The Tri-Parish chicken barbecue was already scheduled to take place on August 19 during my site visit. It was the first time people from all three churches gathered after Pr. Ann's departure. They gathered on a rainy afternoon at Mt. Pleasant Lutheran. There was good food and good fellowship. There had been drought conditions all summer in northeastern Indiana so much of the conversation was about the weather. A few people offered the opinion that they wanted to see the Tri-Parish continue but the loss of Pr. Ann was still very fresh for everyone, creating uncertainty. It had been written into the Tri-Parish agreement in 2001 that the departure of either pastor would put in motion an evaluation of the three-church, two-pastor relationship. However, it was too soon for anyone to describe how they would navigate this change or what impact it would have on the Tri-Parish.

A DIFFERENT SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Every two-point or three-point parish relationship is unique and what I encounter in Noble County is different from what I had encountered in a two-point parish in western Iowa and a two-point parish in northeastern Nebraska. One commonality is that all are small church, rural ministries. In northeastern Nebraska, the dual parish had been in effect for 58 years. In western Iowa, it was only 18 years old. Perhaps the length of the yoked relationship affects the degree to which there is joint ministry. For instance, in Iowa and Nebraska the joint activities were few in number – confirmation, two joint Council meetings per year, one or two "special" joint events each year. In these congregations I heard that the main purpose of the dual parish was to pool financial resources for calling a full-time pastor. Central to each church's mission and ministry was the preservation of its history and identity. Doing too much together was either

threatening to their separate identities or too challenging logistically. Emmanuel Lutheran in LaOtto seems different.

WHAT MAKES EMMANUEL LUTHERAN WHAT IT IS

“By faith.....

A mixed group of long-time members and newer members meet with me on Sunday morning, including Connie, the Council President during the three long years without a pastor, and Kathy, current Council member. I begin to understand what it had been like when lay leaders had to find supply pastors every week; how it felt when they watched the average attendance dwindle to 12 people; what energy it took to keep Emmanuel’s needs before the synod bishop and staff. They refer to it as an “ordeal”. When I ask what got them through the ordeal, the response was “faith.....and faith in the church.”

They had been in this position before. At the time of the merger with Bethlehem in 1962, the anticipated growth did not occur and, in fact, there was deeper division. In one short pastorate in recent times, the pastor would leave on Sunday and be gone most of the week. There was little sense of commitment and people drifted away. With another short pastorate, there just wasn’t a “fit.” This pastor made disparaging remarks about “farmers” and chose not to live in the parsonage or in LaOtto. People distanced themselves.

In more than one conversation about these circumstances I hear a conviction that was expressed, “We will not let Emmanuel die!” Today, there is a core of people that have been the strength of Emmanuel and there are family ties that link generations. Bonnie, a lifelong member, states, “This is my church. I stick with it through thick and thin.” I also hear that newer members quickly become aware of the past trials and come to appreciate the faithfulness of Emmanuel’s long-time members.

When I ask, “What makes Emmanuel Lutheran what it is, and specifically, a good place for first call pastors,” there are many answers. Sue, a lifetime member, describes Emmanuel as “relaxed, not high church” and adds that people really want it to work. “We get so hungry for a pastor (during the long periods of vacancies) so we’re willing to work with a pastor.” Others describe Emmanuel as “family-like” and “accepting,” pointing out that you need to keep people talking to each other. There have been enough experiences with people leaving over the years to know that “little things fester” in Connie’s words. “You have to ask them and be direct; otherwise they go off and talk to others and you never know where they stand,” she adds.

“We appreciate different styles” is also expressed. It is clear that some people liked one pastor over another but, in the course of the conversation, the group summarizes it this way. “Some people are better preachers than they are at making visits. Some are very approachable and good at pastoral care but their preaching might not be so good. Some really connect with the community and like to be here and others choose not to live here and don’t become part of the community.” A newer member states, “We have come to see that it’s good to have variety. Every pastor brings something.” Tom adds, “The Synod reminds us not to be too picky!”

Another real factor, according to Max, is that Emmanuel is a smaller church where “new pastors are not overwhelmed” and “can get their feet wet.” The congregation needs to be willing to overlook things, live with the “bloopers” and roll with the punches he says. In a smaller congregation, pastors are able to get to know people, get involved in the community, and establish relationships. I hear agreement with the idea that a new pastor requires them to be open, to be willing to evolve and adapt. Examples of how that has occurred during Pr. Sue’s pastorate include: getting more people involved as readers, acolytes, and in distribution of communion; adapting to the out-of-the-pulpit style of sermons, coming down the aisle and getting closer to people – even sometimes calling upon them during a sermon – and using drama to make a point. In one “sermon drama” Pr. Sue and her husband, Don, depicted opposing views of the frequency of Communion as a way to raise the topic, knowing it was controversial. Emmanuel eventually moved from Communion once/month to twice/month. While some would like weekly Communion and some would still prefer only once/month, there is an evolution and adaptation that is occurring.

MINI-CASE: A CONVERSATION WITH THE YOUTH

A meeting with the youth had been set up right after the church service with some apprehension that they all might be “no shows.” However, eight young people, ranging from a fifth-grader to a junior in high school, spend about an hour with me. I learn how much they care about their church. The conversation is a little slow at first. After learning their names I ask if they have a favorite Bible verse or story. This is met mostly with silence. I can tell they are probably thinking, “Who is this woman anyway?” But one young boy proudly replies, “John 8:32 ‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’” He seems rather precocious but it gets others thinking and sharing.

When I ask about Confirmation, they talk mostly about Confirmation Camp and how they like it because Pr. Sue participates “in stuff” with them. My question about a Youth Group renders the response, “Do we have a Youth Group?” I still am not finding anything that breaks open the conversation. Then one young girl asks, “Can we tell you what we don’t like?” Now that is the opener! I say, “Sure,” and all of a sudden everyone is talking at once. They talk about things they don’t like; however, there isn’t negativity. First and foremost, they want more kids. They want the church to be “light” and to look “new.” They would like more contemporary worship, pointing out how the songs sung that day were “from the Middle Ages,” and they would like more energy in the church service. They want to sing songs from Confirmation Camp and songs like “Shine Jesus Shine.”

As we sit in a corner in the basement, an older girl expresses the viewpoint, “We’d like a place of our own, some place we can bring our friends to.” Several heads nod in agreement. In a flash their eyes move to the opposite corner of the basement, an unused “secretary’s corner” that I hear is rarely used for the secretary. Before long, they claim the space in their imaginations and are equipping it with a rug, some bean bag chairs, a TV, some games. It has a bi-fold door which is fine with them since it would give them enough privacy. A young girl asks if they could get rid of the “green piano” in another corner of the basement and the next thing you know, they are planning a garage sale to

clear out the unused furniture and items that clutter the basement. A celebration “lock-in” is already being planned and, suddenly, inviting their friends seems more possible.

I draw in a breath as I realize one thing is leading to another and a run-away train is being unleashed. I am struck, however, by how much they care, not just for themselves, but for the church to be a place to hang out. No one is talking about wanting to go to other neighboring churches that are larger and have praise music and contemporary worship all the time. They seem to appreciate what they have right here at Emmanuel.

When I ask them if they feel they can take their ideas to Pr. Sue, there is a resounding “Yes!” I urge them to think about what they can do, reminding them that Jesus always sent his disciples out in “twos.” Before long, two young people agree to talk to Pr. Sue about the space for youth; another two are willing to be involved with Pr. Sue in choosing some music to liven up the worship. I remind them there are other members to consider, some of them older, who might not be as excited about getting rid of the old furniture. This was met with the response, “The older people are nice; they will understand.” It seems nothing will stand in their way.

What I take away from the brief encounter with the Youth of Emmanuel is that they care a lot about their church and that their relationship with Pr. Sue permits them to go to her with their dreams. They realize it is not just their wants but there are other people to be considered in any change that takes place at Emmanuel. It is another piece of what makes Emmanuel Lutheran what it is.

There is a Tuesday evening worship service that draws a small group of parishioners and there is also Adult Sunday School. A “Spiritual Gifts Inventor” has been done by many in the congregation this past year. The next steps of how to put the gifts to use and involve people in ministries that use their gifts are still undetermined, but for some, it was a useful exercise.

There is a janitor who does the cleaning, but there are three loyal members – Ron, Harold, and Darryl – who “see what needs to be done and just do it.” Ninety percent of the renovation to make the church handicap accessible was done by volunteers from the church even though complete accessibility to the basement remains problematic with no easy solutions.

There is pride in the simple architecture and modestly adorned sanctuary, and there are little touches throughout the building that catch my eye. There is a sign above the sink in the Ladies bathroom: “*When you wash your face, remember your baptism*” (Martin Luther). There is a shadow box in the basement that contains old pictures from the founding days. The church has the look and feel of a place that has weathered hard times.

PASTOR SUE SOCHA AND HER MINISTRY

Pr. Sue is a second career first call pastor. Her first career – and love – was music and teaching, the gifts she brings to ministry. During her internship experience her call to

Word and Sacrament became more “real” to her. She had wondered during her first years of seminary if she was “pursuing one more thing that wasn’t going to work out.”

Even though the Indiana-Kentucky Synod was her last choice of synods for assignment as a candidate, she took on faith the bishop’s simple statement, “I can see your gifts being used” in our synod. She identifies her gifts as her musical skill, and she frequently composes songs and plays guitar. Her husband, Don, identifies her gifts as preaching and an ability to establish good relationships with young people. Members of Emmanuel quickly identify her gifts as “approachable” and “caring,” and several people comment positively on her pastoral care.

During the call process, Pr. Sue came to interview at Emmanuel first by herself. For the second interview when she also preached, she was joined by Don. She met with the St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant Council separately from Emmanuel’s Call Committee. When Pr. Sue accepted the call that was extended, people expressed great respect and admiration that she was willing to uproot herself and her family from South Carolina and move to Indiana, trusting that her husband would find work and knowing that she had two sons who would have to change schools.

People at Emmanuel continue to appreciate the support that Don provides to Pr. Sue, noting with genuine caring that he is a full partner in ministry, participating in the sermon dramas, playing trumpet, and reminding Pr. Sue of announcements in worship when she turns to him and asks, “Have I forgotten anything?”

Pr. Sue shares with me that many repairs were made to the parsonage before their arrival and they were greeted with a “Welcome Home” sign. “It almost made me cry,” she remembers. The congregation has extended itself to make their pastor welcome, and the pastor and family have entered fully into community life at Emmanuel and in LaOtto.

Pr. Sue recognizes her need for self-care and has a spiritual director. She regularly seeks retreat time. She openly shares the importance of time for her spiritual nurturance in her pastoral letters, the newsletter, and Annual Report. The congregation appears accepting of this.

Pr. Sue states that Pr. Ann was an important mentor to her and, from descriptions of their working relationship, it appears that they were a good team. Pr. Sue openly states, “I will miss her,” a reality that is still sinking in three weeks after Pr. Ann’s departure. The final worship service on July 29 for Pr. Ann is still fresh in her mind and in the minds of people I meet from St. Mark and Mt. Pleasant.

The first St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant Council Meeting since Pr. Ann’s departure was held the evening before my site visit and served as a vivid reminder of how things were different. Action was taken at that meeting to request an interim from the Synod. Pr. Sue acknowledges that the meeting had been different as they all tried to envision how things would be in the coming months.

There is a “oneness” with which the Tri-Parish presents itself and seems to operate. Even before I arrive I feel the intentionality of the sacramental images in the directories, the

common language that ties the three churches together, and the respect for being “different but related.” While Emmanuel and St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant have their own mission statements, the separate processes were linked by common theology. When I ask Pr. Sue and Council member Kathy about the mission statement process at Emmanuel, they describe a group process that is rather free-flowing – writing down words, experimenting with phrases, and ultimately evolving to a mission statement out of a creative process. It is unique to Emmanuel, yet able to fit in the Tri-Parish umbrella. It reads, “United in Christ’s love we worship God to strengthen our faith, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can use our gifts to serve with love and care for all God’s people.”

I conclude that the ten years of Pr. Ann’s leadership, the complimentary gifts of Pr. Ann and Pr. Sue, their respective centeredness in Word and Sacrament, and their positive working relationship as colleagues contribute to the “Three in One” mode of operation. It seems to “give permission” to others to do things for either the individual churches or for the three churches together without requiring a process or approvals.

Sharon, the secretary for all three churches, has just recently created the Tri-Parish Weekly Bulletin. It accompanies the worship bulletin and includes all of the notices unique to the three communities, yet common to the larger membership. One woman from Mt. Pleasant comments, “I am so grateful we have it; now I can see if someone is in the hospital and I can send a card. Otherwise, I would never know.” Sharon relates, “It’s the little things that are done that make us feel like one.”

THE LITTLE THINGS

I had come prepared to hear that there were very few joint activities among the three churches based on my experience in two other two-point rural parishes. In both those situations, examples of joint activities were few in number and a desire to maintain individual identities, ministries, and programs was apparent. In this situation, however, the lines blur. Pr. Sue was called specifically to assist Pr. Ann in youth and choir St. Mark’s and Mt. Pleasant as associate pastor as well as providing leadership to Emmanuel. Therefore, by the very call, there were assumptions about combining confirmation, joint youth ministry, and choir. Parish nurses collaborate also.

In each of the churches I notice the “Walk Around the World” maps, a program to encourage people to walk and record their miles. The “Primetimers” include elderly from all three churches. The “Three-Parish Post” is the monthly newsletter that includes general announcements for all three churches and an individual page or two for each church. This is augmented by the Weekly Three Parish Post. “Noisy Buckets,” a collection for World Hunger, clang at each church every Sunday. Small blue cards with “Church Mouse Squeals” are in pews everywhere as a means to identify good deeds to be recognized, later published in the Newsletter. The “Shawl Ministry” does not discriminate. Prayer shawls, initiated by Mt. Pleasant, are willingly shared with whoever is in need of prayers. A mission trip to Mississippi was a joint effort. Each year there is a Three-Parish Chicken Barbecue and Outdoor Worship event. Pr. Sue and Don host all Council members at the parsonage twice a year, solely for fellowship.

St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant Church Council convenes as a joint Council first and then moves to individual Council meetings. The location rotates monthly. A member of the Emmanuel Church Council visits St. Mark's and Mt. Pleasant Council meeting once a month, and members of St. Mark's and Mt. Pleasant's Council visit Emmanuel's Council once a month. This has been the arrangement since the relationship began in 2001. The cross-representation has worked better at some times than others, yet the invitation is always extended and the intention for open communication and on-going relationship-building is sincere.

Some people express the desire to have more joint committees; e.g. the Education Team. As St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant enters into a call process to replace Pr. Ann, hope is expressed by some that there be further consolidation of committees and/or ministries. In the meantime, it appears that the support for living out of a Tri-Parish model will continue to sanction "the little things," the joint opportunities that make sense.

THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS – CHALLENGES

How people see the current situation depends on where they are standing. The departure of Pr. Ann will trigger an evaluation of the current two-pastor, three-parish arrangement. People from Emmanuel openly express their desire to see the current relationship continue with Pr. Sue continuing as their pastor and as associate pastor to St. Mark and Mt. Pleasant. It is seen as a good relationship; it brings stability that allows growth in membership. Some people describe this as a time "when Pr. Sue can step out into the spotlight."

Pr. Sue is hopeful that the current relationship will continue and would like to see even more joint ministries emerge out of the discussions. A few people even envision that now might be the time for all four Noble County ELCA churches to combine, but to others it seems premature to actively raise this at this time.

While finances continue to be a concern, things are better than in the past." At least two people state they feel the three churches will be in a "maintenance mode" for some time to come.

No one can describe definitively a process or timeframe in which the current relationship will be evaluated and decisions made. I interpret this to be out of deference to St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant Councils which need to address their vacancy and have the requisite discussions with the synod. In fact, the decision for an interim had been made and was in the process of being communicated to the synod as I did the site visit.

In the few conversations I have with individuals from St. Mark/Mt. Pleasant, the common theme expressed is the need to grieve the loss of Pr. Ann. Some of the grief is evident in the soft-spoken statements, "It is going to take time for us to get used to this," and "We knew she would leave eventually, but it is still hard," At the chicken barbecue, there is a general uplifting and jovial atmosphere, with no one suggesting that anything should be different in the future. As Pr. Sue offers the table grace at this gathering, she acknowledges the absence of Pr. Ann, speaks a word of thanksgiving, and later mingles with members from all three churches.

The three parishes are in a time of transition. The tangible “event” that triggers a re-evaluation has occurred and now the intangible psychological and spiritual process of adapting to the event is unfolding. For Emmanuel Lutheran the challenge is to continue to focus on its ministries, make its improvements, and implement its actions, even as it co-exists with the longer, more ambiguous process to be defined by St. Mark and Mt. Pleasant Churches. Given how well the Tri-Parish has worked, people assume that Emmanuel will be part of the discussion. As was stated in 2001, “It is a new era in our ministries, and we trust that our mutual witness will continue as long as it pleases God.”

By faith.....