

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
St. Peter Lutheran Church – Pilger, Nebraska
St. Luke’s Lutheran Church – Stanton, Nebraska
Site Visit: May, 2007
Nancy Anderson, Case Study Researcher

Introduction

“Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:33-34)

The Fifth Sunday After Easter began with the Thanksgiving for Baptism at each of the church services – St. Peter at 9:00 am and St. Luke’s at 10:30 am – followed by the readings and the new commandment given to Jesus’ followers in the Gospel of John. As he began the Thanksgiving of Baptism, Pr. Steven Peeler called the children to the baptismal font in each church to be present to, and part of, the age-old ritual.

At St. Peter, a brother and sister came forward. Pr. Steven gave the pitcher of water to the young boy who carefully poured the water into the basin as Pr. Steven read *“We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit brooded over the waters and you created the world by your Word, calling forth life in which you took delight.”* The little girl, not much more than four years old, watched and listened, squirming slightly but fully engaged. As this ritual was repeated again at St. Luke’s, four children came forward. The water was poured, the words were spoken, the children watched, intent mostly on the sight and the sound of the water streaming into the basin.

Declining population and dwindling numbers of children is a concern to the people of Pilger, NE (pop. 378) and Stanton, NE (pop. 1,627), yet you see signs of hope and commitment in each of these communities. Construction of a new \$750,000 swimming pool, approved in a Pilger referendum in November, 2005 is a visible sign of providing for the children. “They can’t swim in the Elkorn River like I could as a kid; it’s too dirty,” says a long-time resident and member of St. Peter Lutheran. In Stanton, an addition to the high school and improvements to the middle and elementary schools are a source of pride as I am given a tour by a rural postman, his wife, and sister-in-law, all life-long members of St. Luke’s Lutheran Church. These communities have experienced firsthand the shift away from an agricultural economy and the resultant impact it has on the population, the economic base, the churches, and community facilities.

Ministry to the children has been one of the few common concerns of these two congregations and Pr. Steven’s presence is a common bond. “He is so good with children” was expressed in many ways, citing how he gets down with them during his children’s sermons and how he includes children in worship. One Sunday Pr. Steven took a rambunctious little boy by the hand when he ran up to the altar, holding him close during the sermon, the singing and the Eucharist.

“Everyone wondered what he (Pr. Steven) would do,” recalled one member. “I just held my breath,” said another. It was a moment that is remembered and retold. Later someone told Pr. Steven, “It was cute.” “Cute” was not Pr. Steven’s intent, however. “It is how Jesus would want us to be with the children,” he related with a clarity that comes from his Lutheran roots and seminary training.

Pr. Steven grew up in North Carolina “surrounded by Lutherans,” pursued a short career in science, and ultimately enrolled at Southern Seminary, responding to the call to ordained ministry. Now he finds himself in his first call in rural Nebraska ministering to these two parishes and their children.

Community Context

Pilger and Stanton are the only towns in Stanton County, a two-hour drive northwest from Omaha. Small cattle yards dot the landscape and corn and soybeans are the primary crop. Stanton County is part of the four-county Elkhorn Valley Economic Development area that also includes Antelope, Madison, and Pierce Counties. Norfolk, (population 23,516) is the commercial center of the four-county area and makes its claim to fame in the big billboard “H-e-e-e-r-e’s Norfolk: Proud Home Town of Johnny Carson.”

For every success story, there is also a story of tough decisions. The painful reality of a church closing was captured in the headline “Madison Saying Goodbye to Parish” in the *Norfolk Daily News* on May 4, 2007. The First Presbyterian Church in Madison held closing services on April 29 after 137 years of ministry. It is a stark reality facing many churches in rural areas.

Before I even had a chance to look at a map to find Pilger and Stanton, I heard from Pr. Steven about the historic rivalry between the towns. At one time, they were big school rivals and an effort to merge the two school systems in the 1960s was met with fierce opposition. I heard reference to the town rivalry throughout my visit, but much of the community antagonism has subsided and neither town, some 13 miles apart, really competes with the other any more. Notwithstanding, it became apparent that Pilger folks related mostly to the town of Wisner, 9 miles east of Pilger, and Stanton folks related mostly to Norfolk to the west. The only thing Pilger and Stanton seem to have in common is that they are in the same county.

Stanton had invested not only in improvements to its schools, but built a new City Hall. It takes pride in its senior housing, an assisted living facility, and religious diversity. There are seven churches in Stanton – Wisconsin Synod Lutheran, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Congregational UCC, and an Evangelical Free Church in addition to St. Luke’s Lutheran Church of the ELCA. The Lake Meskathine Recreation Area is popular for fishing, camping, and recreational activities. There is an array of small businesses that make up the commercial center; e.g., a hardware store, cable network company, medical and dental clinics.

Pilger, while much smaller, boasts three churches—St. John Lutheran, a Missouri Synod Lutheran church, a Methodist church, and St. Peter Lutheran. Its main street has several empty buildings, but it has a bank, a Library, a Senior Center, the Pilger Café, and a few other small enterprises. The Farmer’s Co-op is the most commanding presence in town. The current park and old swimming pool has been the site of Pilger Days where community spirit is celebrated and people gather to remember its founding days. About two miles out of

town is a housing development of new homes surrounding a lake formed by a large gravel pit operation, Pilger Sand and Gravel.

Congregational History

St. Peter Lutheran and St. Luke's Lutheran have co-existed in Stanton County as a "dual parish" since 1949 according to at least one historical timeline, yet records show they have shared a pastor since 1929. Rev. M.A. Jensen is listed in their respective Centennial Anniversary booklets as their shared pastor at that time.

It is difficult to get the complete history of the relationship of the two churches, although there was common agreement that the dual parish was forged "out of necessity" in 1949, and it was clear that the necessity was financial. While the formation of the dual parish is listed in a "Time Line of Special Events of St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church," there is no mention in St. Luke's history.

An elder of St. Peter described St. Luke's as a mission church of St. Peter's when St. Peter covered 87% of the expenses compared to 13% by St. Luke's. The percentage changed over the years and has been 50/50 since 2002. Finances continue to be the reason they stay together now 58 years later, not uncommon among many small rural parishes.

Each congregation has its own colorful history, however, told in stories that continue to influence their respective culture and mission in 2007. The stories generally focus on the buildings, the early church life, or the pastors they have shared. The names of past pastors were mentioned frequently – Ritzen, Wittrock, Griese, and two clergy couples, Peter & Marsha Jark-Swain and Ruth & Gary Larson. There have been 14 pastorates, including Pr. Steven, since the dual parish began in 1949. All but four have been first call pastors and two of them were Seminex students. The average length of call has been four years.

St. Peter Lutheran Church, Pilger, celebrated its 100th anniversary on September 24, 2000. It is the result of a merger in 1948 of three congregations—St. Petri Lutheran and St. Peter Lutheran, both German, and St. Pauli Lutheran, a Danish church.

St. Petri Lutheran Church was organized in 1898 south of Pilger. It was a country church that shared pastorates off and on over the years with St. Peter Lutheran in town. Stormy weather frequently caused cancellation of services and, when a severe windstorm damaged the St. Petri church in 1947, talks of merging with St. Peter began. St. Petri was ultimately dismantled and all that remains at the site now is the cemetery. Its dark wood altar, pulpit and baptismal font were built into the St. Peter building which was moved from its initial location to the present site in 1948.

St. Peter Lutheran Church was informally organized by 14 charter members in 1900 and by 1903 was large enough to meet in the Pilger schoolhouse and then in the Baptist church. The congregation built a church in 1907 and a tower and bell were added in 1911. A picture of the little white wooden church hangs in the sanctuary as a remembrance. In its growing years, funds were raised by holding suppers and bazaars. Ladies Aid meetings were held in homes and the Luther League was formed in the 1930s.

St. Pauli Lutheran Church met without formally organizing until 1914 and finally became a member of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1925. The congregational membership was mostly Danes who never had their own church but gathered on Sunday afternoons at St. Peter, sharing a pastor with another Danish Lutheran church. A memorable story is told of one Christmas service. Before anyone had a chance to leave, the

organist struck up wedding music and Axel Petersen and Agnes Miller were married. The guests knew that they had been invited to the Miller home for dinner after church but no one had told them it was a wedding party. Years later, descendants of Axel and Agnes Petersen are loyal members at St. Peter and serve as conscientious tour guides during this site visit. The St. Pauli congregation dissolved in 1945 and joined St. Peter in 1948.

The plan to build a new church began in the early 1940s. There was need for more space and there was optimism about the future. Construction was completed in 1949 at a cost of \$30,000 and a note-burning service was held on November 22, 1956. A parsonage was built in 1962. St. Peter had active programs for men, women, youth and children through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

At the time of its Centennial Anniversary, St. Peter not only celebrated the merger of the three predecessor congregations but also acknowledged how the tradition was continuing in 2000 with the Tri-Parish of St. Peter in Pilger, St. Luke's in Stanton, and Trinity Lutheran Church in Winside, a partner in ministry from 1987 to 2002.

St. Peter has since built an addition to the church to create a new, more spacious narthex, to make the basement and fellowship space handicap accessible, and to create a new bell tower. A large rock inscribed with "On Christ the Rock," given by former pastors Ruth and Gary Larson, stands at the entrance. The 1949 cornerstone now graces the inside wall of the narthex with a picture hanging above it, dated June 14, 2003. In the picture are all of the previous pastors who joined in the dedication.

St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Stanton, celebrated its 100th anniversary on September 18, 2005 under the theme "Blessed to be a Blessing." St. Lucas Church began steps toward organization in January, 1905 and was formally organized in February, 1906. Thirty-four families were on the church roll at that time and assumed the cost of \$800.00 to purchase a frame building from the Congregational Church. "The people of Stanton now had a German Lutheran Church in their midst that would fill all requirements to serve all and everyone in the German language," wrote the centennial historians. St. Lucas initially borrowed pastors from neighboring communities and discontinued services in the German language in the late 1930s when speaking German became unpopular. In 1943 the name of the church was anglicized from St. Lucas to St. Luke's.

At that time there were large families and an active Sunday school. In the Centennial history, the story is told how "Johanna Muhs told Esther Muhs that if Esther would teach Sunday school, Johanna would supply the children. Both kept that promise. Esther Muhs led classes for 27 years and taught all nine of Johanna's children." As we drove by the now-empty site, an older member recalled how the building was "just busting at the seams" during those years. The small plot had no possibility for expansion.

Some remodeling in the 1960s, using wood paneling, eventually resulted in a "termite problem." A long-time member remembered being at a funeral when a corner of the casket sunk a little, causing everyone to worry that the floor would give out. "We knew then it was time to do something," she related. The huge bell, inscribed in German and donated by the women of the church, caused "the whole church to creak and sway, especially if you were up in the loft." The realization that they had to leave the little white, wood-framed church sunk in. It was not only the state of the termite-ridden building that forced the decision, but the enticement of a member who owned heavy equipment and offered to prepare the new site "if you do it this year; if you don't, I can't promise about next year," he stated.

Resistance came in threats such as, “I won’t donate anything to the new church unless you take the altar, pulpit, and baptismal font from the old church.” This demand was met willingly and resistance subsided. A building committee was established, a site on the edge of town was purchased, an adjoining lot was donated, and there was \$55,000 in a building fund. St. Luke’s proceeded on faith and, on April 17, 1991 fifty families celebrated their last service in the little church, walked to a site on the western edge of Stanton and lifted the first shovels of dirt for the new church.

The Council took action to send out an “Invitation to Bid” on March 23, 1992, the first step in the sale of the church building. Bids were received from the City of Stanton and Stanton Telephone. The bid for \$5,250.00 by the telephone company was accepted by the congregation on May 8th. This marked the final transaction of the transition from the much-loved little white church to the new brick building on Veterans Avenue.

Much of the work was completed by members and the dedication was held on August 30, 1992 with the theme “The Little Engine That Could.” The mortgage was burned on April 21, 1996, a mere four years later. Additional property purchased in 1995 was paid off in three years and that mortgage was burned in 1998.

It is interesting to note that the materials gathered prior to my site visit included the Invitation to Bid, the offers for purchase and the acceptance. When Pr. Steven told me that the packet was in the mail, he mentioned these pieces. “They felt it was really important to include these,” he said “and you know I’m still seeing things and learning more about this parish every day.” Also included in the packet of information were articles about the two men from the congregation who became ordained pastors, names I frequently heard mentioned.

Understanding the Congregations

I came to know St. Peter and St. Luke’s through first phone conversations with Pr. Steven. His North Carolina hospitality was evident as he accommodated my requests for materials, found dates for the site visit, and shared the excitement of the congregations in participating in this project. “I was not prepared for a two-point parish and rural life,” he related, less a comment about the congregations or Nebraska, but about the significant change he experienced coming from a town of 30,000 in North Carolina to rural Nebraska. He shared that he has found a mentor, a seasoned Lutheran pastor, who “has been invaluable.” He stated, “If I had the money I spent on tuition to pay a mentor, it would be just as valuable.”

Pr. Steven told about how good the people have been to him in his first experience away from home, punctuated by, “I have seen it all, the good and the bad!” In listening to Pr. Steven, it was obvious that he has had highs and lows and has experienced conflict. As he approaches his three-year anniversary on August 3, 2007, he declared, “Sometimes I am amazed I’m still here. The Spirit works in interesting ways.”

In reading the documents sent to me, I began to see just how different the two congregations are, even though they share similar experiences in their histories. I found myself drawing a line down the middle of a paper and doing a side-by-side comparison to help envision the similarities and differences. I looked forward to understand firsthand the challenges that two very different congregations present for any pastor, certainly for a first call pastor; to learn the secrets of how they have co-existed in this long-term dual parish relationship for 58 years; and to understand the methods they have used to weather the ups and downs and resolve conflict. They had been nominated for a reason and I wanted to discover those reasons.

Congregational Profile – St. Peter Lutheran

Trend data for St. Peter Lutheran Church described a membership that had been generally stable over the past six years with baptized membership in the range of 184-195. An effort was made in 2006, however, to clean up the rolls and the current figure of 133 baptized is believed to be more accurate. Average worship attendance of 44 is an increase. There have been about twelve children who participate in Sunday school. Vacation Bible School is held with the Methodist Church.

There is no stewardship program and virtually no interest in developing a structured pledge program for on-going financial support. When there are financial shortfalls, a letter is sent out advising members of the financial distress. A Council member said that had happened only twice in the past six years, one of those times being mid-2006. The Council report included in the 2007 Annual Report thanks members for their generous support, indicating that “through an appeal to giving, fund raising, and austerity moves, we were able to pay our bills and end the year on a positive note.” Mission support is 6.9% of the current operating and debt expenses. ELCA benevolence has grown modestly over the past two years and is currently at \$3,675.

While finances have been difficult, there is a corresponding pride in the declaration that the “mortgage just got paid off last month.” This milestone was mentioned as a goal in the call process paperwork, came up again in conversation with current Council members, and is generally top-of-mind for members when asked about the strengths of St. Peter Lutheran. I acknowledged the “note-burning” tradition and was told that another note-burning service is being planned. While there is justifiable pride in the debt reduction on the building, there is on-going concern about the overall financial situation. I encountered at least two younger members who wondered out loud if more money shouldn’t be going to ministry instead of paying down the debt so quickly.

Council members are very involved—in making sure there is someone to run the Power Point, in beginning the service if the pastor is late, in cleaning the church—and it was acknowledged that “being on Council means you end up doing a lot of the work.” Staffing is all volunteer and there is no paid secretarial support. A survey was conducted in 2006 by the Council to get perspectives on such things as worship times, the contemporary worship, and joint activities with St. Luke’s. Key results include: (1) People want to see the church grow and be financially stable; (2) Members were positive about the contemporary service and would like more; and (3) Members want more activities. These three themes were punctuated by a plea from the Council for members “to get involved” and “be proactive...not reactive.”

Worship is important to the people. An older gentleman, when asked about worship, responded, “I always leave with more than I came.” Pr. Steven’s preaching has been appreciated and people acknowledged that it has gotten better over time. He has listened to feedback to “not bring the congregation to the front of the church or include in sermons unexpectedly.” According to some, it has taken some time to get accustomed to his walking up and down the aisle. The congregation uses both LBW and WOV and expressed some excitement about the new Renewing Worship resources.

There seems to be an attitude of experimentation, whether with music (e.g., invitation to get involved at the “hymn picking” meeting) or the use of Power Point which is used during the entire service. A half-sheet of announcements is all that is handed out to worshippers. The screen for the Power Point was placed to the left side of the altar and does

not detract from the attractive wood altar. A volunteer member prepares the Power Point each week, and on the Sunday I attended, a teenage girl ran the projector.

Overall, the adaptation to Power Point has gone well. “We’ve gotten used to it,” was the general response. Some people really like it and are glad they don’t have to “fumble with a bulletin and hymnal.” Only one person has registered a negative response because of a problem with vertigo that is exacerbated by the projection. He and his wife no longer attend but seem to harbor no bitterness. In fact, they were the ones who are called upon to recite all of the pastors since 1951, remembering which pastors were first call pastors and relating stories about each. Pr. Steven admitted technology is not his gift and that he is not comfortable with Power Point; however, it was initiated by a predecessor and he doesn’t fight it. Over the years the congregation and pastors seem to practice “getting used to each other.” As pastors come and go, the congregation is willing to try new things and pastors decide what battles to fight.

There is no WELCA and women do not participate in Lutheran World Relief – not because it’s seen as unimportant, but because of the small number of people. Some women expressed a desire to get together, perhaps for Bible study, and the idea of a couple’s group has been raised. However, fund raisers generally take priority. They live with the reality of the need to do them.

There is a certain tension about whose job it is to invite community people to church – the pastor or congregation members. Even though there are new people moving into Pilger, with a Hispanic population bringing more diversity, there has been no agreement on who should be doing the evangelism. Pr. Steven has identified “diversity” as one of the congregational needs and has raised the idea of offering classes in English as a Second Language.

Congregational Profile - St. Luke’s Lutheran Church

St. Luke’s Lutheran has 120 baptized members and an average attendance of 55. There is an active Sunday school with fifteen students and four teachers/leaders, and Vacation Bible School is shared with two other churches in town. Baptized membership has decreased slightly over the past six years. Staffing is all volunteer.

WELCA is very active at St. Luke’s and took charge of several activities the Sunday of my visit – confirmation, celebration of graduates, and welcoming of a new family. WELCA members had everything under control. They generally take charge without Pr. Steven’s request. “I just check in with them,” he said, “and know that they will do a great job.” The women are also active in Lutheran World Relief and a prayer shawl ministry. Materials and completed items share a table at the back of the sanctuary.

There is no stewardship program at St. Luke’s. The bad experience of two other local churches with stewardship pledging has made them cautious. In one instance a church lost members over it; in another, there was a lot of conflict. The financial needs are real, however. As the Treasurer explained, “It’s our fifth Sunday offerings that are carrying us now.”

St. Luke’s contributes 25% of its operating and debt expenses to Mission Support and Benevolence and takes pride in providing financial support to the missionary family of Ruth and Gary Larson, former co-pastors currently serving in Bangladesh. When asked what has instigated this high percentage, parishioners acknowledged the presence of a retired pastor in the congregation as the voice who challenges people to give to Benevolence and Mission

Support. “He is quite vocal and challenges us to support the larger church. People respond to him,” related a long-time member.

Worship tends to be more traditional and, by their own admission in the call process papers, it is “contemporary only periodically.” On the Sunday I visited, the organist played a lively prelude. When the children were called forward for the children’s sermon, she played a lilting tune as their processional. All songs were accompanied by both piano and organ. The music provided a “revivalist” feel to the service for me, even though the liturgy for this Confirmation Sunday was Setting One in the LBW. The mixed choir sang an anthem, “The Longer I Serve Him.” I had heard glowing comments about the contribution of the choir over the years.

There is much pride in the church building. My tour guides pointed out many features as we walked through the church. As we proceeded from the narthex to the left and entered the back of the sanctuary, the lovely stained glass windows were pointed out. They were designed by a long-time member, not because he considered himself an artist but because “it was a project.” A large hand-sewn quilt hung on the left wall, made especially for the dedication of the new church. Quilt squares were filled with symbols and icons of the Lutheran faith like a stained glass window, and at the bottom was a list of all of the pastors and their years of service.

One of the women on the tour called my attention to the front of the church, pointing out a lovely white altar and pulpit and baptismal font to the side. She confided in me, “The robe of Jesus was blue in the old church, but I painted it rose to match the new carpet.” It is a lovely picture of Jesus with outstretched hands, welcoming the faithful.

Back at the entrance, straight across from the door were the stairs to the basement. At the bottom of the stairs, I was struck immediately by the wall filled with children’s multi-colored handprints, their names and ages. To me it was an immediate statement of how this congregation has come together – the old and the new, the traditional and contemporary, the past and the future, all living in the present. “It was a bit controversial at first,” my tour guide admitted, “when the Sunday school spontaneously filled this blank white wall with the handprints. Some of the older members thought it ruined the fresh white wall, but now we all like it. It’s fun to find the children’s names and remember them.”

St. Luke’s hasn’t been wordy in how they express their mission. You will not hear about a planning process or drafts of a mission statement. It was stated simply in the self-evaluation from the call documents, “We try as best we can to emulate Christ. When we fail, we rely on God’s grace to help us correct the situation.” The documents go on to say, “First and foremost we are excited about God!”

Working Together in Ministry – The Dual Parish Relationship

Preparing for the Call

Each congregation completed the “Congregational Mission Profile” individually in 2003. A side-by-side comparison yielded some common responses. In response to what is the most significant conflict in your congregation in the last 20 years, St. Peter responded that different expectations between pastors and congregation and financial concerns with the dual parish were points of conflict. It further identified that more frequent meetings of the congregations and better communication would help the situation. St. Luke’s identified the conflict as the challenge of trying to meet the needs of three congregations (when the Tri-Parish with Winside Lutheran existed from 1987-2002). Upon probing this issue on site, it

was confirmed that the Tri-Parish relationship had caused most of the stress and conflict and that things had indeed improved when Winside Lutheran decided to become a solo parish again. The Tri-Parish had been more manageable during the tenure of the two consecutive clergy couples who served 1987-1999. It was easier to serve three congregations with two people but could not be maintained with one pastor.

Significant trends or “surprises” were similar as both congregations noted that attendance was up and that giving had increased. In the case of St. Luke’s, the increase was specifically in benevolence.

Mission priorities, listed in priority, were:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| St. Peter | St. Luke’s |
| 1. Full-time Pastor | 1. Youth Ministry |
| 2. Community Outreach | 2. Active Pastor |
| 3. Retire the Debt | 3. Service to Community |

The longing for a full-time pastor was expressed by individuals in both congregations, followed very quickly by the statement at St. Luke’s, “but we’ve had to learn to do things that we wouldn’t have otherwise done if we had a full-time pastor.” The presence of a resident pastor seems important to people. Only once in recent history has St. Luke’s experienced “its own pastor” when Pr. Scot McVey-McCluskey (1999-2002) and his wife purchased a house in Stanton to be closer to her work.

The parsonage is in Pilger and the presence around town of Pr. Steven and his wife, Courtney, has been important to the people of St. Peter’s. Pr. Steven has found it necessary to declare “two days in Stanton and two days in Pilger” to try to establish equanimity and has made it a point to visit parishioner’s homes during his two days in Stanton. Pr. Steven also has had to learn to draw the line and say “no” when people expected him to drop off letters or other items sent back and forth between the two churches. “I had to let them know that I was their pastor, not their messenger boy,” he related.

Perhaps the greatest difference expressed in the Mission Profiles was the ranking of the “Ministry Priorities and Skills” desired of the ordained leader.

The priorities are:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| St. Peter | St. Luke’s |
| 1. Worship | 1. Interpreter of Theology |
| 2. Evangelism | 2. Spiritual Discipline |
| 3. Preaching | 3. Family Life & Self-Care |
| 4. Musical/Artistic | 4. Youth/Confirmation |

I surmised that these differences would have complicated the Call Process; yet they evidently didn’t. Perhaps the priorities were more an expression of the culture and style of each congregation rather than criteria for the person who would be called. In the end, it was finances, followed by a sense of “fit,” that were critical in the call decision. The dual parish relationship, forged “out of necessity,” driven by what they can pay and the assumption that all they can afford is a first call pastor drove the decision. But it also allowed the Call Committee to do its work diligently and without conflict.

The Call Process

A Call Committee consisted of four people from each congregation, all of whom were Council members. They recalled that synod staff outlined the process for them; however, that was the extent of synod involvement. At the time of the site visit, two Call Committee members and the spouse of a third were available, all from St. Peter. One person from St. Luke's had moved out of the area, another had left the church because of conflict, and the remaining two were unavailable. There was agreement among the three people that the process had been very good. One member felt that the diligence with which each congregation did its self-evaluation contributed significantly to the quality of the process. His advice to any congregation considering a first call pastor is "be honest and critical of yourself in the evaluation and keep it in mind during the interview." Another Call Committee member echoed, "It is important to be clear on priorities (of each congregation) and find common ground." A third piece of advice was, "Don't be afraid; be open with each other."

These became guiding principles which created a very positive working relationship and the ability to organize well for the interview. A phone interview was scheduled first and all of the Call Committee members gathered at the bank in Stanton for a conference call with Pr. Steven. "We were very organized. One of the best things we did was talk out what we wanted and developed a list of questions. Each of us took turns asking questions," recalled a member. He went on to say that a Call Committee member from St. Luke's posed a particularly deep theological question. Pr. Steven's response, "Give me a minute to think about that," impressed the committee. Not only was Pr. Steven thoughtful once he answered the question, but also he had taken time and did not just jump into an answer. The phone interview was sufficiently positive to go the next step, a face-to-face interview. Pr. Steven came with his own questions and there was good discussion. The Call Committee was in total agreement to recommend Pr. Steven. The congregation voted and, as people recalled, the votes were unanimous. Preparations were made for his arrival.

Support of the Pastor

Ever mindful of finances, people recalled that there was some anxiousness about moving expenses for Pr. Steven; however, these were put to rest when Steven, a young bachelor who had never set up housekeeping, arrived with only a few personal belongings in his car. Hospitality was extended to Pr. Steven in many ways – providing food and a place for him to stay while the parsonage was being repaired and repainted, equipping the parsonage with curtains, helping him find furniture, and inviting him to family homes. Pr. Steven appreciated all of the efforts even as he experienced "Nebraska hospitality" as somewhat reserved. "It's not North Carolina hospitality and it's not Texas hospitality (where he had completed his internship); it's just different – Nebraska hospitality!" he exclaimed. Members of St. Peter's found it necessary to also "get used to Pr. Steven." "He found out we don't hug here as much," said an older woman, "but he still does call me 'dear' sometimes."

It helped to have a native North Carolinian on the Call Committee. When this member asked Steven on the phone, "Where did you get that accent?" he recalled, "It broke the ice immediately!" Relationships are very important to Pr. Steven and this has served him well at both St. Peter and St. Luke's. When asked why he has been successful, an older woman responded, "He has done all the right things." Upon probing further, the "right things" consisted of stopping by the senior center, the Pilger Café and other spots around town and, when in Stanton, being very intentional about visiting people.

Hospitality was also extended to Courtney when she had an extended stay during their engagement. She stayed with a parishioner and got to know the area. For the first holiday open house after their marriage, a woman lent the newlyweds some Christmas tablecloths. “Now when we host both of the churches, I just borrow them and she never wants me to wash them afterwards,” Courtney related.

Both congregations have been supportive of Pr. Steven’s involvement in synod activities, his First Call group, and the ministerium. As there have been financial difficulties in both congregations, they have had conversations about continuing education expenses and have been able to find resolution.

While there is sensitivity to the logistics of the dual parish for Pr. Steven, specifically the travel back and forth between Pilger and Stanton, there is little willingness to alter routines. The inability of Pr. Steven to be involved in Sunday school because of the service times at each church was mentioned frequently; however, the suggestion of changing the early service from 9:00am to 8:30am was met with resistance. Council members at St. Peter expressed no intention of discussing it, based on feedback from their 2006 survey. At St. Luke’s, where the suggestion originated, it ultimately came to a congregational vote and the change to 8:30am was supported 19 to 11. There was speculation, however, whether or not it will be implemented on July 1 when the six-month rotation takes place – when St. Luke’s has the early service for six months and St. Peter has the late service.

The self-sufficiency of each congregation also shows up in the assertion, “We just start the service without him,” referring to the tight travel time between towns and the conditions that sometimes make the pastor late for the second service. It doesn’t seem to happen very often but, if it does, there is no reluctance for someone to begin with the announcements and the first song. It is just another of those “things” that pastor and parish have worked out.

Joint Activities

Over the years, depending on who is in leadership, there have been voices that advocate more joint activities between the two churches “since they are a dual parish.” “We may try some things for awhile, but then they die out,” was described by a St. Peter Council member. The tendency seems to be to collaborate within their respective communities rather than between St. Peter and St. Luke’s.

There have been ecumenical activities in both communities; St. Peter and the Methodist church do VBS together and have collaborated on the Christmas Sunday School program. In Stanton, VBS has been held with other churches. St. Luke’s also has participated in the Tree of Caring, an annual effort to provide presents for needy families at Christmas. Both congregations have provided support to the Norfolk Rescue Mission and have participated in the local CROP walk.

The shared activities of the dual parish consisted of Confirmation instruction (which also includes the Lutheran church in Wisner), two joint Council meetings a year, an annual “Lay Renewal Weekend,” and a joint worship service in August on the shores of Lake Meskathine. Joint activities had just been discussed at the April joint Council meeting. St. Peter, using feedback from its 2006 Survey, declined to be part of the worship service at the lake, careful to assure St. Luke’s representatives that there would be no hard feelings if they held a service themselves.

The Lay Renewal has been scheduled for October at St. Peter. Ten years ago the Lay Renewal activity began as a full weekend that included men, women, and children. For those who were involved in the early years, it was a time of faith exploration, community-building, and investing in the dual parish relationship. Now it has been scaled back to include worship and a potluck. For one of the original lay leaders from St. Luke's, there is some regret about this and he hopes it's not a matter of discontinuing it altogether. "If people don't want to continue this, I would hope that we can talk about what we would like it to be," he states.

St. Luke's people have accepted the scaling back of the joint activities, albeit with some disappointment. At St. Peter there has been more of a matter-of-fact acknowledgement that "people are very busy and they just want to do things with their own families." Distance was cited frequently as the reason, although it is apparent that this reason is insufficient, expressed by, "It's just as far to drive from Stanton to Pilger as it is to drive from Pilger to Stanton." In the words of another long-time member from St. Luke's, "We need something; if all we have is sharing the pastor, that's not enough."

Joint Council meetings have standard topics of business. For the spring meeting, the agenda was to plan for the Lay Renewal and worship service at the lake. In the fall, the Council meets to discuss the pastor's salary and the joint Advent and Lenten schedule. Joint worship during Advent and Lent has become routine with services alternating between the two churches. This year during Lent there was a meal, a study of "Lenten Learnings on Worship" and a worship service. There were several positive comments about how much they liked the adult study. For his part, Pr. Steven found the Lenten Learnings study to be a way that he could do what he cannot do on Sunday mornings. "I love teaching," he said, "and I have had to learn to do it in different ways than the traditional Bible Study." One of his goals this year is to find at least four opportunities for education during the year, as well as continue the men's Bible study that meets in the Pilger Bank once a week.

When I asked how they have sustained the dual parish for so many years, there were a variety of responses. "We go with the flow." "We adapt." "We're open." Another response was "Desperation! We need each other. We don't have much choice." It was stated not as "despair" but as the pragmatic reality that neither church could afford its own pastor.

The names of past pastors come up frequently. "They go on to better things," was said. The self-image of always being a first call dual parish seems offset by pride in the stories and pictures that come back to them of where previous pastors are now – missionary work in Bangladesh, appointments to synod staffs, larger parishes – all marks of significant ministry for which they were prepared in their first call.

Conspicuous by their absence in conversation are a few of the former pastors' names. Upon inquiry, there was the off-hand comment, "Well, we've run a few out of town." This was more of a facetious remark than a serious one, it turns out. At least twice in the dual parish history, however, there were issues with a pastor. In one case, when St. Luke's Council members came to a joint meeting ready to discuss the pastor's raise, they found St. Peter members discussing how to relieve him of his duties. I asked, "How was that handled?" "Well, we swallowed hard," related an older St. Luke's member, "and went along with it." In another case, there was unanimity that there "just wasn't a fit;" after conversations with the bishop, the pastor left. In both instances, the pastors went on to other calls. Even though parishioners accepted there wasn't a fit with St. Peter and St. Luke's, there was satisfaction that these pastors continued in ministry and "found a better place" for their gifts.

There has been no Mutual Ministry Committee. Pr. Steven's good intentions to have the Call Committee continue in this capacity were thwarted by a confrontation and ensuing conflict at St. Luke's. The presenting issue was a difference in the understanding of baptism and salvation that came to a head, brought about by statements made by two members (both of whom were on the Call Committee) and refuted by Pr. Steven as not being the Lutheran understanding. The Call Committee reconstituted as Mutual Ministry met only twice and dissolved without discussion after the confrontation. A St. Peter member commented, "I wanted no part of it", feeling the confrontation was inappropriate and not wanting to be part of the conflict. The issues around baptism and salvation expanded into a broader dissatisfaction with the direction of the ELCA on several current issues. There was no resistance to confronting the issue although there was tension and stress for those closest to the confrontation.

Mini-Case: Managing Conflict

As I reviewed the Council Minutes from St. Luke's Lutheran Church, I noted the Minutes of July 19, 2006, in which "The Rev. Lowell Hennigs led a discussion on being a Lutheran Christian prior to our council meeting." It was subsequently noted that a participant in the two-hour meeting then read a long letter indicating he and his family were leaving the church. I wanted to understand more about the situation and learn what was at the heart of the discussion and actions. Four of the people I met in the course of my visit were also participants in the meeting. I also discussed it with Pr. Steven and conducted a telephone interview with Rev. Hennigs. My basic questions: What were the issues and how did the congregation and pastor navigate this time together? People did not avoid the conversation with me and were willing to share their perspectives. By all accounts, the conversations, while tense, were respectful and there were no personal attacks on any of the individuals or on Pr. Steven.

It was the suggestion of the synod office that Rev. Hennigs, a seasoned Lutheran pastor, come to Stanton to serve as educator and mediator. He had served in this capacity before, and the bishop felt he might be less polarizing than someone from the synod. "Conflict resolution is one of my portfolios," he related.

Rev. Hennigs shared with me his opinion that sacramental theology was the focus of the conflict, but "if it hadn't been that, it would have been something else." Previous to this meeting, a lay leader had argued for an understanding of baptism that Pr. Steven pointed out was not a Lutheran understanding. Evidently, this created fodder for the other family who wrote the letter about their disagreements of where the ELCA is going. Rev. Hennig's assessment was that some issue would have eventually been raised that would require a "sorting out."

It was useful to hear Rev. Hennigs describe it as a "structural issue" versus a personal issue directed at individuals or at the pastor. He characterized St. Luke's as a "family style" church where the primary focus is on personal connections and relationships with the pastoral relationship as secondary. It is a function of the long-standing familial relationships that make up its history. "Existing relationships trump the truth," Rev. Hennigs reflected, referring to the congregation's way of maintaining its equilibrium. I had heard several stories of how St. Luke's is a congregation which has lots of "blended" families – Lutheran married to Baptist, sisters of ELCA and WELS churches who still talk to each other,

non-denominational backgrounds finding their way into Lutheranism, in-laws with different theologies. For the most part, the people have found a way to co-exist since relationships are primary.

Rev. Hennigs' perspective of St. Peter is that it has more of a "pastor-led" culture and style than at St. Luke's. He said that he not imply right or wrong, nor good or bad, but just a different view of the pastor's role that is part of the history and the culture of each congregation.

Of greatest interest to me is how Pr. Steven, St. Luke's and St. Peter navigated these trying times in a healthy way. St. Peter folks acknowledged to me that they were aware of the tensions and had witnessed a public challenge to Pr. Steven. They knew that things had been said that were painful and hurtful to Pr. Steven and offered him moral support. It was obvious when talking to the members who tried to become the Mutual Ministry Committee that they had maintained their distance during this time. Rev. Hennigs acknowledged respect for St. Peter, that they did not adopt a confrontational attitude toward St. Luke's such as, "You're trying to get rid of our pastor," nor did they develop a stand-off. Similarly, Pr. Steven did not play one congregation against the other. "Some pastors do that," Rev. Hennigs said, reflecting on his past experience, "and they may win in the short run but lose in the long run. To his credit, Pr. Steven did not do this." People accepted that a resolution needed to be found, and it was, even though people from St. Luke's were saddened to lose members who had been very involved.

Within St. Luke's, Pr. Steven adopted an attitude of listening, sought assistance when he knew he didn't have the skills, engaged in one-on-one, face-to-face conversations, and always remembered that regardless of the issues, "I am still their pastor and they need to know that I am here for them." "I have made some mistakes," Pr. Steven admits, "and I have learned from them." Rev. Hennigs commented, "The Seminary prepares pastors academically but they don't necessarily come with a set of skills or tools in assessing congregations."

St. Luke's has weathered this conflict. People indicated that this conflict has not created factions nor caused other people to leave, though they acknowledged there is still an undercurrent of unrest. Theological differences, concern about the direction of the ELCA, and concern about losing members still remain. These issues were not the first things people shared about their church, but they also did not avoid the inquiry or sugar-coat the circumstances.

A Long-Term Relationship Based on Need and Mutual Respect

It is a fact that many new seminarians will serve their First Calls in rural America. A high percentage will find themselves in dual parishes such as St. Peter and St. Luke's. It is also "not uncommon in the Midwest that the relationship is 'purely economic'," according to Rev. Hennigs. I found the same circumstances in the western Iowa dual congregation case study. In both rural congregational contexts, there was a dedication to the local community, the history, and the preservation of the identity of each church that was primary, seconded by the economic realities. It appears that only after there is assurance that the individual identities will be preserved and the financial arrangements are satisfied is there much interest in joint activities between these congregations.

A dual parish represents complexity for any pastor; e.g., time management, relationship-building, the logistics of serving both congregations fairly. Two congregations

that are very different add another layer of complexity, and two that have different developmental needs add even more complexity. Irrespective of the circumstances, nature will run its course and organisms (people, institutions, initiatives) will gravitate to what is natural for them. Towns will not relate to one another just because they are in the same county. Churches will not relate to one another just because they are a dual parish and share a pastor. People will gravitate to the relationships and history that have been formative to them. Buildings become important because they are tangible and have a greater permanence than people. It is not the intent of this study to try to change these factors, but to lift up the implications they have in the here and now and look with fresh eyes at issues such as congregational and pastoral relationships, mission and ministry.

St. Peter and St. Luke's members love their churches – the buildings and the worshipping community. They also love their pastors, telling the stories and celebrating the accomplishments with a pride that is palpable. Each pastor that has gone on to bigger and better things becomes another story to be told and an affirmation that “We got them started.” It appears that the humorous and mostly loving comments are more freely shared about those pastors who have gone before than those who remain, not unlike the memories of dearly departed loved ones. Yet, I would surmise that people already know the stories they will tell ten years from now about the young seminarian with the accent and a penchant for extending his North Carolina hospitality with hugs. The stories likely will include how he came fresh out of seminary, arrived with nothing and faced a funeral the first week he arrived when he learned quickly the local practice of reading the obituary at the funeral service. The story teller might say how Pr. Steven accommodated to this practice immediately and how he was grateful for the people who helped him out.

There is no question that newly called pastors learn and grow. Whether or not the congregations realize how much they as congregations learn and grow is a question worthy of conversation and reflection. First call congregations that do such a reflection might not only learn some new things, but also celebrate the resiliency and survivalist attitude that is a thread from their early histories. Whether or not the pride of “sending first call pastors on to bigger and better things” can offset the negative self-image of “only being able to afford a first call pastor” is their question to ponder.

At St. Luke's, when asked about their hopes “now that you have no debt,” the immediate and consensual response was “expand the parking lot and put new lighting in it.” At St. Peter, when asked what is next “now that you have paid off your mortgage,” the consensual response was “remodel the kitchen and shingle the roof of the parsonage.” Whether or not the same diligence in paying off the debt can be brought to ministry efforts is the challenge of their stewardship. Music, children's ministry and community service were the things mentioned at both St. Peter and St. Luke's as critical for their future.

Our Final Gathering

We gathered at Tony's Steakhouse, half-way between Pilger and Stanton, on a Monday evening to share a meal and fellowship. Six members from St. Luke's, seven members from St. Peter, Pr. Steven and Courtney joined me. Before I summarized my experience and observations of my three-day stay, I read from I Corinthians 12, citing *the varieties of gifts.....for the common good*, a fitting framework, I felt, for the “variety” I had experienced in these congregations. The waitress had a hard time getting us to sit down since a huge photo album was being passed around. It was filled with pictures of the construction

project at St. Peter, pulled out for the occasion. They wanted to share more with me since the site visit had opened up so many conversations. Others gathered around the album and I heard once again, “I’ve never seen those before.” I had heard that remark several times earlier – when I pulled out the St. Peter Centennial booklet, when I pulled out the “bid” for St. Luke’s, or when I referred to a particular incident. These occasions had been opportunities to share things that newer members had not seen or that Pr. Steven or Courtney had not heard – an opportunity to see themselves again in a new light. One gentleman commented, “When we visit other churches, we always notice things. I guess it might be good to look at ourselves that way.”

I shared what had caught my eye – the children’s handprints on the wall at St. Luke’s, the pink hand towel in the Ladies Room at St. Peter – little things, perhaps, but touches that demonstrated the loving care and pride they take in their churches. I shared with them how different my experiences were in each church and each town, yet how the same spirit is very much alive in their worship. They hadn’t been aware of a common worship experience, the Thanksgiving for Baptism with the children pouring the water, and it seemed to tie them together in the faith that has sustained them.

I tried to wrap up the evening at least three times, but the group continued to talk. My amazement that the two churches had co-existed so well in the dual parish relationship for so long caused a woman to exclaim, “We missed our 50th anniversary; maybe we should do something to celebrate it now.”

I assured them that I wasn’t trying to tell them to do more together, but that I had heard people express how meaningful it was when they did things together. This evoked the remark, “Maybe we should talk more about that.”

At a certain point I sensed a transition had occurred. Sharing my experience with them was replaced with conversation that was flowing among them and seemed very natural and spontaneous. For instance, when Pr. Steven commented that he would much prefer to do a funeral than a wedding, people were surprised and perhaps got a little more insight into his theology and commitment to ministry. When a woman asked Pr. Steven to tell them about his call to ministry, he hesitated only a moment and then shared his journey to seminary and ultimately to them. Later he told me that he had shared bits and pieces of his call story with members, but that was the first time anyone had asked him about his call and he ended up sharing the full story.

As one last attempt to wrap up our gathering, I asked them, “If you had one piece of advice that you would give to a congregation considering a first call pastor, what would it be?” The answers varied:

“Have mercy when they come.”

“Give them guidance; tell them how it’s done.” (funeral, communion, etc.)

“Remember that the pastor is the outsider and doesn’t know all of the connections. It will take time.”

“Be patient.”

“Take them under your wing.”

“Be flexible.”

“Give the pastor a list of who does what, so it doesn’t take so long to figure out.”

“Realize that every seminarian coming out is different, even if you’ve had lots of First Call pastors.”

“Be willing to let them make mistakes.”

“Show them God’s grace.”

It seemed a fitting end to the evening – remembering that God’s grace is present and active in all of our lives. We parted with lots of good-byes and “God bless you.”