

**The Vocation of First Call Congregations**  
**Case Study Report**  
**St. John Lutheran Church, Prairie du Sac, Wisconsin**  
**Site Visit: October, 2006**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Here is the church, here is the steeple.  
Open the doors and see all the people!

This finger-play story of “church,” beloved of teachers and children alike, focuses on activity and energy of people. It is about opening up the building that people might come to life.

Over the course of 20+ hours of interviewing people at St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Prairie du Sac, WI, I heard very little about “the church” as a building. It is indeed a building to be proud of. Sitting on the corner of Oak Street and First Street, it is a beautiful brick, one-story, accessible building, built in 1966 with recent additions of fellowship hall, kitchen, library and classrooms.

Formed 115 years ago by German settlers along the Wisconsin River, just northwest of Madison, this is the third home for the congregation. Growth of the congregation inspired them to move from its original building in 1912 into one purchased from a Universalist congregation that was disbanding. Another fifty years of growth inspired the congregation to build a new facility, dedicated in 1966. In the past few years, further expansion occurred. The 2005 ELCA Congregational report showed a \$500,000 debt remaining.

The faith legacy of the original twelve men and women of German descent who formed St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1891 seems to have been passed on, bearing fruit in a congregation that today is grateful for a beautiful facility and focused on being the people of God in this community and in the world.

Ordained pastoral leadership during the one hundred fifteen years of St. John’s life and ministry was a mixture of short and long term pastorates. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary history book recounts these pastorates with recognition of major ministry themes during their years of service and, in most cases, the place and type of ministry to which the pastor was called when he left St. John’s.

For the last ten years of ministry, St. John’s has been served by a pastoral team. Congregational members talked about watching their current senior pastor start as a seminary graduate, grow into his pastoral role – mentored by the senior pastor – and in the past year, following the retirement of this pastor, move through a second call process to be called as their senior pastor. This dynamic cycle has begun again with the coming of a new associate pastor, recently graduated from Wartburg Theological Seminary. I had the sense that I was sitting in the presence of “proud papas and mamas” as I listened to story after story of this latest chapter of

their history. The following pages are summaries, excerpts, closer examinations, and insights from these stories.

## **CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT AND PROFILE**

More than the church “building” being mentioned in conversation with the people of St. John, was its “location” in the community. Oak Street borders the south side of St. John’s property and is the southern boundary of the town of Prairie du Sac. Oak Street also borders the north side of the church property of St. Aloysius Roman Catholic Church, located just four blocks to the west of St. John, and is the northern boundary of the town of Sauk City, WI. Historically, Sauk City was home to families belonging to the Roman Catholic tradition and Prairie du Sac was home to families belonging to Protestant traditions. Although religion was among the formative forces that gave rise to the two towns, people today minimize such a separating force.

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church has endeavored to build evangelical bridges into both communities and certainly bridges of hospitality and overtures of outreach to the St. Aloysius congregation. This movement has been more or less warmly received, depending on the climate of openness in these church communities.

While there are two towns, it seems that there is one community. People regularly move between the two towns, working and relating to people from both towns. They cross the same bridges over the Wisconsin River to travel to the state capital and Badgers sporting events in Madison. Each town contributes three thousand plus residents to the population count of the area, now combined into one school district, Sauk Prairie. I continually heard about the importance of the one school in this two-town community.

One common reference appearing in almost all stories about the church in the community was the “concession stand” at the school sports complex where Pastor Fred routinely works. They noticed and seemed to appreciate the fact that their pastor was there in the midst of youth and adults selling hot dogs and pop.

People like this community. Gleanings from conversations yielded some reasons for this common theme. The beauty of the area – with the wide and winding Wisconsin River meandering through it and the Wisconsin Dells and Madison close by – offer pleasure, recreation, and awe every time one gazes at the countryside. A newly completed four lane highway makes possible a quick and easy drive into Madison. This attracts new people to the community, and population growth often lends itself to new ideas and business growth. Youth and young adults with whom I shared pizza and conversation on Friday evening in Pizza Hut were thrilled that it had recently come to town. The appreciation of community was infectious!

## **PROCESS FOR CALLING A PASTOR**

The processes for calling Pr. Sally and welcoming her to the congregation seemed to be done with much thoughtfulness and care. Nancy, the chairperson of the most recent Call Committee, spoke clearly about the intentions and actions of the congregation in selecting the members of

the call committee. “The committee needed to be truly inclusive of the diversity of the congregation,” she remarked.

People speak of diversity in their congregation. However, the congregational profile from 2005 reported that of the 1,141 individuals who are members of this congregation, only thirteen are of ethnic heritage other than white/Caucasian. Thus, one does not see diversity in a visual glance of skin color or physical features unique to a particular race of people. Instead, the sense of diversity seems to come from knowing each other well. From this knowledge, they think of diversity in terms of life experience, viewpoints, long and short-time members, Lutheran and non-Lutheran background, political persuasion, age, local and global familiarity and the role of faith in daily life. No one person could be lifted up as a “typical” member.

Knowing that everyone on the call committee was elected for a very particular reason, Nancy described how she needed to be very patient with the Committee’s work. During the congregational profile stage of the call process, each committee member completed the congregational profile according to his or her own understanding and perspective. In a prayerful spirit, the process included enough conversation and group writing so that eventually each person’s responses were incorporated into the final Congregational Profile that would be forwarded to the bishop’s office.

Group processes like this one take time, and in the meantime the congregation was wondering what was going on. Traversing the fine line of not publicly sharing information ahead of time, yet keeping the congregation informed of progress was important. As interviewers reflected on this time period, they acknowledged that Nancy’s regular comments to the congregation during Sunday morning announcement time, immediately preceding worship, seemed to create a climate of trust that the process would lead to the calling of a pastor that would fit the congregation.

The synod policy for interviewing pastoral candidates was for congregations to interview only one first call candidate and to make a decision on that candidate. Not everyone in the congregation appreciated this process. Members reported that there were those who believed this process gave them no voice in the calling of a pastor. However, it was the process that was followed.

One congregational member refused the invitation to interview with me as a response of frustration to the synod’s process.

Thorough and honest paperwork may not always be the whole answer to a smooth process, but in this most recent call process of a seminary graduate, it seemed to have contributed to a match of pastor and congregation that was deeply satisfying. While the interview process and subsequent orientation of the candidate to the town and parsonage all seemed to be have happened according to suggested protocols, the story of the call committee’s deep, intense and prayerful work prior to submitting their synod paperwork might be the most illuminating factor in this story.

## **WELCOMING AND ORIENTATION OF THE FIRST CALL PASTOR**

St. John provided a parsonage for the new pastor. The ranch style, brick residence is on the northeast corner of the church property. The new senior pastor, after residing in this parsonage since his arrival nearly ten years ago, had recently moved into a newly purchased family home. A man who led the property team recruited and directed a crew who assisted with major renovations in the parsonage prior to the new associate pastor's arrival. It was with great satisfaction that in less than a month the property team had completed significant kitchen renovations and cleaned and prepared the house for Sally's arrival.

As the stories were recounted, the day of arrival was a bit anti-climactic in terms of welcome. The information of date and time of the new pastor's arrival was not widely known. A small group of people were gathered impromptu to help unload belongings. A few interviewees expressed regret that there had not been a more hospitable welcome. The new pastor, not knowing any differently, simply moved in and thought this was the way it happened.

Another form of welcome was helping Pr. Sally feel included and this began unfolding upon her arrival. The senior pastor, adult chaperones and youth of the congregation were scheduled to fly to San Antonio for the ELCA Youth Gathering. The new associate pastor was added to the group's registration and travel reservations. According to stories of those who had traveled with the group, Sally's presence with them seemed to have contributed to a strong beginning for her ministry. A young woman, serving as an adult chaperone, related her experience of talking with Sally during the travel time and in the hotel room as a time when she formed a meaningful friendship with Sally. Sally became a real person she liked, instead of just the new pastor.

When I pressed with questions about the extravagance of sending both pastors to the Youth Gathering, there was no question in anyone's mind but that this was the right, even the only thing to do. Some of the story tellers noted that this was also a good opportunity to invite back the now retired, but previously long term and beloved pastor to preach on the Sunday they were gone. It seemed to be a win-win for everyone.

While there were some remembrances of the Pr. Sally's installation celebration, the worship service and a pot luck dinner, more of the conversation with me focused on the way congregational members have been intentional about reminding her of the dates of annual community events and inviting her to attend with them. One story involved watching the "Cow Chip Throwing Contest" at the annual "Cow Chip Festival" that had been held the previous weekend. Describing the laughter and fun of this obscure kind of recreational social event underlined the need for a first call pastor to be welcomed into the community's life as well as the congregation's life.

## **PROCESSES OF SUPPORT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

In terms of processes of support, there is no Mutual Ministry Committee in the congregation. It's not because this congregation is a utopia. People readily talked about diversity of opinion and the fact that families do leave the congregation, even as families come into the congregation. However in the midst of this, there seems to be a climate of good will. The pastors have fostered an awareness that a community exists within the congregation. Evidently it was not always that way. There were memories of Sunday worship times when Pastor Fred asked people to stand

during the announcements or sharing of the peace, and walk “across the center aisle and have a brief conversation with another person.” From these experiences, leaders of the congregation, as well as long time and newer members, talked about being intentional in not just saying “hello” to each other, but in forming relationships. One member, DM, told of the freedom to disagree with another member about a decision needing to be made. MF said, “I’m for this.” DM said, “I’m ag’in it!” The decision was made and life went on with both of them, having fully expressed their opinions and then participating in the work that followed the decision.

Probing the confidence that members could disagree and then move on and wondering what role trust plays in this climate, I heard people identify that people do trust one another, and people trust the pastors because they believe the pastors have the best interests of the congregation at heart when decisions are made.

This informal process of dealing with disagreements seems to work in this community of faith because people love and trust their pastors and visa versa. Contributing to this mutuality is a good dose of humor. Pr. Fred has a reputation for being able to put people on the spot in a way that good naturedly draws laughter. Later I would find this out for myself.

There has been a desire to be a reconciling presence within the larger community. St. John provides much of the initiative and energy for the ecumenical connections within the community of the two towns. A Crossways Bible Study for the community, led by their previous pastor and held at the Roman Catholic Church, was often cited as an example of community participation. Evidently, the current priest is less open so the Bible study is not presently offered.

St. John regularly opens its facility to community groups, including recreational athletic events in their gymnasium space. St. John’s pastors are noted by congregational members as being the ones taking initiative for community worship at Thanksgiving time.

## **CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTHS**

St. John members seem to truly care about and delight in their congregation. Person after person commented about what a friendly and caring congregation it is. A common story theme was the Sunday coffee hour time. People have been formed by Pr. Fred’s coaching to engage in conversation about their daily life. A new member expressed how startled he was that people initiated a conversation, rather than merely saying “hello.” Growth in the congregation is reported to be occurring because people are being invited to come and visit. Members and pastors both are credited for having originally invited many I interviewed.

During the course of this congregational visit, I visited with about sixty people of the 1,141 who are reported as members on the 2005 Congregational Report. The scope and perspectives of their stories suggest they were not hand picked because an image was sought to be portrayed. For instance, after listening to two members share warm and positive stories about the congregation, a third person spoke up, “That’s not the only story...”. She had not found the congregation to be welcoming. She noted that she has been there for years and felt very lonely most of the time. She worshiped at the 11 am service and for many years grieved that there had been no choir, special music or fellowship time for that service. It was reported by the other two that changes

have recently addressed those situations and she agreed that this was the case. When I asked her why she remained in the congregation while holding these feelings, she responded, “Because of the Bible study and the opportunities to be in mission and [because of] the staff.”

The people of St. John seemed eager to talk about their experiences in this congregation. Before the site visit, I e-mailed the congregational secretary a schedule for sixteen interview times, and upon arrival all sixteen times filled. One time I met with two people, but mostly there were groups of four, five, or six people, as well as several Sunday morning conversations. A group of three community leaders, non-members of the congregation, even arrived at 8 am on Saturday to talk about their experiences of St. John in the community. Group after group arrived at their agreed upon time. They did not cancel out, and if an emergency impinged upon their appointment, they rescheduled. All of this was on a weekend with a home football game in the community on Friday and a Badgers football game in Madison on Saturday. I continue to be deeply impressed by the energy that pulses through this congregation and its members and its mission.

Perhaps mission is at the heart of this congregation’s strengths. Kiosks in the gathering area, displays in the fellowship hall, and announcements in the printed materials on Sunday morning offer an array of invitations for people to be involved in caring about other people in the local, regional and global community. Nine different forms of caring about other people were described in the Sunday morning bulletin the day I worshipped with them. When I asked about the process for the selection of mission opportunities, the pastors reported that after consulting with them, individuals seeking involvement in a caring project were encouraged to invite others to participate. Thus, each form of caring isn’t expected to solicit a whole congregation response. A congregational member who had been worshipping with the congregation less than one year was already leading and inviting the participation of others into a new ministry of making prayer shawls.

Generosity of time and talents was obvious from these conversations. Financial generosity was also evident in the hospitable and welcoming facility and in the congregational budget. However, there has been little formal talk about financial giving. Interviewees reported that the congregational perspective had been that finances necessary for congregation needs will be received. Some memories were shared of a person standing up and announcing in the congregation that funds were low, and that seemed to be all that had been needed to rectify the situation.

In one interview with a person leading a ministry team focusing on “giving,” an activity planned for this fall will remind people about “giving.” It is a variation of the “Pony Express” process where a packet of information about giving moves from home to home. At St. John the contents of the packet will include inspirational, educational and instructional material to help declare a financial intent of giving to the congregation. It will be clear on the packet who to deliver the packet to next. One interviewee noted that when someone expressed seeing no need for this in the congregation, Pr. Fred’s response was, “It is another opportunity for someone to be involved (in the congregation).” By tone of voice and repetition in reporting this to me, it was clear that the phrase “another opportunity” was the persuasive point in Pr. Fred’s response.

According to leaders, the addition of more and more ministry opportunities has had any negative impact on monetary support of the congregation. It was suggested by one person that this may have contributed to more generous giving.

Contributing to the financial strength of the congregation has been the receipt of bequest monies in significant amounts. Several thousand dollars from this fund have been shared with a neighboring congregation in their support of three seminarians. This story was repeated throughout the interviews in a joyful tone.

Youth and family ministry that focuses on sharing the love of Christ beyond the congregation would easily be recognized as a mission-driven strength of this congregation. The following mini-case is one example of the magnitude of this energy.

#### **MINI-CASE: RALLY SUNDAY 2006**

I was seeing correctly! Preschoolers and their parents were playing miniature golf in the center of the parish hall. In the midst of the new, large-enough-for-a-small-basketball-court size multipurpose room, buzzing with laughter, conversation and activity, was a small miniature golf course. Taped to each cardboard “hole” (more like an archway, than a hole in the ground) was the name of a country in which the ELCA is in accompaniment with a local church. It was called “Around the Globe Golf.” Parents were naming the countries (and sometimes tweaking the position of the “hole”) as the small plastic balls, that looked much like a globe, rolled towards them. The giggles of glee were contagious!

On the perimeter of the parish hall, inflatable globes were being tossed into “Baskets of the World.” The country of origin was identified on the beautiful hand woven baskets. There were also baskets for sale in the World Market in the gathering area of St. John.

“Where in the world?” found people playing a game that many might recognize by its actions as “Pin the tail on the donkey.” The large world maps mounted on the wall made it obvious that we live in one small spot in a big world. Just to the left of the maps, in the front corner of the parish hall, was a display of some of the hundreds of quilts made by congregational and community members that will be shipped to many places in the world through Lutheran World Relief.

At one point, parents and children were singing together “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands.” the theme song for this year’s Sunday school experiences. The song leader was one of the youth who had taken time out of her Friday evening activities to join me for pizza and conversation. And speaking of food, true to the nature of any well-planned intergenerational event, there was food. Fortune cookies, tortilla chips, “Swiss” cheese, and a “world of fruit punch” gave nourishment to hungry tummies.

It was clear that we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There were computers with on-line access to the ELCA Global Mission website, with reminders of the link that was

just for kids (<http://www.elca.org/mission4kids/index.html>). One computer noted that travel about the world without a picture ID/passport is impossible, so pictures were taken as children registered for the day.

To assist with this focus in the year ahead, there was a table to trace and decorate one's handprint which would then become a part of a visual display, remembering "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." "As his children, Jesus asks us to love one another as he loves us and to be his servants in the world. Our handprints we make today will be used throughout the year as a symbol of our call to be servants and of our connection to one another. God Bless the World!" (quoted from the printed guide to Rally Day activities.) Goals are also a part of focusing, and a "Goals for Sunday School" corner gave people the chance to do field goal kicking.

Within the spirit of the fun, there was also the awareness that many in the world do not have the necessities they need. One of the ways that St. John cares for people in the Sauk City/Prairie du Sac area is to assist with a "Good Neighbor Medical Clinic." The offerings placed in the baskets during this rally day were being given to support this free clinic.

As much as I wanted to stay and play the games of the world, sing and eat with the folks, I was gently reminded by the pastor that there were members waiting to talk with me in one of the Sunday school rooms. Walking away from the energy of this global rally day event, I hearkened back to the first interview of the weekend. At 7 am Friday, among the four women who met with me were two who had responsibility for directing the Sunday School Rally. They had greeted each other that morning with updates on this event in process. At that early Friday morning moment I had had no clue of the creative and interactive global event that would be experienced with the traditional term, "Sunday School Rally Day." I now had a quite clear hunch as to why any parent would want their child participating in this congregation's Sunday school program.

## **LAY-CLERGY RELATIONS**

"A mutual admiration society" might be too strong of a phrase to describe the lay-clergy relations at St. John. I heard enough stories that congregational life is real, with its disagreements and differences as well as joys, successes and ordinary days, but in the midst of it, people seemed to genuinely like their pastors, and the pastors, their people.

To get a perspective from the outside looking in, I met with three people from the community at 8am on Saturday morning. They echoed the growing chorus I had heard the day before, "Everybody likes Fred!" (the senior pastor). One of those three expressed relief about the working relationship with Fred and that differences can be attended to as they arise. "We can trust the pastors because we know they care about the congregation," one community member stated. When I heard that a disagreement arose with the pastor, I asked, "How are you attending to this?" The answer became predictable, "Oh, I've talked to Fred about it."

In conversations with Pastor Rilling and Kris, his spouse, and Pastor Mitchell (new first call pastor), the responses to questions about relationships with congregational members were equally positive. When I asked why they felt the congregation remained healthy, I heard: “They are not questioning my motives.” “There are no hidden agendas here.” “We don’t have a lot who need to be in power.” .

It was obvious that the members and the community delight in a pastor who is a person in the community and in the congregation as well as being a pastor in the congregation and in the community. It was also obvious that the pastors delight in people who gather for worship and Bible study and who as Pastor Fred said, “expect the pastors to lead but that the people do the ministry.” From the outside looking in, it really does have the character of a mutual admiration community.

### **HOSPITALITY, OUTREACH AND WORSHIP**

The themes of hospitality and outreach appeared again and again in a variety of forms. The wife of a member, who attends another congregation in the community, had ears into the quilting group, where she participates in quilt making and social time. Her stories carried a sense of mission beyond the local community. If I heard and remembered correctly, there were several hundred quilts made in the past year.

Congregational leaders told stories of being on retreat in a neighboring congregation. A sign posted on the bulletin board in this congregation indicated they were currently contributing to the seminary support for three people from the congregation. Knowing that there were currently no members from St. John in seminary, the leaders returned from the retreat and voted to donate \$25,000 of discretionary endowment funds to give to this congregation’s efforts.

Several people told stories, as if it were just today, of 5-6 years ago when their previous senior pastor taught “Crossways” Bible study for the community, with the classes being held in the Roman Catholic congregation’s facility. Studying the scriptures with others from the community was one of those moments they wished could have continued. However, in time, the pastor leading the study retired, a new priest came to town who wasn’t keen about such endeavors, and the study was discontinued.

Worshipping with the congregation on Sunday morning at both services, 8am and 10:30 am, was an experience of immersion in Lutheran worship. The Lutheran Book of Worship liturgy, Setting I, gave structure to the corporate worship. I was at home there as I am in my home congregation. It was like nestling into a familiar community during the worship time, with the exception of one joke on me. I had heard stories of the playfulness of the senior pastor, so my intuition told me I had it coming. The long story short, I overslept and arrived at the sanctuary just as pastor was completing the pre-service announcements. There was no way I could slip in unnoticed. When he saw me walk in, he called it to everyone’s attention, along with joking comments about letting powers-that-be know that I showed up late! Laughter rippled through the congregation.

During worship I could not help but notice the American Flag and the flag that people think is the Christian flag standing prominently in the front of the chancel. This made we wonder about the piety of this congregation and how first call pastors deal with this form of piety. Stories abound among seminary graduates of the ways they seek to move the flag to other places in the church building. Some congregations have actually been through this experience enough times to summarize it this way: “We come to learn how a pastor will love us by the way the flags are moved.”

I decided to ask about the flags during Sunday school hour conversations. One person spoke up, “Why do you ask?” I had the sense that I opened up a “can of worms” or maybe even “stirred up a hornets’ nest.” I realized that the piety of this congregation is embedded in a deep love for being citizens of America. The presence of the flags speaks that love of country. My response to the member’s questions indicated my awareness that there are differing perspectives about the presence of such flags in the chancel; that seminary graduates often have strong feelings about this, and it can become an issue in their first call. This was not fully satisfactory. “Well, why is it an issue?” was asked. After I responded a bit more, the comment was, “Well, maybe we should talk about this.”

In reporting this story to the senior pastor, I offered my apologies if I had opened up a topic that was not helpful. He shared that he was well aware of the flags and that this was not an issue he had chosen to address. He acknowledged that someone might now bring it up in conversation, but if they did, that was OK. More at the heart of the ministry he seeks to lead his people into is the call to be a servant, a disciple, to care about others.

There are two distinct stories that stood out, based on repetition in telling them, as indicators of the ways the pastoral leadership has been shifting people’s perspectives and visions in a welcoming direction. When the “peace is shared” during worship, people remember their coaching, “It is OK to cross the aisle and share the peace with folk over there.”

Secondly, a sermon preached recently, resounds for those who were present that day and is reported by those who were not there, but heard about it. In the midst of proclaiming that the love of God in Jesus Christ is not just for us, but for “them” as well, members were asked to stand up, move to the other side of the aisle and reseal themselves there. The point became quite vivid: now we are “them.” One way this has been lived out is St. John’s intentional effort to be a welcoming church in the community.

Ecumenical relationships are foundational for St. John’s members. Interviewees repeatedly affirmed their joy that open communion is practiced at St. John. They know that any baptized person who worships with them is welcome at the Lord’s table. Their own pain at not receiving such hospitality in other area churches (for many in the Missouri or Wisconsin Synod Lutheran churches of their family members) is reflected in inverse proportion by their joy in welcoming all to the Lord’s table.

## **EXPECTATIONS: CONGREGATION AND PASTOR**

Three congregational council members and two of their spouses arrived for our 9:30 am meeting on Friday. We settled into the library, an almost new room that is just across the gathering area from the front doors of St. John's facility. The neatly organized, attractively decorated, brightly lit room has glass windows on the upper half of the walls along the main corridor and would be "home" for me for the next two days of interviewing. After an exchange of get acquainted stories, I posed the question directly to the leaders who were there: What do you expect of your pastor?

The responses began almost immediately. "We expect our pastor to provide direction for us and to keep us informed about the ELCA and church stances on topics." "We expect our pastors to lead in worship and to bring out the best of things."

At a later interview I would hear about a recent situation in which some members were dissatisfied with the choices of hymns that were being sung in worship. When they took their concern to the pastor, a process was created for suggesting favorite hymns. These would then be incorporated into the worship services as they were planned. It seemed to become a win-win rather than winner-loser contest. I have a hunch this is "bringing out the best of things."

Leaders expect their pastor to live their faith every day and to be a "little something for everyone in the congregation!" One example cited was about the new pastor. When she first met a member of the congregation with a severe spine curvature, she knelt down so that she was able to look into the woman's eyes while she was visiting with her.

From the leaders' standpoint however, they articulated clearly that they expect their senior pastor to be a mentor for the newly ordained associate pastor. "He was mentored by Pastor Wendt (former and recently retired senior pastor) and we expect him to do that for Sally." They also spoke of their awareness that it is truly a blessing for their congregation to have two pastors.

Leaders expected the newly ordained pastor to have a lot of learning to do and that the senior pastor would be a model of a healthy pastor for her. Among the leaders present, one newer to the congregation family remarked with amazement that it was only when the former senior pastor was retiring and leaving that they became aware there actually were "senior" and "associate" roles. They had perceived the pastoral team to be functioning as peers and colleagues and experienced no sense of hierarchy. This is the experience of mentoring and ministry that they would expect to continue.

During the course of later interviews, expectations of pastors would surface in conversations, outside the parameters of a direct question. Among the common expectations was that the pastors need to connect with the youth. When I probed what "connecting with the youth" meant, the response was that Pastor Fred is approachable and the youth feel comfortable with him. Stories of the "concession stand" would often pop up at this point. One parent remarked, "The Pastor makes himself approachable. It is common to see kids surround the pastor. They comment that 'He is one of us.'"

Stories about how naturally Pastor Sally connected with the youth during the San Antonio trip were told often. There are adults who organize and assist with programmatic ministry for youth, but it is a clear expectation that the pastors will build relationships with the youth.

Another expectation took the form of an attitude. The members do not expect their pastor to be perfect. In fact, they rather expect there to be mistakes and for forgiveness to be given. Pastor Rilling's ability to acknowledge a mistake has endeared him to the congregation and opened wider the doors for trust. Another attitude expressed was an honest feeling that many have when something is problematic: "I just want the pastor to fix it, to tell me what to do." The storyteller knew this would not necessarily happen, but appreciated the relationship with the pastor so that this could at least be expressed.

Just as members expect the pastor to be involved in the community, they also expressed that they want the pastor to have time for self and family. There was a clear awareness that congregation, work and family are interwoven and attention needs to be given to all of them.

Leading in hospitality also was identified as an expectation of the pastor. Hospitality concerns both the community as the congregation. The congregation has been both caring and formed to care, and they expect pastors to be hospitable and to lead them in hospitality. Community members reported in their interviews that there is deep respect for the congregation in the community and that St. John's facility is used a lot by the community. There was a sense of concern during the call process that perhaps a new senior pastor would not value the community quite so much. (Pastor Rilling, who had served as associate pastor, was called to be senior pastor after the previous senior pastor retired.) It is with joy that they received Pastor Rilling as the new senior pastor, knowing that these same attitudes would continue.

A prominent community member, also a member of the congregation, echoed a similar thought in these words, "People like it here. People do not want to see us fail - pastors or congregation. It sometimes makes me wonder, though, if the pastor will want to stay?" At least two other times during the interviews this concern was expressed. In the speakers' reflections about this, there was no clearly articulated concern other than that the pastor might find another place more appealing than this one.

Both pastors are very clear that their ministry is about being disciples of Jesus Christ. It is about caring for others as Jesus cared for people. With that core conviction, it is no surprise that they recognize the value of caring for the community and the congregation in a way that is continually directing them to think about others. A logical expectation within the congregation is that the pastors will lead and that the people will do the ministry. In terms of pastoral practices, the pastors seem to thrive in this setting where the congregation expects the pastors to make the choices and determinations.

Reflecting back to their seminary formation, both pastors recognize how they have been trained to value partnership, teamwork and collaboration with their colleagues. They **[feel they]** will thrive in the current understanding of pastoral teamwork at St. John and are clear they could not accept a call to a congregation that expected a hierarchical model of "senior pastor."

Pastor Rilling remembers very clearly in his own formation that the senior pastor allowed him to “pick his own battles” and would stand with him in those that he believed in. Pr. Rilling clearly sees the value of this. It is fundamental in the team relationship that is now being built.

## **FINANCIAL ISSUES**

The topic of finances was in a sense everywhere present and hardly ever talked about directly. What was present was a spirit of gratitude. After a day and a half of hearing indirect referrals to finances, but never that there was a shortage, I asked at a late Saturday morning interview, “How do you form a generous spirit?” The response was, “We do not stress giving and then the giving flows.” Another said, “When we are not having to regularly ask, people are more willing to give.” In the midst of a conversation about conflict, one person added, “Our energy is directed into service from the preaching and in the youth formation. In doing this we forget about self.” The carry-over of this appears to contribute to financial support of the congregation and the ministries that members give their energy to.

In the last interview on Saturday, a story was told about the pastor who served a long term pastorate from the early 1960’s until early 90’s. He was very clear that there would be no fund raisers in the congregation. His conviction was that the congregation was to teach and learn “giving.”

A former congregational treasurer offered that the congregation is in a state of financial stability. Over the past 15 years there have been generous givers who sense an obligation to fulfill commitments they make. Both tradition and formation are included in this.

Another participant told a story of being away from the community and congregation for a time. After returning to the community and an occasional return to worship, a conversation with the pastor included a request for offering envelopes. When I probed about the story underneath this, acknowledging that it is not necessarily a common request, a family story was told. The parental generation, now deceased, had been members of St. John and taught the children to tithe. “It is just what you do.”

To probe for the roots of this generosity, I asked, “What contributes to this generous spirit in this place?” Among the responses was an acknowledgment of the economics in the area. It is a good time. There is an “explosion” of new housing in the area. Another offered that people can see where the money is going to bless others through the many ministry opportunities, and that people are generous when a need is presented.

I sensed there had to be deeper reason. When I used the word “inspiration,” one spoke up and talked about the environment, the beauty of the land around the community. “Nature inspires us every day.” Another mentioned receiving daily inspiration in viewing the Wisconsin River, flowing on the east side of town, while driving to work.

Contributing to the financial stability of the congregation is the generosity of now deceased members who have left significant bequests to the congregation. Those who have served on the

team that is charged with dispersing the investment earnings from the bequest report that is a welcomed process each year when the decisions are made as to the recipients of the monies.

## **SENSE OF VOCATION**

St. John seems to know itself to be a healthy congregation in a healthy community. Health does not mean perfect. It certainly includes the capacity to receive each new day and experience that arises with energy, creativity and imagination, and in theological language, to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A sense of vocation as a first call congregation is relatively new to the congregation, although in its early years, there were several pastors who have been first call pastors (according to their pictures and brief biographies in the Congregation's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary History Book). Their lived experience of Pastor Rilling coming to St. John directly from seminary is clear to them. His growth as a pastor while working with Pastor Wendt is spoken of with that affection of a "proud papa or proud mama" watching their offspring succeed at some major endeavor. They expect that he will now to do this for the newly called seminary graduate as associate pastor.

The people speak about their congregation and community with great affection and admiration. This seems to contribute to the state of health in this congregation. One might wonder, "Who wouldn't want to be pastor here?" as you listen to them speak so affirming and enthusiastically about St. John, and Prairie du Sac/Sauk City and the Sauk Prairie School District.

Finances influence any reality. The reality that a lack of finances is not a driving force at St. John certainly contributes a state of well-being. Gifts of money, time and energy given in gratitude generate a spirit that is contagious and inspires ministry and mission.

The local context contributes to the sense of well-being. Historical understanding is critical. Knowing that Prairie du Sac was the Protestant community seems to inspire a sense of openness and outreach to a congregation that today desires to be a witness to Christ's love in the entire larger community. There is plenty "to do" and the capacity to receive the energy of a seminary graduate is sincerely acknowledged. In the words of one interviewee, "A new pastor brings a breath of new life to the congregation."