

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
Living Hope Lutheran Church, Ettrick, Wisconsin
Site Visit: September, 2006
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Congregational History

“On September 21, 1897, a group of people met at the Iver Pederson Hall in Ettrick to talk of the need for a Norwegian Lutheran Church.”¹ And so begins the history of Living Hope Lutheran Church in Ettrick, Wisconsin as reported in the document “A Brief History of Living Hope Lutheran Church” found in the 100th Anniversary Booklet distributed at the celebration on October 19, 1997. Iver Pederson donated “a beautiful piece of land for the building site”², and the Ettrick Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded on October 14th, 1897. The cornerstone was laid on August 14, 1898 in which copies of the New Testament Lutherhske Kirke Tidende, Bornebalder and one copy each of *Skandiaven*, *Whitehall Times and Blair Banner* were placed.

For a congregation with over a 100-year history, Living Hope has had few pastoral calls. Key pastoral calls and congregational events include:

Reverend S.S. Urberg of Blair, a community 20 miles from Ettrick, accepted the first call to serve the congregation and began his work in June of 1898 at an annual salary of \$100. Reverend Konrad Urberg was called as Pastor upon the death of his father, accepted the call in 1930 and served until December 31, 1951. The combined pastorates of father and son extended over a span of 53 years.

In 1956 the congregation voted to become a single parish, calling their own pastor. The historians describe this as a critical decision for the church.

In 1962, the congregation decided to change its name to something that would better describe who they were as a congregation because they were no longer the Norwegian church and the felt that “Ettrick Lutheran Church” did not give them an identity. A contest was held and the name “Living Hope Lutheran Church” was selected. The historians of the church indicated that the husband of “Harriet” was the one who found the name “Living Hope” while thumbing through the Bible and stumbling across 1 Peter 1:3.

By 1950, it became evident that more room was needed for Sunday school and other activities. As is normal in the decision making process of this congregation, it took much time to address all the issues involved in expansion. In 1961, the congregation voted to adopt a building program, property was purchased in 1962 and the groundbreaking for the first unit of the educational building was held April 5th, 1964.

Pastor Douglas Brandt was installed in 1975 and served until August 1987 and Pastor Lyle Ness was installed on the first Sunday in January 1988 (on the day the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church came into existence) and served until his retirement in 2003.

Living Hope church decided to minister to itself for about seven months after Pastor Ness retired. This turned out to be an excellent experience for them. Seven months later they accepted an interim pastor for five months until Pastor Kristin was called in August of 2004. This is

¹ 100th Anniversary “Heirs of Living Hope” Booklet

² 100th Anniversary “Heirs of Living Hope” Booklet

Pastor Kristin's first call and she was ordained on August 22 and began work in September of 2004.

Members Perspectives on their History

The congregation is proud of their Norwegian heritage although the historians of the church recall that when Pastor Uberg died in September of 1930, "the old Norwegian nature of the congregation also died"³. The historians, however, continue to feel strongly about the Norwegian roots of Living Hope and feel it is evident in the ways they operate as a congregation. There was an understanding and acceptance of not having the Norwegian language spoken (only one of the eight historians I spoke with speaks Norwegian fluently), but an acknowledgement that the Norwegian friendliness, stubbornness, ability to avoid conflict and acceptance of a "need to move on" when conflicts are resolved or irresolvable work well for them as a congregation.

The congregation is also proud of the fact that they have had only nine pastors in the almost 110 years of existence. Five of the eight previous pastors had lengths of stay of 9 years or longer and the average length of a pastor at Living Hope has been 12 years. Many of the historians interviewed knew the majority of the pastors that have had calls to Living Hope.

Congregation members feel they have had excellent pastors and spoke no ill of any pastors over time. They indicated that some of the pastors had very different styles and the congregation has adapted to their style of ministering. In describing the last two pastors before Pastor Kristin they stated that one was more pious, reserved and aloof and the other was a very easy going person who allowed the congregation more independence to try new things, but they indicated they loved each pastor for who they were and what gifts they brought to Living Hope. This, they feel, extends as well to Pastor Kristin, who is a first call Pastor and has been at Living Hope for two years.

Congregational Context and Profile

Living Hope Lutheran Church is in Ettrick, Wisconsin in what is known as the "drift less area"⁴. It is a 40-minute drive to La Crosse, Wisconsin or Winona, Minnesota. Nearly 70% of the non-retired adult members work outside of the Village of Ettrick. Most are parents in "dual income" households. A large number are professionals as well as agricultural services and farming.

The village of Ettrick (population c. 600) was settled as a farming community in the 1850's and was incorporated into a village in 1953. Its heritage is Norwegian and the community has a long tradition of civic pride. Local businesses, service clubs and organizations have given the community many projects and on-going activities. In the past five years the Lion's Club, the Village Board and the School Board cooperated to construct a community center and expand the library. The larger Township of Ettrick (population c. 2000) is primarily family farms growing corn and soybeans and raising dairy cattle.

The only controversy in the area in recent years was over the addition of the Trempealeau students to the high school. Galesville and Ettrick were fine with this merger, but Trempealeau had difficulty giving up its high school. The merger was completed and the communities have gone forward to provide excellent education for all its students.

There are four other ELCA congregations in the Township:

French Creek is known to be outgoing, energetic and makes decisions and acts quickly,

³ 100th Anniversary "Heirs of Living Hope" Booklet

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in American – Congregation Mission Profile, Part III, p.10

South Beaver Creek is a very laid back, low key congregation,
Hardies Creek is the “family” church meaning that most activities there revolve around families, and

North Beaver Creek is a quiet congregation.

Living Hope parishioners describe themselves as being the “friendly church” and feel others would say the same about them. Being the “friendly church” to outsiders is important to them. Joint projects with these congregations, as well as ecumenical projects with St. Bridget’s Catholic are a proud part of their tradition.

In discussing the data from the ELCA Congregational Trend Report the members felt that they were stabilizing in their growth. Data from 1995 to 2002 indicate a small decline in membership but a small increase in worship attendance. Giving per member has steadily increased. Living Hope addressed itself as “a small, but strong congregation, and growing – not quantitatively, as much as qualitatively in our response – collectively and individually – to Christ’s Call. In our life as a modern Christian community in a rural area, numbers are neither the beginning nor the end of anything. Yet, our lives as individual members are diverse, and so too are our congregational activities.”⁵

Telephone Conversations

Communications to begin this study began in July. Pastor Kristin indicated that she had asked long time parishioner Rosanne Thompson to act in the capacity of organizer for the weekend visit and to accumulate the items for my review prior to the visit. They were very excited to be a part of this study

I contacted Rosanne in late July to explain the process and again in August to follow up. Rosanne scheduled the individuals and groups we decided on and in late August I received the package with all the materials I requested and was e-mailed the schedule.

Although no functions were scheduled outside of church, coffee hour, Rally Sunday activities and confirmation orientation, it was evident that they had put together individuals and groups that would be great to talk to and learn from in the process of getting to know the Living Hope congregation.

Pastor Interview

I met with Pastor Kristin and Rosanne on Friday in Ettrick and had dinner with Pastor Kristin alone on Saturday evening.

Call Process

Pastor Kristin began the call process with Living Hope in April 2004 when she was contacted by the Synod. She was interviewed in May and called back to the congregation to preach and meet the council in June. At that time there was a picnic “meet and greet” at a council members house with most of the council members and their families present and others deemed important to the process. This was a very positive experience for her as it was a warm and comfortable setting and she could meet families.

In July, she was called back to preach a second time with the reasons being two fold – many of the members had not had an opportunity to hear her as church was not well attended due to a community activity on the first day she preached. In addition, the sound system was

⁵ Evangelical Lutheran Church in American – Congregation Mission Profile, Part III, p.10

not set correctly for a woman's voice on that day, and thus many parishioners who were there had difficulty hearing her. She indicates even though those were the given reasons, she felt that some church members were struggling with the issues of her age and gender. She was aware that they were moving from an older (mid seventies) male to a young (mid twenties) female. This callback was uncomfortable for her and she seriously considered withdrawing her name from consideration because she didn't want them to feel like they "had to" take her as their pastor. She did not feel that would be in the best interests of her or the congregation. She prayed about it, spoke with the bishop and felt it was still her "calling" and decided to keep her name in the process.

Pastor Kristin feels that the Holy Spirit was very involved in the call process and her welcome to Living Hope. She prayed for the congregation and their concerns as well, and the congregation voted almost unanimously on August 1, 2004 to call her as their pastor. She now sees how the extra time and preaching opportunity (although unique in the call process) worked well for this congregation and allowed for a more successful integration. She was ordained on August 22 and moved into the parsonage in Ettrick on Labor Day.

Welcoming

The congregation warmly received her when she came to Ettrick. It was very evident that the congregation had done a lot of work in the parsonage, painting, cleaning, carpeting and a few months later took her to pick out new window hangings. There were many people from the congregation there on the day she moved in and everyone was helpful in bringing in boxes, furniture, serving food and talking with her as she directed the boxes and furniture where she wanted them put. She found them to be a very friendly congregation and began learning their names immediately. Pastor Kristin feels learning and knowing peoples names is one of her strengths and she has received many comments on her ability to remember their names.

In the following weeks the parishioners made her feel welcome without being intrusive. Since the parsonage is only a block away from the church she was concerned about unexpected visits, but feels that they have respected her privacy in the welcoming process. In the next few weeks the staff and parishioners helped her out, freely gave her information and introduced her around town. She went with them to various church and community events and they were proud to show off their new pastor.

Pastor Kristin indicates she feels true bonding with the congregation came later when a parishioner collapsed during Sunday morning worship service and eventually died. It was during this difficult time ministering to the family, congregation and community that she truly became their "pastor".

Pastoral Concerns

Pastor Kristin has some concerns about the congregation regarding their spiritual growth, mission practices and finances. Although they state they are interested in personal spiritual growth, they have not shown much interest in pursuing Bible study or adult education. She laughs about a survey she attempted to do to find out what might pique their interest – eight surveys were returned out of almost a hundred distributed. Of those eight, four indicated an interest in a book club so she has started one with those people and feel it is going successfully.

In the area of mission she is concerned that they are more recently satisfied with monetary missions rather than relational ministry. They do contribute to an India missionary family, give to the World Hunger Appeal, have committed \$1000/year for a mission congregation and make quilts for LWR, but most of these require little interaction with people

and amount to giving money rather than of themselves. She is aware, however, that many of them give informally to others inside, as well as outside the congregation.

Lastly, Pastor Kristin is concerned that without significant growth the congregation may not be able to support a pastor a few years from now. Finances did come up in discussion with the call committee, church council and other leaders.

Dealing with Change

“Change does not come easy for some in this congregation”, and although she knows that change needs to be planful and deliberate, it sometimes is frustrating. She has been there two years and has made the following significant changes: has introduced twice a month communion, a 4:30 p.m. family service on Christmas Eve, a children’s sermon during Sunday morning service, has asked that the congregation stand during the final hymn and recently introduced the concept of intinction for communion. The congregation has tried each change with a bit of reluctance, but has found the first four to be valuable to the worship life of the congregation. There is still speculation that intinction will not make it to be a permanent part of the service.

Collegial Support

Pastor Kristin has also been welcomed into the community by other clergy. Another young woman pastor, a classmate of Pastor Kristin’s, was recently called to an Ettrick church. Of the four pastors, three are women pastors. There is a strong collegial group that does text study together once a week. These relationships have been helpful in her transition from seminary to parish service.

Pastors Perspective on Why It Has Worked

Two things Pastor Kristin feels have made this a positive experience for both she and the congregation have been their willingness to make changes (repeatedly reported by parishioners as “as long as they are small and not often”), and her willingness to be “out there”, making an effort to meet people, be involved in the lives of the parishioners and the community.

Lay Leader Interviews

The lay leaders interviewed included Rosanne, a long time member of Living Hope and a special support to Pastor Kristin, a group of historians, who had been members of Living Hope for a long period of time, members of the Call Committee, that extended the call to Pastor Kristin on behalf of Living Hope and a group of lay leaders that included those active with education, youth and worship activities.

Call Process

The call committee was very large (11 members) and very diverse as to youth, younger people and older/retired people. No one who was asked to be on the committee turned down the invitation and all had a history of involvement in the congregation. The call committee knew this would be a somewhat difficult process, as the new person would be following someone who had been with the congregation for a long time.

They wanted to ensure that they had a good fit so they were prepared for a long call period. It was difficult for them to define what they meant by “fit” but they knew they wanted someone who could work with youth. They indicated they did not see themselves as a “doctrinal” congregation so they felt they were looking for a practitioner vs. a theologian. They wanted someone “touched by the spirit” who would be a shepherd to them. They felt they had and could continue to provide “administrative” leadership and expected the pastor to provide pastoral leadership. They talked about the support they could give to a first call pastor.

The congregation then decided it would minister to itself for a while, partly as a challenge and partly for financial reasons. The members of the call committee said there was a feeling in the congregation that Pastor Ness had prepared them to be independent as he shared ministry with him the last year due to his illness. They stated, “We went in with a good deal of confidence we could hold our own until we found a good fit”. For about seven months parishioners led the liturgy and preached sermons to the congregation. Male and female, young and old participated in these roles. They found it was a great experience to hear each other’s faith stories through the sermons. They felt that the experience of hearing different ages and genders preach opened up the conversation about calling a young, female pastor later. Many felt that they needed this time to explore who Living Hope now was, and to make the transition to a new pastor.

After seven months on their own they were tired, and asked the Bishop for an interim pastor. He served the congregation for about five months and was there during the final stages of the call process. That allowed congregational leaders to focus on the call process instead of the church functioning.

After reviewing the initial list from the Bishops office and interviewing some candidates they asked for a second list of candidates. Pastor Kristin was on this list, and after interviewing her they decided they wanted to call her back to preach. In the interview they were impressed with her answers to controversial questions and felt her responses were authentic and from the heart. She came to preach for them in June of 2004. A community event on that day meant that church was not full and there was difficulty with a sound system so some did not hear her preaching. They did have a picnic afterward for the council, call committee and other congregational leaders to get to know her. They were particularly pleased with her ability to “work the crowd” and get to know the names of people. She was confident and comfortable with all ages.

Although they knew it was not protocol to call her back to preach a second time, they did so. The second preaching experience went much better for the congregation. The call committee met again and tried to get through their, and the congregations, stereotypes of young and female pastors. They talked about the differences in past called pastors and talked about the uniqueness of Pastor Kristin. They spent more time on age than gender and two experiences finally moved them along. The first was a statement from a youth member of the call committee who said, “We can’t hold it against her just because she is young”. The second was a meeting with the Bishop who strongly supported the candidate stating she felt it was a very good fit for Living Hope. The Synod office helped the process by being clear about the candidates they would be referring (all women) and that helped move the congregation to “see how it works”.

Age and Gender Issues

The issues rarely talked about, but underlying all discussions, were that they were only given names of young, female candidates and their own finances, which would prohibit an experienced pastor.

There were considerable questions from congregational members about a single woman’s adaptation to Ettrick, the need for a “family in the parsonage”, all, which suggested some in the congregations discomfort with a young woman pastor. There was, however, a feeling on the call committee that they needed a young pastor to challenge them to look at “new and fresh” ideas.

The decision to call a young, woman pastor was most difficult for the group of historians. Anger at the Synod office for only giving them the names of woman was evident. They felt the Synod office was making the decision for them about having a male or female pastor. They were also the group most concerned about a first call pastor.

The congregation turned the issues of age and gender around by looking at the strengths of the candidate and their own call to be a congregation that could help support, nurture and grow a first call pastor. When the decision was made to call Pastor Kristin there was considerable optimism and excitement about beginning ministry with a young, female, first call pastor. The vote to call Pastor Kristin was almost unanimous.

Welcoming

The call committee and council helped organize the workdays to spruce up the parsonage for Pastor Kristin's arrival. There were people to welcome her on the day she moved in and moved boxes while she directed traffic. They felt it was a great day for all.

They were pleased with the numbers of people that showed up to help clean, repair and paint the parsonage. There was special care for Pastor's tastes in window coverings however the paint was purchased when the local hardware store was going out of business, so there was no color choice.

They were also aware that many of the congregation members were taking Pastor Kristin to meet others in the community and to community events.

Dealing with Change

Meeting with the historians was probably the most interesting conversation of the weekend. They initially stated that they were Norwegian and "change came hard for them". It was also stated that because of their ethnicity they did not "talk about their faith". What they particularly like about their congregation is their friendliness and their ability to make decisions. They explained some hard and fast rules of the church for me so I would understand what to do the next day. One was that everyone has their place to sit in the church and that once a parishioner moved a guest out of her seat by saying "Hey, you got my place". They also said they told the Pastor when she came that the service was to be 45 minutes to an hour with a 10 minute sermon. They joke about one of their peers who has threatened to hold up a number card indicating the countdown to 0 for the sermon. They also informed me that there is no fellowship/coffee hour after church and that "breakfast at the golf course or diner in the winter follows church".

The current controversy is about intinction. After piloting intinction during the summer months, there will be a decision made to continue or not continue the pilot. One of the historians stated her concerns that it is difficult to feel in a pious mood when you constantly need to say, "don't eat it, don't eat it, don't eat it" as you approach the communion rail. Although the decision to continue with intinction has not yet been made, there continues to be a sense of humor around the discussion. There is a sense of sternness, but a sense of give and take from this group, and a great sense of laughter at themselves and others.

They have been pleased with some of the changes to date, and spoke very positively about Pastor Kristen's introduction of a children's sermon into the service. They feel this is one of the highlights of the service.

Dealing with Conflict

Rosanne strongly feels that things work at Living Hope because people process the issues, feel like they are heard, and then move on without "carrying it along with them". The

attitude of people is that they have done the best they can to make the decision and then “see how it works”. They have not been disappointed in this process.

A number of instances came to her mind where humor is used to diffuse any disagreements, or to get those congregational members, who are stuck, unstuck. She shared the story about the introduction of standing during the final hymn. When this was introduced someone informed Pastor Kristin that initially Pastor Ness had them sit during the last hymn because parishioners were so quick in getting out of church to get to their breakfast at the local county club that they beat him to the back of the church and he was unable to greet them. The first time this was introduced into the worship service, someone who was grumbling at the back of the church was surprised (as were others) when a hymn rack fell off the back of the pew, which resulted in the entire congregation enjoying a good laugh.

The historians talked about conflict in the church and indicated it did not happen much. Norwegians don't like conflict so they usually avoid conflict situations. When pushed a little further they indicated that the decision regarding the ramp on the back of the church was the last difficult decision they had to make. Some of the parishioners wanted an elevator and some wanted the ramp. After months of discussion and education they came to the decision of a ramp and the vote was 98 to 2. Decisions are made by “majority rule, whether you like it or not”. Some of those who wanted the elevator were still upset and one woman insisted on using the front stairs even though it was difficult for her just to show her disapproval. They laughed when someone in the group said, “I wonder if she knows that eventually she'll be coming up the ramp 'cause the casket doesn't go up the front stairs”.

Leadership Perspectives on Why It Has Worked

All of the individuals and groups interviewed explained their perception that a ministry of their congregation was to share its gifts with a new pastor. They realized they were fairly independent, competent to handle administrative tasks and had managed to meet their own needs for seven months. They felt they had learned a lot about what they had to offer and were in a position to “give back” to the church.

The sentiment of the groups was that the Holy Spirit was working in the call process to bring Living Hope and Pastor Kristin together. They are all very happy with the “good fit”.

Governance (Church Council)

The members of the church council were interested in talking about Living Hope, but informed me the majority of them were not on church council during the call process. As congregation members they were aware of what was going on in the call process even though it was supposed to be confidential.

The council has spent the majority of the last six months working on solving some building problems. They have had to purchase a new heating system and look at repairs to the roof. The council agendas, minutes and discussion with the council members all reflect this as the primary topic of concern. As in most decisions to date, they have researched the possibilities, received bids and will take the time needed to reach consensus (or as close to consensus as they can get) on this decision. This fits in with their impressions that they are capable of handling administrative tasks but expect the pastor to perform pastoral tasks. They indicated they are hopeful that they can get on to other things in the future.

They stated they are appreciating the spiritual leadership of the pastor and feel she should not have to worry about the bills and buildings. They described the pastor's position as coach to the congregation, not the general manager.

Worship

Upon driving to the church I noted that there was very little signage from the highway that is only a few blocks from the church. There is a small sign that indicates that Living Hope is in Ettrick. The church building itself is raised on a hill off of Main Street, but is not real easy to find if you are unfamiliar to the area. The church buildings consist of the church and an educational building that is approximately 100 feet from the church proper. You must go outside to reach the educational building. The parsonage is approximately one block from the church proper.

The signage on the church building is welcoming, indicating the name of the church and the times of the service and Sunday school. The controversial ramp is on the back end of the church building and is esthetically built to not be too obtrusive but is very functional as people can arrive at the level of the services.

Upon entering the church I was warmly greeted by greeters (remembering the historians indicated that “greeters” was something they did not do well). They introduced themselves and welcomed me to the church service. Families serve as ushers and they were ready to greet me and present me with a bulletin.

The most noticeable thing was the smallness of the Narthex. It is very narrow and does not allow for the parishioners to congregate. There are two billboards in the front Narthex indicating church information, schedules, calendars and upcoming events. Literature is available at both the front and the back door. There is also an updated picture directory of the congregation available at the door.

The buzz of the congregation talking in the sanctuary was evident in the Narthex. Pastor Kristin stayed in the Narthex to greet and welcome people. It was obvious she knew peoples names and was particularly attentive to the children, asking them questions about school and sports. Conversation in the sanctuary was vibrant and positive. There was physical movement from one pew to the other, but not in a disruptive way. When the organist began the prelude the congregation began to return to their seats, as it was evident the worship service was to begin. People do appear to have assigned seats and I was careful to let most people sit down before I found a seat. The balcony is full with an extended family that according to others is “beginning to flow over into downstairs”.

The bulletin was welcoming and informative. Although it was basically a traditional service, the bulletin indicated page numbers for the liturgy, and included the Bible readings. This was very helpful for a first time visitor. The bulletin also listed some announcements, schedule for the day and week, and things coming up.

The service began with announcements. Pastor Kristin welcomed everyone to the service, introduced me, and reviewed the schedule for the day. In addition she spoke lovingly and joyfully about the amount of children’s noise in the pews and was truly grateful for the children on the first day of Sunday school and stressed their importance in the worship service.

Pastor Kristin, who has a very nice voice, sang the liturgy. She did make mistakes with the words and looked to the organist for guidance. The congregation smiled to support her in her error and the organist accommodated. She and the organist proceeded as if nothing had happened. It was a wonderful acknowledgement of the congregations support to her.

The lector, who this week happened to be the chair of Pastor Kristin’s call committee and the former president of the council, led the lessons. A psalm was read responsively and the

traditional Alleluia verse was sung before Pastor Kristin read the gospel. Following the gospel, Pastor Kristin called the children to the front for the children's sermon.

The Children's Sermon

The most wonderful contribution their new pastor has made to their worship experience is the children's sermon. Every single person, and every group that I interviewed, spoke highly of her ability to give wonderful children's sermons. People shared this with me with light in their eyes and excitement in their voices and I was truly looking forward to this experience. One adult told me "if Pastor Kristin continues to give such dynamite children's sermons, people might not listen to her sermons. Pastor Kristin said that she tries to engage both the children and adults in the children's sermon so if the adults don't listen to her sermon they "at least get a few of the points" from the children's sermon. She said this with a smile on her face.

The children's sermon is nestled between the Gospel and the Sermon. After the gospel reading for the day, Pastor Kristin invited all the children to the front of the church. The noise and buzz of twenty-five to thirty children excitedly moving toward the front of the church was a gift itself, but the expressions of anticipation on the faces of the adults was something I did not expect.

When the children were in the front of the church, Pastor Kristin asked them to divide into two groups and selected two youth by name, one to be the teacher of each group. There was no noise either at the front of the church, or in the pews. All were waiting to see what was going to happen and how the children would respond. There was much laughter when she named the teachers and asked them to stand before their class. Pastor Kristin proceeded with a short skit and had them repeat the lines after her. The theme of the skit was helping people different than themselves – a variation of the gospel reading from Mark 7.

Watching the children I, too, became mesmerized into the skit and found myself (while trying to observe) get caught up in the message, laughter and excitement of the group. The children talked with Pastor Kristin after the skit was completed about some of the things they learned from it, and Pastor Kristin wove in the message from the Gospel of Mark. I was able to speak to a young child, Izzy, maybe 4 years old, on her way back to the pew and she indicated by her smile and her comments that she enjoyed the experience.

Moving into the sermon was difficult as I was still absorbing the excitement, lightness and message of the children's sermon experience. After the children returned to their families Pastor Kristin began her sermon. She spoke from the pulpit in a clear voice and held the attention of those in the pews. She followed the same theme that she had captured for the children in the children's sermon, preaching about radical grace and the example in the Gospel of social justice.

Sunday School teachers were installed at this service. The teachers stood proudly when their names were announced, and participated with strong voices in the commitment they were making to lead and guide the children of the church. After they stood Pastor Kristin asked all "learners" in the congregation to stand and the majority of the congregation stood up.

The service proceeded with the Confession of Faith and the Offering. During the prayers Pastor Kristin allowed time for parishioners to add their own prayers for others. Because there was no communion this Sunday the service closed with the Benediction.

Pastor Kristin went to the back of the church to greet people but because there are two doors to the church she missed greeting some of the people. Many of those using the back church door were Sunday School students and teachers going to the Education Building.

Fellowship Hour

The historians had shared with me that they “do not do fellowship hour”. Since I knew there was one planned for the morning I inquired about it. They indicated that since they had a guest and it was Rally Sunday that it would be attempted, but that it is difficult to get people to attend for a number of reasons. First, there is no narthex, so there is no gathering space in the church. The gathering space is in the Education building which requires that people go outside to another building, in some cases, further from their cars. It is difficult for many of the older people to walk, so few, other than the Sunday School students and teachers venture to the “other building” after service.

The more probable explanation came from those who meet for breakfast at the local golf club (in summer) or diner (in winter) who feel that dawdling after worship means they may have a wait for breakfast/brunch. It is apparent that Fellowship Hour, in the traditional sense, is not an important part of this congregation’s culture.

Since I was aware that a Fellowship Hour was planned for the morning I was curious as to how it would “happen”. Pastor Kristin, Rosanne and I agreed that it would be best if I present some of my findings at the end of church and be open to listening to feedback and gather more information during the fellowship time. Some members had planned it to be a kind of special event, making homemade donuts to entice people to come. Only about five to seven people (other than the children and Sunday School teachers) came over to the education building for the coffee hour. We watched as the majority of the people left the church and went to their cars.

It appeared, however, that some of the youth came to check in with the pastor, some of the adults came to share some news with the pastor and some had a special need to connect with the Pastor that day.

Personal Connection with Lori

Rally Sunday morning was cold and rainy. It had rained for two days in Ettrick and the dampness and chill left a fog on the coulees as I was driving the twenty miles to the church from my hotel. Like the first day of school, I always hope that it will be sunny and bright, so I can better see the excitement in the children as they come, and they will be more energetic.

The morning worship service was warm and comforting. The cold and damp was left outside and the warmth of the church and the congregation touched the shoulders and the soul.

This morning was particularly hectic at Living Hope. Rally Sunday meant the beginning of Sunday School, the kick off for confirmation and the special coffee hour for the guests. After the worship service all were invited to the education center for homemade donuts, juice and coffee. The students would then be dismissed to their Sunday School classes or confirmation groups, and the adults could stay on to talk with me in the Fellowship Hall.

The procession from the church building to the Educational Center was vibrant and energetic in spite of the weather. A mist covered us as we moved from one building to the other, and I watched as the children ran and played as they tried to get to the donuts first. Small groups of adults moved together, talking and laughing, catching up and sharing new stories. As I walked and talked, I heard about someone’s accident, someone recently placed in a nursing home, and the local football teams hopes for the season. Families did not need to

stay together as everyone watched out for the children, guiding them to the door if they strayed, catching them if they fell and taking their hand if their hand was outstretched. My thoughts were of a very large family who cares for each other, and particularly the children.

As I entered the Education Building I immediately smelled the coffee and donuts and followed the crowd to the Fellowship Hall. Teachers were greeting students and telling them to have a snack and they would begin Sunday School in a large group. Confirmation students were grabbing a donut or two and finding their parents to eventually move toward a room for orientation. Older youth were congregated in a corner discussing the weekend sports events and sharing other youth information. Adults were getting their coffee and donuts and finding places to sit and talk. Young couples sat with older individuals and I was invited to sit and talk with them.

Pastor Kristin was providing the leadership for all events so got to the hall quickly after the service. I quietly observed her wonderfully calming interactions with those to whom she spoke, patting the heads of young children, ensuring that she spent time with the youth and engaging folks in friendly discussion.

After about ten minutes discussion I went to the counter to get a donut and a cup of coffee. It was then that I observed Pastor Kristin and another woman in the far corner of Fellowship Hall sitting across from each other at a table and holding hands in prayer. The bustle of children was beginning to diminish around me as the children were herded to their classrooms and group rooms. The Pastor and the woman were providing stillness to the chaos around me and I found myself mesmerized by their solitude. It was a picture of comfort, caring and the presence of God. After a few moments they stood up, hugged, and the woman left. Pastor Kristin continued with the morning activities by ensuring that Sunday School was beginning and moving into the group room for confirmation orientation.

Later that morning, when all had left the building, Pastor and I were spending a little time debriefing the morning's activities. As we were standing in the entrance to Fellowship Hall, a woman approached from afar. I did not recognize her at first, but as she approached I realized that she was the woman that had prayed with Pastor in the corner of Fellowship Hall that morning amidst the chaos of activity. She immediately introduced herself as Lori, and said that she felt she needed to come back to talk with me. With tears in her eyes, she shared the story of how Pastor Kristin had helped her husband find Christ before he died. She had been worried for years about him and when he found out he was ill, her worries about his soul increased. She asked Pastor Kristin to visit with him, knowing that he may not accept Pastors calls or visits. It was obvious her grief was still fresh and that she had found comfort in her relationship with Pastor and God during this difficult time. She expressed thanks to Pastor Kristin and then spoke to me about the blessings she has been to the congregation in so many ways. Her gratitude for the time Pastor Kristin took with her husband was stated and evident in the way she spoke about the interactions between Pastor and her husband. Pastor stated that she appreciated as well Lori's willingness to invite her into this difficult time. Lori stated she just wanted to make sure that I heard her story so I could know how happy she is that Pastor Kristin is there. She gave me a hug.

As I watched her, with tears in my eyes, give Pastor Kristin and hug, I realized that the feelings of stillness, comfort and the presence of God were again there in that relationship in that room.

Age Inclusive Education/Study

Christian Education takes various forms at Living Hope. There are Bible studies, Vacation Bible School, Sunday school, church camp, confirmation and most recently a Book Club.

The most involved organization at the church is the WELCA women's group. There are currently three circles that all have their own Bible study meeting once a month and two meetings a year of the whole group. This does involve only the women of the church, and it was noted by some that it primarily consists of the older women in the church. Pastor Kristin attends each circle quarterly (or more if possible) and attends all the important functions of WELCA. She, and some of the women of the church, expressed concern that the men of the congregation were not very involved in Bible study or other church activities.

Vacation Bible is done jointly with two other local churches including the Catholic Church. This has been a great opportunity to work together and has worked out well and drawn many attendees from the three churches. All described it as a very positive experience for the children and the congregations.

Currently there are four Sunday school classes with approximately 25 - 30 students total. The teachers and students appeared excited to begin on Rally Sunday. The classrooms are nice, with chairs and tables for the children and things on the walls. There was no formal Sunday school on Rally Sunday, but a large group gathering of song singing, talking about Sunday school and classroom assignments. The students did go to their classrooms with their teachers to get oriented for the next week beginning of Sunday school. The teachers have a curriculum they have been creative in implementing.

Confirmation orientation was Sunday morning as well. Confirmation is held on Sunday mornings after church. Pastor Kristin has spoken to the families, and due to the distance for some, and the other activities the children are in at school, Sunday morning works the best for them. All students and their parent/s were in attendance. When talking about the seasons of the church, Pastor Kristin inquired if anyone knew what season they were in and how they would know that from their church experience. One young man replied that he would know from the "color of the stuff on the alter and the stuff you wear around your neck", which was met with much laughter from the pastor and others. In spite of the fact that they were discussing expectations and schedules, it was apparent from the feeling in the room that there was warmth and respect between the pastor and the youth and their families. It was clear that the youth relate to her as their pastor.

Sunday school students are encouraged to attend church camp in the summer. Attendance is mandatory for confirmation students. The congregation feels strongly about using the camps, Luther Park and Sugar Creek, to support youth ministry and therefore offers scholarship to all students who wish to attend. Most of the money used for scholarship is raised by the WELCA group.

Adult Education has been very difficult to get going at Living Hope. Pastor Kristin indicated that she has tried to get adult education going, but has not had success in getting a group together. She finally did what she called a "sad little survey" because only eight surveys were returned to her. Those did indicate an interest in a book study/club and some women have gathered to discuss "The Giver" and "Aging with Grace". She has felt this has had some success.

Staff Roles/Relationships and Leadership Styles

I met with Bette, the church secretary, Lon, the custodian and Rose, who plays organ half of the time and is considered the Worship and Music Committee leader. Bette has been at the church for 35 years, and Rose has been the organist for a time. Lon recently joined the staff as the last pastor's wife had performed the custodian's duties.

First Impressions

Bette was not involved in the call process, but her first impression of Pastor Kristin was "Lord, here comes my daughter". Lon interjected that even he thought she was young and he's in his mid thirties. Bette worried that she, herself, would begin to act like Pastors mother but she was glad to have the pep and energy in the office. Rose, who also provides leadership to the Worship and Music Committee also had positive first impressions of the Pastor. Although Living Hope has done very traditional worship she stated that Pastor laughed with her when she wanted to put traditional liturgy in the bulletin and they have begun to try some new things together.

The openness established early in Pastor Kristin's relationship with staff was critical in their ability to share congregational culture and traditions with her. She would often ask "How are you used to doing this?" which made it easier for the staff to share with her.

Congregational Culture

The staff shared their perceptions of the culture of the congregation. They stated that everyone seems to get along and they are a close-knit group. They are receptive to change and no one stomps out when there is disagreement as they had in the past. Bette feels that there is no one group running the church, but responsibility is shared over many. The older members stay involved, but have relinquished many of their responsibilities to the young.

The staff talked about a conscious effort by Pastor Ness to prepare the congregation for the change before he left. According to their information, he handpicked the council, selecting a range of people (primarily young), but people that would be able to lead the congregation through the changes he expected would occur. This has helped to make it easier for the congregation.

Also, because he was in ill health the last two years of his ministry, the staff and congregation assumed many responsibilities for worship, education and ministry. This period was followed by a 7-month period when the congregation did the liturgy and sermons and just had a pastor come to do communion once a month. This was a bonding time for the congregation as it got itself ready for a new pastor.

Relationship Building and Teaming

As a team they feel they work well together. Bette and Pastor have the most contact during the week and Bette has found that the working relationship is very comfortable. She feels they can talk about things openly and her fears of having a Pastor who would be directive have not materialized.

One of the activities that has helped their relationship is Friday morning coffee hour, which is held at the local diner. When Bette first invited Pastor Kristin to come with her she thought to herself "there goes my coffee with the girls", because she was not sure the conversation would continue with the Pastor present. The coffee meetings with other women in the community have been a great way to bring the Pastor into the congregation and community. Bette feels that Pastor now knows "more about menopause than she'll every need to know". Pastor feels it has been a great support to her as she learns about Living Hope and Ettrick.

Calling of Living Hope to the Larger Church

The staff felt that it was a combination of the congregation's willingness to accept the pastor and make her feel welcome, and her willingness to outreach to them and get involved in the community that made this a good fit. They stated that although there was some concern about her age and sex, that once the decisions was made, the attitude was joyful and that they would make it work.

There also was much discussion with this group about their ability to give back to the larger church. The staff felt that they had been blessed with two wonderful pastors and had shown themselves that they could run the church without a pastor. They felt the congregation knew they had gifts to help a new pastor and they had a calling to use those gifts.

Financial Contributions vs. Relational Ministry

There is a strong sense of ministry to others in this congregation. Their ministries encompass local, national and international realms. When speaking of their ministries they are proud that they are a "congregation that gives to others". Some of their ministries are internal to Living Hope – they support their youth to go to youth gatherings, camp and mission trips. WELCA has fundraisers to support these missions although others donate as well. There is a quilting group that quilts with other church women and some of the quilts are kept for their own disaster relief while others go to Lutheran World Relief. They participate in traditional mission/ministry opportunities including the World Hunger Appeal.

The congregation is particularly proud of two ministries that they have been involved in more recently. One is the "Bridge of Life" Mission Start, which is a mission church of the ELCA near Holman, Wisconsin to which they make a yearly contribution towards their expenses. This helps them feel part of the larger church. In addition, a few years ago, when Pastor Ness requested a speaker for Mission Sunday from the seminary he was connected with a woman who was a seminary student, and a partnership ministry with India began. The congregation has adopted the Pastors ministry in India as their own and Living Hope supports her with their prayers and money as part of their annual budget. Pastor Nijhar has now graduated from seminary and has been ordained as one of the first female pastors in India. They are very proud to be a part of her ministry there and listed it as one of three important events of the congregation in the mission profile for the call process.

There are some concerns that the most recent new ministries, as well as some of the others, involve monetary giving only and are not relational. They would like to continue the wonderful ministries they are supporting, but expand to some ministries that involve relationships with others in the community.

Feedback Meeting

Pastor Kristin, Rosanne and I talked about the possibility of bringing the groups I had met with on Friday and Saturday back together Sunday afternoon or evening to give them my observations. They both felt, from feedback they received about people's schedules for the day, that it would not be possible and we decided that I would talk to the congregation as a whole at the end of Sunday morning service to share some first observations about the strengths and challenges of the congregation.

I presented the following information to the congregation at the end of the worship service.

The Strengths of Living Hope

There were many strengths identified by the parishioners of Living Hope including:

They are a very friendly church. I was welcomed and embraced by all individuals and groups I visited.

Their ability as a congregation to minister to themselves, and how strongly they felt about the success of this and it's usefulness in helping them all accept change. It repeatedly came up as a great time for Living Hope and they felt the Holy Spirit guided them through that time.

The congregation's ability to make decisions in a way that involves all in the discussion allows for a "consensus decision" and even though there is not complete agreement about the outcome of the decision, this process bodes them well. There appears to come a shift from disagreement about the topic, to resignation that it will not work out their way, to a spirit of "now that the decision is made, we will all, together, make it work".

Another strength is the congregation's willingness to change. There was considerable conversation about concerns they had about staying "stagnant", and that young, fresh ideas would be good for the congregation.

Lastly, it was evident from various conversations with the call committee, the historians, the staff, the council and others in leadership positions, that they feel they have been blessed with pastoral leadership over the past one hundred plus years and that they can now be helpful to the church community by mentoring, supporting and caring for a first call pastor. This was evident in their relationship with Pastor Kristin.

Naming the Challenges

Challenges were identified in three areas;

The need for more interest and attendance in adult education, Bible studies and other activities to nurture the spiritual being was a concern to the pastor and parishioners. There was particular concern for the men of Living Hope since most of the activities in Bible study or fellowship involved the women or children of the congregation.

Although Living Hope is very active in mission and ministry, their most recent choices for ministry do not allow for relationships with others outside of the church.

The pastor and parishioners concerns that they will not be able to financially support a full time pastor in the future and the members feel strongly that they will not let this happen. This means continued outreach activities to others in their community.

Conclusions

It was evident to me that Living Hope has many strengths that have worked well for them over the years to become the welcoming, spiritually filled congregation they have become. They have worked hard in getting themselves ready for a new pastor, and have allowed the Holy Spirit to work with them in the call process. They feel they have a calling to be a caring, supportive place for a first call pastor. They continue to welcome Pastor Kristin into their lives, church and community.