

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
Divine Word Lutheran Church, Milwaukee, WI
Site Visit: September, 2006
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Congregational History

The Divine Word Lutheran Church has been in existence in its current form since 1984, but it is a congregation steeped in a tradition, a faith tradition, that extends almost 100 years. Divine Word is a neighborhood church in the Washington Heights Neighborhood in Milwaukee, a merger of two Lutheran congregations merely blocks apart. St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church was established in 1909. In 1950 found itself in the way of construction of Highway 41. St. Thomas purchased and moved to a newly remodeled synagogue.

Washington Park Lutheran Church started its ministry in 1920 and was located in the current Divine Word building. The community was elbow to elbow with churches, one a large Roman Catholic congregation, another a Missouri Synod congregation less than ten blocks south, both with schools, and a Wisconsin Synod church a few blocks to the west.

These two Lutheran congregations from two different denominations, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America, began to feel the pain of competition and a decline in membership. When the pastor of St. Thomas left, the pastor of Washington Park pitched in at St. Thomas. Not long after, the two choirs began working together. With a deep sense of witness and commitment to worship among the members of both congregations, they decided to merge. This happened in 1984, four years prior to the merger of the ALC and LCA. The new church would reside in the Washington Park building, the newer of the two.

The pastor responsible for the merger stayed approximately one year at the newly created Divine Word Lutheran Church. The next pastor called, Derwin Schlake, came with an interest in urban ministry. He was good at that call and related well to young people; however, he did less outreach than the congregation felt needed. Pr. Schlake left this call in 1993.

The congregation decided to take months for a “Mission Exploration” process. They wanted greater clarity about their calling as a congregation. This process brought to the table conversations about opening up to ethnicity, homosexuality, styles of worship, engagement in the community and relating to the neighborhood public school. A seminarian, Chris Erdmann doing her internship at Pentecost Lutheran Church (several blocks north of Divine Word), was asked by the synod to serve as interim pastor during the search for the next pastor. When Chris finished her internship at Pentecost, the people of Divine Word extended a call to her and she stayed until 2003.

In the call process for the next pastor, the Call Committee returned to the original guidelines set forth by the Mission Exploration team. They worked closely with Rich

Diness, Assistant to the Bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod. He had been working with candidates and thought that Susan Gaeta would be a good fit for Divine Word.

Of Korean descent, Pastor Gaeta had been adopted by two Caucasian parents who were both pastors in urban New Jersey. Gaeta was familiar with the challenges and struggles of a neighborhood church in an urban area. She said that she was looking for an outwardly focused, welcoming church, including a congregation committed to becoming a “Reconciling in Christ”¹ church.

Working with Rich Diness, Susan met over dinner with two couples prominent in Divine Word work. The next day she met with the staff and others she requested to meet. Susan met with people in the neighborhood as well as people at the nearby school. Susan found the people at Divine Word welcoming and clear about the values of the church. Indeed, all pointed to a good fit for the church and for her. In September of 2003, Pastor Susan Gaeta was called to Divine Word.

Congregation: Context and Profile

From 1998 to 2005 Divine Word’s membership dropped by 97. In 1999 and 2000, 13 and 19 members were added respectively. In 2004, 14 members joined and in 2005, 29, the largest increase since 1998.

In 2006 there were 135 baptized members with 105 confirmed. Of those confirmed, 71 were communing members and 64 were communing and contributing members. There were 28 pupils in Sunday school and the average worship attendance was 54. The racial/ethnic composition of the baptized membership was 110 white, 20 African American/Black, 3 Asian/Pacific Islander, and 2 who chose to call themselves multiethnic. Over the last few years, worship attendance has increased from its lowest point in 2003, 21% to 40% in 2005.

In 2005 at Divine Word, regular giving and designated giving by members was almost \$68,000 with a total income of over \$219,000.. This is up significantly from their lowest point in 1999 which was just over \$120,000. Divine Word gives about \$12,000 toward mission support. This benevolence has increased over the years since 1999, and at present is almost double the 1999 giving. Their total ELCA benevolence in 2005 was over \$14,000.

The Washington Heights neighborhood, home of Divine Word, is a diverse neighborhood both racially and socio-economically. It has perhaps as many as 300 gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transsexual (GLBT) families. After Pastor Gaeta’s call, the congregation was becoming more reflective of the surrounding community.

Pastor Interview

Pastor Gaeta acted passionately about the urban ministry. It appeared her first love. In a conversation we had about her call to Divine Word and the ease in which she functions in this setting she remarked, “I never really thought about it. It just seems natural for me to

¹“Reconciling in Christ” refers to a congregational commitment to welcome homosexual persons.

be in this setting.” Then after some thought she remarked, “Probably the worst place you could put me is in a large suburban congregation. I wouldn’t know what to do there.”

As a candidate for her first call, Pr. Gaeta was hoping to serve an urban congregation on the East Coast, closer to home. The Midwest was at the bottom of her list. Assistant to the Bishop Rich Diness called her indicating he had some possible openings that seemed to fit her well. She was given two options: Racine and Milwaukee. Upon visiting Divine Word, Pastor Gaeta met with two of the more prominent couples in the church. They went out for dinner. The next day she met with the staff. Later that day she met with the congregation at large. She then went into the neighborhood and became acquainted with Divine Word’s community partners and with the neighborhood school, Hi-Mount School. She saw a need for her ministry in this place.

Pr. Gaeta found the congregation of Divine Word welcoming and open. When she was ordained in New Jersey some of the people at Divine Word went to be a part of the ordination. Back home, the congregation installed Pastor Gaeta and had a special reception.

Pr. Gaeta sensed a strong alignment between her values and the values of the church. She has a commitment to serving the neighborhood, as did the Divine Word community. Pr. Gaeta was a firm believer in being open and welcoming to those that sit just outside their doors. This fit the church’s values. She felt she had different values, similar to those of the previous pastor, although with different professional boundaries.

Pr. Gaeta’s passion for urban ministry was demonstrated in her involvement with the MICAH (Milwaukee Inner City Congregations Allied for Hope). Prior to her call the congregation had not allied with MICAH. MICAH is a multiracial, interfaith organization addressing justice issues in the community. MICAH’s goal is to empower people to act together in pursuit of their individual and collective interests. Pastor Gaeta attended regular meetings and involved Divine Word in MICAH’s programs. Six lay leaders joined their pastor in this participation.

Pr. Gaeta developed good relations with the Catholic Church, St. Sebastian. Recently, the two held joint services on Thanksgiving eve and Ash Wednesday. Pastor Gaeta continued an already strong relationship with Hi-Mount School through the SafeZone music program and the Peace Award program (described later).

Pr. Gaeta expressed a belief in congregation-based organizing, helping people discover their gifts for service and finding opportunities for them to serve. Much of this work is done through one-on-one meetings with people in the congregation. Several positions – such as the neighbor minister, peer minister with the Lutheran Campus Ministry, Christian Education chair, and the Youth Work Ministry leader – are results of these one-on-one relation-building meetings.

Pr. Gaeta participated in the “Coalition of Churches,” an association of ELCA churches in the area. This enabled her to stay connected with the other churches and find ways to join them in ministry. Supported by the congregation, she participated in continuing education opportunities offered by the synod and other organizations. She encouraged

members of the church to get involved in training to bring more ministries to the church; for example, a Green Congregation Training Event. This event provides “care for creation” guidelines and resources for enriching the life of the congregation through worship, education, property, discipleship at home and work, and public ministry.

Pr. Gaeta said that the first year of her call was a challenge with many transitions to the pastoral role. The transition focused on moving from being a seminarian to dealing with the practical aspects of the pastoral role. Many of her transition issues centered on the formation of Pastor Gaeta as a pastor and learning to be comfortable in that role. She received a great deal of support from family and key colleagues. One support took the form of a coaching relationship that helped her deal with the multifaceted process of transitioning to a new role in her life. In spite of her strong belief in setting and maintaining personal boundaries, there were occasions where she shared her struggles with the staff and the congregation. It enabled them to “connect with her in a more human way.”

She also dealt with the challenge of helping parishioners view her differently from her predecessor. Although they shared similar values, the way they chose to formalize the role as a pastor differed greatly. Pastor Gaeta chose a much more formal approach to her role. This was evidenced by asking that she be addressed as “Pastor Gaeta” rather than “Pastor Sue” or “Sue”. This was a change that several parishioners commented on.

Lay Leader Interview

Brandon Koltz was the past president of the church council, a long time member of Divine Word and a member of the Washington Park Congregation prior to the merger. Brandon contributed historical information to this report.

Koltz described the congregation after the merger in 1984 as a “cutting edge” congregation. An open way of thinking has continued to be a characteristic of the congregation, according to him. This openness was illustrated by a call to two female pastors, by greater acceptance of the surrounding community and by becoming a “Reconciling in Christ” congregation. He attributed this openness to proactive education leadership from the pastor and key lay leaders.

According to Koltz, the congregation has learned how to adapt to change more effectively. It was not easy at first but Divine Word learned from the merger process that in order to remain a thriving congregation it had to be an open and flexible congregation. It got easier for them over the years.

Koltz spoke of the synod’s support for Divine Word, especially during the call process for Pastor Gaeta. The synod provided funds to support some of their programs, improving the relationship. In programs and meetings the synod has been a vital presence, not a distant bureaucracy.

As a call committee member, Koltz said Divine Word had selected “the right candidate.” He stated, “Her approach was very close to Divine Word’s...It is important to provide

many doors for people to walk through and we need to be a 'church without walls'." He spoke of music as important in the life of Divine Word and "the desire for the music and worship experience to be meaningful." He talked about the need for all people to serve in the church, a core value being developed. A great deal of this was a matter of increasing people resources, but also helping people feel a deeper commitment to the church. The commitment was needed to improve the financial resources. Koltz remarked that Pastor Gaeta was devoted to all these things.

Church Council

I attended a meeting of the church council. The council consisted of six people. Before a full agenda, focus and attention was given to helping members think about gifts they bring to the church, a step in developing their stewardship program. In the council meeting a survey entitled "Using 20 Practices for Growing Stewards on Your Congregation" was used to help generate discussion around gift discernment and stewardship. The group discussed statements that were perceived as strengths and challenges to the congregation. Strengths centered on gift discernment (although they did not speak of a formal process for this) and commitment to growing generous givers. Challenges were focused on tithing and future financial planning of parishioners to include the church. Perhaps the biggest item on the agenda was a concern that the large gift money that supported this young church was beginning to run out.

Kevin Ronnie had been president of the church council for two years. During his tenure he had seen a great deal of growth, particularly the increased visibility of Divine Word in the larger community, and increased involvement of the laity. But nothing was more apparent than the increased diversity of membership – notably, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transsexual.

Ronnie described the congregation as warm and welcoming, mostly an older group of people who have large personal investments in the church. "This older group is so passionate about the church continuing they are willing to try anything." He continued, "They have an amazing openness to ideas and people."

Ronnie spoke positively of Pastor Gaeta's leadership, "People are not reaching for the reins of power. There is no power, prestige, money, or resources as blocks. Leadership has to be nurtured. Pastor Gaeta is very good at that." He also remarked that Pr. Gaeta is conscious of boundaries, not to get sucked into all of the tasks of the church. That forced the laity to step forward. "Pastor Gaeta has given people permission to use their gifts," he claimed.

Ronnie expressed appreciation for Pr. Gaeta's organizing model for doing ministry, seeing it as a stronghold of her leadership. With background in community organizing, she identifies an issue and then brings a constituency of people together to address the issue. Ronnie attributed a great deal of her success to a clear sense of mission and a vision for carrying it out. He remarked of her getting out into the community as "an activist of sorts." Ronnie spoke of the congregation letting her do it, as well as encouraging laity to be involved.

I saw the biggest challenges facing the council and Pastor Gaeta as: (1) deepening and expanding the leadership bench, involving those at the fringe of the congregation, and (2) finding ways to financially sustain the church. They have been sustained by the sale of the St. Thomas building and by two large bequeaths. This has supported the pastor and her programming. However, these funds will run out; thus they need to be creative with financial planning.

A stewardship committee was recently formed to address the financial concerns. They have tried stewardship campaigns, weekly bulletin announcements, monthly columns to the The Mentor, the church newsletter, drawing on personal testimonies of “faith lives” during the months of October and November. Through a pledge campaign – with couriers sent to all households to deliver pledge packets, followed a week later by a personal pick up – half of the congregation has turned in pledge cards for a total of \$63,000 of the \$70,000 goal.

Worship and Fellowship Hour

The worship space at Divine Word was intimate and inviting. Stained glass windows adorn the east and west walls of the sanctuary, with the largest window above the altar to the north. The windows helped share the faith story of Divine Word. The rest of the building was comprised of a large fellowship area used by both the church and community for meetings, social gatherings, and educational opportunities. There was a small room upstairs just off of the balcony used during Sunday school and a basement used as a day care center and outreach activities.

I experienced the worship service at Divine Word as participative and experiential. With over 50 people present, several of the laity, including youth, participated as assisting ministers, readers, communion servers, choir, acolytes, and the sending of the congregation at the end of the service. The liturgical service incorporated both traditional and contemporary music and liturgy. The choir with a soloist added warmly to the service. Intimate and inviting, the high point for me was the Sharing of the Peace where people moved from front to back and back to front greeting each and every person present. A sense of community was reinforced when the entire congregation held hands for the Lord’s Prayer. It was a touching moment for me when a three year boy looked warmly into my eyes, smiled, and grabbed my hand for the prayer. A truly welcoming moment. Later when I interviewed the youth, they spoke of loving being a part of the worship service. They said it made them feel important.

Approximately 25-30 people stayed for the Fellowship hour with a local bakery donating pastry and bread. Young and old mingled, furthering a close, intimate feeling. I spoke with a young couple recently married at the church. The young lady had been a member of the congregation as a little girl but left following the death of her father. When it came time for getting married, she wanted to do it here. Since then, both have become involved in the Christian Education program and both serve together in the Sunday school.

An older couple I spoke with were a part of the merger in 1984. They spoke about the “liberalness” of the Divine Word congregation and the “sense of community” they experience. They saw the church as “doing well in the community” and saw the congregation as “an extension of the community.” They spoke of experiencing the congregation as more “open with Pastor Gaeta” with “no secrets,” thanks to an “open budget and the (circulated) minutes of the council meetings.” They saw Pastor Gaeta as being “better organized” with a “good sense of alignment between her and the congregation.”

I spent time with a small group of kids, two very vocal young ladies and three young men more interested in their own conversation. All spoke of their love for the church and how much they liked Pastor Gaeta. They felt it fun to be with her. They reported liking to be involved in the service as that made them feel important. They spoke about how they liked being in Youth Work Ministry, helping keep their church and neighborhood clean, and “We get paid for it!” The kids said, If we don’t show up for church, Pastor will sometimes come and knock on our door (if they live close to the church). They felt she cared about them.

Education/Study

During the hour preceding worship service a Bible study group met with Pastor Gaeta. She had told me previously that this was a new endeavor and that she was unsure about the turnout and participation level. Six people showed up. The Bible study focused on the creation story and the care of the earth; following the theme for the next few weeks. People were encouraged to write down the first verse in the Bible and then engaged in a discussion of what this meant for them. Further discussion centered around how we continue to care for God’s creation.

Upstairs in another part of the church Sunday school was taking place. This was the second week of the term. About 10 –12 children were present, ages 4-12. During the summer there had been a Vacation Bible School for the children of the church and community. A library just outside the sanctuary had a small collection of books and DVDs for youth and adults and other educational materials for parents of infants and toddlers and for children aged 3-6.

The council’s first ever retreat was held in a private home in February. It focused on serving and vision and reported to be a positive experience. The members enjoyed the intimate setting. They focused attention to service in the church and the vision process. The retreat began on a Friday evening with dinner and 8 people attended. The evening content centered on how to conduct one-on-one interviews with others as a way to get to know them and learn about their gifts. Time was allotted for the group members to carry out these conversations with each other following the training provided by Pastor Gaeta.

The Saturday session was a full day session that began with breakfast and some council business. The bulk of the day was led by a lay leader and focused on deepening the vision of the church based on three major concepts found in the mission statement: “invite”, “share”, and “serve”. The council discussed ways to broaden how they achieve these

concepts and began to develop action steps to implement over the next 3 years. In the implementation phase three major areas were targeted: Tithing, Evangelism, and Leadership. Leaders were assigned for each one of these areas and council members selected an area to be a part of based on their spiritual gifts. The groups agreed to meet in the coming weeks to further the unique visions of each of these groups.

Staff Roles

There were two paid staff positions at Divine Word. Elaine Farber was the church secretary and Karen Boutin the music director, serving prior to Pastor Gaeta's arrival. Both reported having a good relationship with her, appreciative of her leadership. Both spoke of how Pastor Gaeta had made things more "professional," by setting and maintaining boundaries of responsibility. This has significantly impacted "stopping the rumor mill" that was once a bigger part of the church community.

Both women spoke of a seamless transition was on her arrival. Pr. Gaeta gave individual attention to her staff and organized her ministry (i.e., streamlining things, having a protocol or structure for daily functioning in the church, etc.).

Before May 2006, there was a Neighborhood Minister. The position was vacated without a public explanation and has not been filled at this writing.

Community Partnership

I interviewed Alex Hardy, social worker, and Shannon Kilsdonk, principal of Hi-Mount School asking about their relationship with Divine Word. Both spoke of a significant ministry the church did in the community. SafeZone Community Art Center was a music program started in 2001 at Divine Word after the Milwaukee Public Schools terminated school music programs. It offered an instrumental band experience for students, Grade 4 through Grade 8. Divine Word provided space and instruction and raised money for instruments. Over the years SafeZone had brought other organizations into the program, helping to increase the integrity of the program as well as bringing funding. Recently, money has provided for private lessons from a local conservatory. During the summer SafeZone created a week-long summer camp for kids in the neighborhood, with art and drama (and expectation to have dance and drumming added). Daily performances were offered to camp participants and the neighborhood. The program culminated with a final concert by the participants. The school and the community expressed high appreciation.

Mr. Hardy spoke of the Peace Awards offered a child in the school who demonstrated behaviors that favor peace. This program had grown over the years to include an award recipient at every grade level. It was believed the teachers had become more facilitators of peaceful behaviors by their students.

Several events throughout the year are sponsored together by the church and school. For instance, there was a family night during Holy Week where the church teaches people about Holy Communion and how to bake Communion bread, with participants listening to the Holy Week story. The church also puts on an appreciation lunch for the teachers during the school year.

Mr. Hardy attributed the continued success of the connection between the church and school to Pastor Gaeta's leadership. He said the key to her success was that she was raised in an urban setting and truly understood the needs of the community and was not afraid to pursue those needs.

Another significant community program offered the community was the Youth Work Ministry. In the summer they bring together neighborhood children to work in the church and in the community. The program runs for eight weeks and incorporates Bible verse learning and attending worship. In the summer of 2005, 35 people participated in the program: six were supervisors (ages 18-21), six were peer supervisors (ages 13-17) and 23 were youth workers (ages 8-12). The children made mailboxes for church members, set up the church library, cleaned garages and other property and worked in gardens. The church compensated the youth for their work. This program worked on a positive work ethic and encouraged the youth to "give back to the community."

The Food Pantry was another community program. The pantry opened every Thursday at 9:00 am and was followed by a Bible study at 10:30. In 2005, 5,765 individuals in 1,856 households were served. With members of the congregation volunteering, this ministry was important to the community.

Interpretations

The success of this first call congregation began in which the synod and congregation were able to find a fitting candidate. All were clear about what the call was and what was needed to keep Divine Word a viable congregation. Pastor Gaeta had grown up in an urban setting and understood the needs of this population.

Another key factor in the success of this call so far was the lack of financial constraints. The church was solvent and Pastor Gaeta could carry out the ministry she and the congregation chose. But the months and years ahead would require strategic financial planning and intentional stewardship on the part of the council and congregation.

A third factor had to do with the congregation's willingness to take risks. The people at Divine Word had a deep love for the church and the ministry. They demonstrated a willingness to do whatever it took to keep the church alive and well. With this commitment, the people of Divine Word transcended many of the obstacles troubling other congregations (e.g., opening doors to the neighborhood community, being a Reconciling in Christ church, etc.). Although some families were lost because of these changes, the loss was minimized. "Oh, I think we lost one or two families," was said by one member. Although challenging at times, these risks enabled Divine Word to provide meaningful ministry to many in the neighborhood.

It is my view that Divine Word is an extremely open and welcoming congregation, that it is passionate about the ministry outside of its doors. The people of the church speak and demonstrate their convictions. They invite many community programs to use their

building as well as volunteer in these programs. Being invited into this faith community was truly a warm, heartfelt experience for me.