

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
Trinity Lutheran Church, Clovis, New Mexico
Site Visit: September, 2006
Carol Schickel, Case Study Researcher

INTRODUCTION

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, Will you let my name be known
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

The gospel lesson for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost includes a strong challenge from Jesus for all to connect discipleship and the cross (Mark 8:27-38). Trinity Lutheran Church seeks to engage in faithful worship practices that invite participants to be nourished for their calling in the world. The people of this congregation welcomed me with generous amounts of time, regard, and helpful insight into their faith community during the three days of my visit.

With ten called pastors (the most recent two pastors in their first call) in its congregational life of forty years in a small town, Trinity is a typical ELCA congregation in many ways. The collective memory of the leaders and members of this congregation provided many reflections on the life, the vitality, and the expectations and hopes for ministry in this congregational setting.

Trinity Lutheran Church of Clovis, New Mexico is a congregation of about 200 members who bring their own stories as they participate in ministry through this faith community. Pastor Bonita Knox is a first call pastor who was called two years ago to serve among these Christians. She is leader, friend, spiritual guide and pastor to a lively and faithful congregation that seeks to live out its mission of 'growing disciples to worship and serve.'

CONGREGATION NARRATIVE

Charter members Al and Ingrid McNamara wrote in 1995:

As we come together to worship, fellowship, and celebrate the forty years as a congregation here at Trinity Lutheran Church of Clovis, New Mexico and as a part of the larger Church of our Lord Jesus, I like to think God's purpose is being shown. I believe that purpose is the friendship and love shown to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. This is one of the friendliest and helpful congregations I have seen. Our prayer is that God will continue to bless Trinity and show us His will in all that we do.

"Friendly" was a word that I heard many times over the weekend visit to Trinity. And the word is backed by the genuine sharing of time and attention among the people of this congregation.

A Friday night meal at Guadalajara Restaurant included laughter, affirmation, and lively conversation with the pastor, her spouse Kevin, and John and Ann Sharp. John is the congregation council president – the youngest leader in this congregation typically led by more

“seasoned” members in age and experience. He is well respected and has a natural gift of affirmation and encouragement. Ann shared her perspective on life, the community, and the church. Raised Roman Catholic, she and John came to the ELCA congregation as a middle ground from his LCMS background. They are raising three children, plus are permanent guardians of a former congregation member’s 10 year old son. They also do emergency foster care. She is a teacher and believes that everyone has gifts. She offers her own gifts as she is able, coaching athletic teams and nurturing children, and offers service through Trinity as well.

John and Ann both grew up in this area of New Mexico, and they are now leaders in the community. John works in the local hospital as the purchasing manager. He has significant leadership training through this corporate experience, and he and the pastor consult weekly regarding church life. He and Ann have led the youth group at Trinity, and he has served on the council for two different terms in his 12 years as a member.

Kevin Knox, the pastor’s spouse, is an active member of the congregation. He has found his own way to be involved in a variety of ministries and shared his perspectives in our conversation. A quiet, thoughtful man, he offers his gifts of cooking for the men’s Bible study group, he does altar preparation and participates in worship leadership. Kevin has also constructed a large cross for the congregation and does other projects as he sees a need or an opportunity. His model is a gentle and genuine way of being in ministry through this congregation.

Bonita Knox has been pastor at Trinity for two years. She has a ready smile and a pleasant way of engaging in conversation with people. Pastor Bonita genuinely loves the congregation where she serves. She expresses enthusiasm for the ministry opportunities in Clovis, and clearly enjoyed sharing her appreciation for the community and culture. The warm welcome I received seemed to reflect her openness as a pastor. When I arrived at the hotel, I found that a hospitality basket of local items had been carefully assembled and delivered by Bonita. The drive to the Mexican restaurant included a tour offering lively stories about the community.

This congregation understands itself as small compared to some others in town. They are aware of the challenges of competing with youth programs in the two city “mega churches.” John sees the value of teaching the basics of Lutheran theology and identity through catechism, but is realistic about program limits. The stories shared throughout the weekend suggest that the people of this congregation see their strengths, their grounding and identity and their limitations. They know who they are and they seek to be faithful to their calling.

CONGREGATION CONTEXT

Clovis, New Mexico is a town of about 32,000 in the High Plains of eastern New Mexico. It was founded in 1907 by the railroad and became a strong economic community after the Cannon Air Force Base was established in 1942. There are many churches - one Missouri Synod, two Catholic and many Baptist congregations, as well as a variety of other Protestant churches.

This congregation sees itself as a “small mission on the outreaches of the Synod as well as being a somewhat transit congregation (drawing from Cannon Air Force Base)” which has led to some struggling times over the life of the congregation as leaders and members have come and gone.

A recent development in Clovis is creating a new sense of hope. Cannon Air Force Base will be expanded with the addition of a Special Forces Operations unit that could bring as many as 3,000 new people to the area. Several congregation members shared this news along with their hope that “at least a few” of those moving here would be Lutheran.

The current pastor, Bonita Knox, was called two years ago. She is from the Rocky Mountain Synod and was raised in eastern Colorado. She did her internship in the North Texas Northern Louisiana Synod and then received her first call from Trinity Lutheran Church in Clovis.

The membership of this congregation reflects the demographics of the area – a small town with many retired military families as well as young families and couples. There are about 75 families listed in the Church Directory for 2006. A large number of the active members are over 70. There are two services each Sunday with 100 as an average attendance. The Sunday school consists of two classes for children and an adult education class of 6 -12 people. The congregation has a council and a committee structure, although John, the president, says:

We are not very committee driven, even though we have lots of them. But we expect the pastor to be the back up, to do the work. We know how the model should be, but when it doesn't work, we fall back on the pastor. People need to take their responsibility more seriously. It's not the pastor's job to do everything that no one else does. It's not about the pastor that keeps us going....it's us.

The council recently made a decision to refer to committees as “Ministry Teams” relating back to the mission of Trinity: *Growing, to Worship, to Serve*

This suggests that ministry is not done alone, but in teams and through relationships. There is zeal in the leadership of this congregation. You can feel it. The connection, the enthusiasm, the hope, the care that members have for one another is quite striking. Many members described this as a place of “extended family,” as “friendly,” as “a family.” The care and connection of people was very clear as I visited and observed during three days of activity.

The congregation has a budget of \$117,000 for 2006 – more than half of which goes to compensation for staff. The mortgage on the addition is at \$54,000 and being paid off with about \$12,000 per year.

CONGREGATION HISTORY

Trinity Lutheran Church was organized in 1965 by the ALC through the Home Missions program. The church building was constructed that same year. Trinity sits across the street from Trinity Methodist Church as well as a Church of Christ congregation, all on a main street in Clovis. The large piece of property is neat and appealing, with well maintained grounds and parking areas. A prominent sign can include a personalized greeting (“Welcome Carol Schickel” was up for my visit!).

The building is a traditional L shaped structure, with the church and parish hall part of the original construction. The mortgage for that building was burned in 1990. An addition was built and dedicated in 1998, with well-furnished classroom and office space that welcomes those who enter the pleasant hall off the narthex of the church. The building seems well lived in and well cared for. There is a parsonage just two blocks from the church. A few of the charter or early members continue to provide stability and perspective for this congregation, while other people come and go, particularly impacted by the Air Force base nearby.

Trinity has had 10 called pastors and five interims in its 40 year history. Three of the last four pastors were in their first call. Both of the last two pastors were “second career” first call pastors. Pastor Bonita Knox has served for two years, and Pr. Tom Wilson was retired military who left after four years to serve in campus ministry, where he still serves. The pastor prior to Pastor Wilson was Pastor Christiansen, who spent his “last call” with the congregation, retiring after serving a number of years.

CALL PROCESS EXPERIENCES

The pattern of this congregation appears to include the formation of a call committee about every four to six years. This history means that there are several people in the congregation who have had direct experience with the call process. In addition, one newer member served on call committees in other congregations where she belonged. The congregation council members also have been quite involved in the call process. Our conversations included many comments about the dynamics of having a first call pastor. One interim pastor (the first woman pastor for this congregation, who was an Air Force chaplain) a few years ago was reported to be very helpful in guiding them through the call process and thinking through the implications of a first call pastor’s fit with this congregation.

Church members also commented that the message from the synod seemed to be, “If you consider a first call pastor, you can get someone as much as a year sooner than if you want someone more seasoned.” Another observation was that the synod does not deal with the congregation itself in this process, but works through the call committee briefly and then steps back. So the congregation must work to know itself and its needs. Still there was reluctance to consider a first call pastor in the last two call processes. A call extended a few years earlier to a young first call pastor (the only other first call pastor at Trinity) had not gone well and had ended after only one year.

One church leader commented that during the 1 ½ years with no pastor, prior to Pastor Wilson, the synod and the interim pastor helped them to “get our act together.” They were encouraged to be broad minded and open to new ways of working in the call process. He acknowledges that their profile at that time was missing guidelines and was not very well done. Another member commented, “To consider a first call pastor was the only smart thing to do.” Once the congregation “came together” on this issue, the process went rather quickly, with the synod making a recommendation.

Trinity Lutheran Church continues to reflect on making a transition to the practice of calling a

pastor in his or her first call. Some members are satisfied with the balance of life experience and recent seminary training that a first call pastor brings. One woman expressed a positive attitude about the fresh ideas brought by a new pastor. There seems to be a sense by many members that the primary characteristic contributing to their satisfaction is that the two most recent pastors were “seasoned” in life, if not in public ministry.

Pastor Tom Wilson was extremely popular and well liked in this congregation. He had “zeal and passion,” according to one member’s memories. He also “learned along with us” in Bible study and other areas. He came as retired military (with benefits that relieved the congregation of some of the financial obligation) and related well to many in this place. The previous pastor, nearing retirement, had also agreed to a lower compensation in his final years of public ministry. Both of these financial situations were viewed as good arrangements by the congregation at that time.

In the most recent call process, two years ago, there was a short list of candidates, but Bonita Knox emerged as the only likely one to consider Trinity. Bonita was attracted to the location of this congregation as she considered her personal preferences for a small town in a dry climate. She also seemed to be a good fit theologically and spiritually with the practices that had been established at Trinity.

Some members commented that there was (and still is) not complete support for a woman pastor. The issue of gender is one where everyone is not in agreement. The call process and the years that have followed have not provided any intentional exploration of the impact of the pastor’s gender on the ministry of this congregation. Pastor Knox is aware of this issue as a sensitive one. She knows of at least one family that worships at a different church in town unless she is away on a Sunday. A few members raised gender as one issue where the congregation has been stretched, and some people have responded well, while others remain uncomfortable.

VOCATIONAL IDENTITY

A sense of what the church provides in equipping and nourishing its members was explored with some of the people I met at Trinity. Members were also revealing in their understanding of what people need from the church. One seasoned leader of the congregation stated, “Older folks are set in their ways – going to church is established for us. But younger people need encouragement.”

One member asked, “What makes a pastor suitable for us?” He reflected on how seminarians are now being trained and encouraged to be open about first calls in rural churches. Another member commented that he realizes, “There are four players at work in a call: the ELCA, the synod, the pastor, and the congregation.” Another woman thought that some members of this congregation have come to understand their vocation in this matter: that with their own maturity and with their own experiences (including, for her, some family members being pastors) they have become more aware of the characteristics that are important to them. They know that they can be open to some change and that a new pastor will bring that. Their last two pastors have been “second career,” so that has worked well for this congregation. There is an appreciation that the pastor “is just like us,” and that “we need to look out for them too.” This was not an

attitude that seemed paternalistic or controlling. Rather, it recognized that each person has gifts and a place in this community.

I sensed a depth of understanding in these conversations regarding the attitudes, hopes, expectations, and realities of what a pastor brings to a congregation. There is a clear awareness that academic preparation must be complemented by “hands-on” learning, and that this is a place where there is room for that to happen. Pastor Wilson commented:

One of Trinity’s greatest gifts is teaching first call pastors to learn ministry. They gave me room to grow and they were loving and open. It was a great congregation for starting out. When I bombed a sermon one time, one woman was very understanding and patient, reminding me that “we can give you room to grow.” As long I consulted with them, they let me go.

Still, when Pastor Wilson left to work in campus ministry many members were disappointed. Pastor Wilson confirmed that the congregation did not understand a sense of call as a “first call congregation” when it came time for him to move on. Many members had hoped that he would stay for a longer period of time.

Some of the members of this congregation see their faith community as comfortable with itself, as strong enough to take care of itself, as able to welcome a pastor to be a pastor, but not to serve all the needs. This collective group of Christians carries a vocational identity that includes the support and nurture of a new pastor as she (or he) “lives into” the role of pastor. They can be open to changes and new ideas introduced by pastoral leadership and can welcome a new pastor with hope and affirmation. One member said it this way, “A first call pastor wants to get out and do what they’ve learned, to incorporate it and see what people will accept. They have shown us a way to be caring.”

EXPECTATIONS OF PASTOR

Members of the congregation have explored some of their expectations of themselves as well as their pastor through a process identified as “Achieving TLC’s Vocation.” This yearlong process began last January in a session focused on Mission and Vision. All members of the congregation were invited to participate. The second session, in the spring, identified “resources” of the congregation. The third session was scheduled during my visit, and 16 people arrived for conversation and activity. Bernie, a retired member, facilitated this session and invited those present into a design that included discussion, focus groups, analogy and analysis.

Irving is a member who has attended Trinity on and off for about 12 years. He is recently married and has become more active recently. Irving offered this reflection:

We are a core group of experienced lay people who have fulfilled multiple roles in our own lives, are savvy about this particular congregation, and mature and realistic in what we expect from our pastor.

Many people expressed appreciation for the presence of the pastor in their lives in times of crisis and sorrow. They value the pastoral care role of the pastor, as well as the preaching and teaching roles. Some members believe that they can make room for a new pastor to come and try some

new things. They see change as challenging but part of life. Many military families come and go in this community, so the church is both a haven for transplanted Lutherans (especially from the Midwest) as well as a community where they can make room for flexibility and be accepting of others, including the pastoral leadership. One person said it this way:

I may have a problem with some of the worship services introduced by the pastor, but at the same time we need and benefit from change. We have such a strong bond that we can deal with conflict and change.

The evening session invited participants to consider expectations for a first call pastor. Expectations of a pastor were identified by the group who participated in this conversation and included:

- Willing to learn together, don't "go it alone"
- Be involved in continuing education
- Accept criticism
- Use a support group
- Be a communicator and a problem solver
- Be receptive to the congregation
- Be able to delegate and manage
- Provide empathy and support for committees and people
- Be a good listener, do visitation and counseling
- Proclamation/sacramental roles
- Leadership
- Theological guidance
- Confidentiality

This session included abundant food, drink, laughter, and smiles. People engaged in the evening in a variety of ways – going with the flow, questioning the process, with silence, chatter, or teasing. I appreciated the generosity and availability of those who were present and discovered people willing to be together in a faith community, whatever the topic.

CONGREGATIONAL IDENTITY

Most of the people in the community of Clovis are transplants. This small town of about 32,000 has its share of well established families. But the Lutherans find their way to this congregation as they move into town, coming and going through the years. Many lifelong Lutherans have found this church to be a small congregation that is easy to become part of. Tammy says that she found it "personable, supportive, and comforting in a way where I can call anybody up if I need help." She moved from Georgia but was originally from Wisconsin. She has felt supported through some trying times, including a divorce.

Mike stated, "I knew three people on my first Sunday here. Because it's small, you can't get lost in it. Everyone is involved in each other's church lives. This is a nurturing church in my faith walk." Mike recently completed the synod's Parish Lay Ministry program and serves in worship and care leadership. Cameron also completed this program, so the congregation is blessed with these two men who are equipped for service. The program met monthly in Fort Worth, and Mike and Cam drove the 500 mile trip together. They have started a home communion initiative.

Mike's wife, Debbie, says it this way, "Most of us have been transplanted to Clovis through the military. We like it – we have shared experiences and we take the place of family. Help is available to us."

Audrey is a retired military nurse who has been in Clovis for 22 years. She became a member two years ago after being invited to join. "I never was hugged so much in my life," she said happily. "The pastor has been very good and has grown along with us. There are down to earth people here."

One leader commented: "It doesn't matter who the pastor is; we know who we are." I heard over and over comments such as: "This is my comfort zone." "It's extended family." "We support each other." "We are accepting of all kinds." One person said, "This is my home." He has seen an ability to welcome people and to help them feel loved and cared for. He sees it as "a really good place."

Congregation members do love this church. There is a sense of connection, of comfort and of belonging that breathed through the days of my visit. This community includes many people who are genuinely committed to sustaining and building the church in the world. But there is also a personal sense that came through – people sharing stories of how crisis and loss in their lives were met with caring, generous people who stepped up to support them. "When help is needed, people offer their talents; there are many gifts, and much willingness to serve through Trinity." Dawn is a woman who has become more involved after being invited to develop some programs of care and outreach. She values this opportunity, but even more important to her was the support and love she and her family received when they faced a serious crisis.

Dave used communion practice as a metaphor for this congregation. He said, "It's full service; there are many ways to take communion here, which reflects our acceptance of different types of people." This is a strength of this congregation, where people feel welcomed when they arrive for worship. Twelve-year-old Charlie commented that what he likes about his church is "friendly people." Bernie, on the other end of the age spectrum, stated, "There are delightful people here who let me be retired and don't make me do leadership. I see the face of Christ; I remember that God loves all of us."

Rebecca joined just a year ago and she commented:

No one knew me when I came, but they accepted me. The church helps me, gives direction, and teaches me. I learned to be a lector, to push a lawn mower, and to be stronger and on a path that is the right way for me. The pastor has talked with me and guided me.

One member, Irving, told me, "There is a core group of experienced lay people who have fulfilled multiple roles, are savvy about this particular congregation, and are mature and realistic in what to expect from the congregation." He sees this as unique and as factors that contribute to the congregation's ministry.

Chuck summed up the congregation in this way:

We laugh together, we cry together in sorrow, and we rally around each other. We don't get lost. In between pastors we have learned what it means to be Lutheran. We are a caring, loving congregation. We don't care what your background is; if you come to worship, you are welcome. It doesn't matter who the pastor is; we know who we are. We hold onto our identity.

Pastor Wilson commented that he saw significant spiritual growth in his time as the pastor of Trinity. The realities are that this will likely never be a large congregation with healthy financial resources. But not being a big church does not diminish who they are as people of God.

Pastor Bonita and others expressed awareness that the church has a relationship with the wider community. The Council is considering whether to place an ad in the Chamber of Commerce print resource. The council president commented that he is not sure that people in the community have a clear sense of who this congregation is and how they serve. This is an issue for the future of the congregation.

Cam says simply, "This is God's church."

PASTOR'S STORY

Pastor Knox grew up in Colorado and attended college there, majoring in political science. She is a lifelong Lutheran of the Volga Lutheran background (Russian German). She served one year as a volunteer in the VISTA program in Oklahoma and then returned to Colorado and began a career in sales. She attended paralegal training and worked with the real estate market in foreclosures. She and her husband Kevin married in 1991 and soon after their marriage Bonita responded to a call to study theology. They moved to Iowa for study at Wartburg Seminary. Bonita did her internship in the Northern Texas – Northern Louisiana Synod. She was assigned to Region 4 and was called to Trinity for her first call.

Pastor Knox lives in the church personage with her husband Kevin, a supportive spouse who is active in the church in his own way. He says, "I just do what I can, where I can." He cooks breakfast for the men's group and he bakes bread for communion and assists in altar preparation and teaching. He repairs doors and serves as assisting minister when asked. This gentle, quiet man is one of the many saints who have been welcomed into Trinity's faith community.

Pastor Knox is committed to empowering people in the congregation to use their gifts in ministry. "I want to share with them." Her generous spirit and flexible approach to leadership is received well by most of this congregation's members. She sees hope and receives affirmation from individuals along the way. Worship life is central to her understanding of her call. "I talk worship a lot." She has been focused on preparing the congregation theologically for the new hymnal, affirming the Lutheran identity of the congregation. This led to the council launching a visioning process this year which seems to be going well.

Pastor Knox has attended First Call Theological Education through her synod's program. She and Pastor Wilson both sang the praises of the NTNL program, the support of their bishop, and the excellent job that the synod does with the first call process in challenging growth and

development while providing a structured program. Pastor Wilson commented that he wishes the national church could do a better job of teaching congregations to see that welcoming first call leaders as their pastor is an important and vital role in the ELCA.

Pastor Bonita is respected by the members of Trinity Lutheran Church. Her pastoral authority is evident in worship and roles of leadership in the congregation. Her sense of call is deep and strong, and her faith and witness are bold examples how to live a Christian life.

WORSHIP

Two worship services are held each Sunday morning at Trinity, with the 8:00 am service normally having a smaller attendance. Weekly communion has been a practice for a few years; it was introduced during the previous pastor's service. A bulletin for each service includes the entire liturgy; hymnals are used for the hymns. There is an insert for announcements and some of those were verbally made as well, appropriately brief.

Music appears to be appreciated by this congregation. The organist played wonderful Bach for prelude music as well as the offering music and postlude. She has done this throughout the green season of Pentecost. A choir sang during the second service.

This congregation embraces its worship. There were many people involved, including ushers, acolytes, greeters and altar guild. A lector read the lessons. Worship flowed smoothly. A children's sermon was shared during the service. This worship was participatory, nourishing and noticeably Lutheran in its practices.

Worship at Trinity had integrity and spirit. The scriptural themes of the day were well incorporated into the bulletin, the confession and the sermon. The pastor is passionate in her worship leadership and has clearly provided education regarding the essential elements of the service. The passing of the peace is an extended moment in the service; people moved throughout the church to greet one another – a friendly, affirming experience. Congregation members appear to enjoy this opportunity to greet and affirm one another.

Related to worship is the topic of a new hymnal in the ELCA. The congregation council and worship committee explored the idea of introducing the new hymnal into the congregation's worship life. It was determined to seek to raise funds for the new hymnal and a campaign has been launched to invite members to purchase 130 of them. At the time of my visit 100 hymnals had been pledged, so the congregation was close to its goal. The council and pastor were excited about this new development. The pastor sees the new hymnal as a teaching tool for the tradition of the Lutheran faith.

CONGREGATION DESCRIPTION

This congregation has had many opportunities over its 40 years of life to reflect on who it is and how it engages with the world through its members. Pastoral leadership has been varied and rich. Perhaps because the congregation has had many relatively short term pastors, its connection with the synod is strong. This eastern edge of New Mexico was included in the

NTNL Synod when it was formed, which means that any synodical activities are a significant distance from Clovis.

Trinity is the only ELCA congregation in Clovis and surrounding communities, with its Lutheran identity strong and clear, but it remains somewhat isolated and cut off. This situation is recognized by church leaders; there seems to be intention to support the pastor and encourage connections through continuing education, synod events and other wider church activities. Many members have lived in other parts of the country and belonged to Lutheran congregations, so there is a sense of church that extends beyond the local congregation. The congregation is represented at Synod Assemblies, Panhandle Conference meetings, and other workshops and events sponsored by the NTNL Synod.

Another characteristic related to the frequent change in pastoral leadership – as well as the movement of members in and out due to military assignments – is that the congregation is more open to change than might be the case in other congregations. There is a climate that is unique to Trinity with its own practices, traditions and preferences. New members seem to be integrated smoothly into the life of the congregation. Pastor Knox has worked to lift up the particular gifts of individual members as she has encouraged new ideas to surface. She sees many treasures and talents still untapped and invites those interests to be expressed through the church.

There are many active members who are generous with their time and talents at Trinity. Many are also leaders in the community. Recently, the congregation appears to be more intentional in reaching out into the community and being part of public life. The council will soon consider the opportunity to join the Chamber of Commerce. Advertising in the community has been discussed as a way to invite visitors.

The support and care of one another is a striking characteristic at Trinity. I noticed gifts on a table with tags indicating that they were being given from one member to another. The monthly newsletter includes a “God Bless” column which lifts up the news and gifts in the lives of members. Prayers are offered for all those in need. And the Lord’s Prayer is part of every gathering and event at Trinity, holding hands, connected through Christ. This congregation has healthy spiritual practices that enhance its life and sense as a community of Christ.

CONGREGATION CHALLENGES

There are many factors that bring challenges to Trinity Lutheran Church. Its context includes a community where individuals come and go, often impacted by the military practices of reassignment and frequent moves. This results in many transitions for congregational membership. Clovis is a small town where economic growth has not been strong. The people of the congregation have struggled with financial realities that have impacted the budget of Trinity.

The congregation has a variety of issues that create tension and invite further exploration. They include topics such as:

Flags in sanctuary
New hymnal use

Community connections/outreach
Worship styles

Sexuality study
Women pastors
Weekly communion
Meeting spiritual needs

Finances
Understanding of pastoral role
Integrating new and old members

The leadership of the congregation addresses sensitive issues and challenges in a variety of ways. The council president meets regularly with the pastor to review the life of the church and issues that require attention. The council and its ministry teams are engaged in ministry on various levels that moves the congregation from 'maintenance' to 'mission' in its focus. The visioning process launched in 2006 is identifying the key opportunities for this congregation as it moves forward in mission. The positive attitude of Pastor Knox provides inspiration and encouragement for boldly moving forward as a lively faith community.

CONCLUSION

Trinity Lutheran Church of Clovis, New Mexico is a community of gathered people of God. These individuals and families share a common belief in God that grounds and connects them. Worship nourishes this shared belief through prayer, creeds, hymns, liturgy and Word. Members are friendly to one another and to those who visit. They stretch to be welcoming and flexible in how they do ministry.

The congregation embodies a sense of being a "first call congregation." It has been able to honor and welcome the gifts of their new pastors. People have been patient, kind and forgiving as a new pastor becomes oriented to congregational life. The congregation has learned to support and accept a stewardship of resources that includes this vocation of welcoming a pastor new to public ministry. People have been flexible as they learn to work together in ministry as partners with a new pastor. This congregation is experiencing spiritual growth as it engages in the ministry it is called to do, in part thanks to the fresh and hope-filled leadership of a first call pastor.

Trinity is in an intentional process to identify and live out its vocation as a church of Christ. The mission and vision are being set and renewed and people are being welcomed and affirmed. The congregation worships with meaningful and nourishing practices, beautiful music, and a sense that God is indeed at work in the midst of them. Members and visitors are cared for and loved in this generous and lively congregation. The additional sense of vocation as a first call congregation comes as an emerging gift to this congregation, the synod and the wider church.

To God be thanks for the people and ministry of Trinity Lutheran Church.

Note: I visited with the people of Trinity from Friday through Sunday. I had conversations with at least 40- 50 people and met many others in worship (where passing the peace included a greeting with almost every person present). This occurred in meetings and in meals, in a breakfast conversation on Saturday, a Saturday evening visioning process, two worship services on Sunday, Adult Education class, and at a final congregational potluck dinner. I was welcomed with generous amounts of time and spirit and willingness to share the story and life of Trinity Lutheran Church. I am grateful to Pastor Knox, to John Sharp, and to all those who reached out to welcome me and share their perspectives on life among the people of God at Trinity.