

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
St. Matthews Lutheran Church, Bridgeport, MI
Site Visit: June, 2007
Rod Schofield, Case Study Researcher

BACKGROUND

Situated at the rural crossroad of King and Portsmouth Roads, just a couple of miles down the road from the German community of Frankenmuth and the “world’s largest” year round Christmas store and display area (according to the locals), is St. Matthews Lutheran Church, a 127 year old rural church with a more modern education and fellowship building adjacent to their adequate parking area. Coming from any direction across the farmlands and fields, one sees the tall steeple of the church as a beacon and the clean, well tended landscaping surrounding the buildings, including the parsonage, located next to the church.

St. Matthews was founded in 1880 by seven German families who decided that traveling long distances to attend worship services was no longer feasible and organized the building of the current edifice. Some descendants of those original families proudly attend and participate in the ministry of St. Matthews today. Located in a rural setting and drawing members from surrounding townships whose economy relies heavily upon tourism and farming, St. Matthews is composed of white, middle class families, many with German ancestry. In 2005 the congregation marked their 125th anniversary with a yearlong celebration. There is a growing population of persons of color and whose language is other than English in the surrounding communities. However, St. Matthews does not reflect this demographic in their membership.

Baptized membership at St. Matthews’s totals 248 while confirmed membership is 172 with an average worship attendance at 80.

Due to the rural isolation of the church, transportation for members, young and old, is a limiting factor in terms of church growth. At present, except for some informal transportation arrangements, there is no program to assure transportation for all persons who may want to attend St. Matthews. During this case study visit several participants indicated they were going to pursue ways to address this need.

The economic situation in Bridgeport is difficult. The community of Bridgeport and surrounding areas, including Saginaw, is economically depressed due to auto plant closings that have affected plant supply manufacturers in the area. One of the major local employers, Delphi, recently announced bankruptcy and that has resulted in some of St. Matthews’ members losing their jobs and having to move. Also, Delphi announced the pending sale of their plant and this has created anxiety on the part of congregational members. In addition, the Bridgeport public school system is seen as suffering from the conditions facing the community and is viewed as not having the quality of some school

districts in the surrounding communities. Therefore, some members of St. Matthews send their children to schools, both public and private, in the adjacent Frankenmuth school district. A large LCMS church in Frankenmuth has a private school that is used by some St. Matthews members, including the pastor's children.

St. Matthews' relationship to the community is based, primarily, on the ecumenical services and VBS programs they sponsor with three other congregations in the area. With the exception of those churches, there is not much connection among churches in the area, including Saginaw, which is just 15 minutes north of Bridgeport. Participants in this study agreed that people in the community love the building and grounds "but don't know us that well." St. Matthews is often viewed by the community as "that white church that sits out in the country."

Since 1942, the average tenure of pastors at St. Matthews has been 5 ½ years. During the last 45 years St. Matthews has called five First Call pastors, who were "inspiring and uplifting except for one." Members often recalled First Call pastors who instituted successful congregational practices that continue to this day. One example is the extensive use of "commissions" for ministry support at St. Matthews, a structure that was described as creating a "bottom up" type of governance that has the potential to involve all members in the life of the church. Also, the congregation has found the commissions helpful in developing strong leaders who "help us cope with interim situations." The downside has been that, in some cases, leaders can become "dogmatic in their roles as commission leaders." Members are proud of the fact that one of their First Call pastors, Rev. Edward Sproul, is now Assistant to the Bishop in the Upstate New York Synod.

The current pastor's predecessor, the first woman pastor called by the congregation, experienced challenges due to differing expectations between her, as a first call pastor, and the congregation which had set out some specific requirements that they felt were not met. Members described this situation as the only time that a First Call pastor did not adequately meet expectations. One of those expectations was that the pastor and her family, including her husband who was also an ordained ELCA pastor, would reside in the church parsonage. The pastor and her family chose to live elsewhere. There were also other personal circumstances, known by many in the congregation, that made that call in the late 90's a difficult one for both the pastor and the congregation. Even with this experience, study participants indicated, "Every pastor has left us with at least one gift."

STUDY PROCESS

This study began with a 3-hour dinner meeting with Pastor Matthew Smith on Thursday evening, June 7. Pastor Smith had to leave the community the next morning to preside at a friend's wedding on the east coast so this was the only opportunity to engage him in the study. Pastor Smith was most open in discussing areas covered in the case study and provided valuable context for my later interviews and observations.

The congregational coordinator for this study, Ron Bell, was exceptionally helpful in organizing my contacts with congregational leaders and other members, in

communicating the importance of this study to the congregation and soliciting their support and involvement and, along with his wife, Barb, graciously hosting me during much of my visit.

Individual interviews with the Call Committee chair and spouse were held on Friday morning, June 8, followed by small group interviews the remainder of the day. An individual interview was held late Friday afternoon with the church secretary.

On Saturday, June 9, small group interviews were held from 9:30 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. followed by further time with the chair of the Call Committee.

Mr. Bell arranged for an excellent cross section of key church leaders, past and present, to be represented in the small group discussions. I was impressed that almost all who had signed up attended these small group sessions and interviews, even though the area was experiencing some of the most beautiful summer weather that weekend.

On Sunday, June 10, I attended worship and the fellowship time following the service as well as holding two additional individual interviews following the service. In the evening, I met over dinner with all those who participated in the study for a feedback session.

The total number of congregational leaders and members who directly participated in this study was thirty-one.

CALL PROCESS

Following an interim period of over two years, the congregation began the call process for the current pastor in the fall of 2000. A long-standing leader of St. Matthews, Ron Bell, who had served in a similar capacity in past call processes, chaired the Call Committee.

Several members interviewed for this study described some distrust of Synod involvement in the call process due to past experiences. There was a belief by some members (unsubstantiated by this evaluator) that the Synod had previously sent pastors to St. Matthews with the unspoken task of closing the church. In addition, the perception of some members was that the Synod encouraged a beloved former first call pastor to take a call to a church within the same regional area as St. Matthews. The congregation had remodeled the parsonage to encourage that pastor to remain at St. Matthews who, despite the congregation's efforts, proceeded to take a call in a church "close to St. Matthews."

Despite these misgivings regarding past Synod activity, it was reported that the Synod's involvement in this call process was appropriate and appreciated.

The Call Committee identified three candidates to be considered. Based on their experience with the previous First Call pastor, several on the committee had a preference for considering someone with more experience. Two of the candidates had experience,

including one from the Presbyterian tradition, with Pastor Smith being the first call candidate.

Financial considerations, while described as “always under the surface,” were not a determining factor in the Call Committee or congregation’s deliberations. Significantly, the congregation had made a commitment several years back to use, at minimum, Synod guidelines for compensation of called pastors. That commitment was not called into question during this call process.

After involving two candidates in the “full process” of meeting with the congregation and leading a worship service, the call committee had planned to bypass some of that process with the young First Call candidate and have him meet with members without leading a service. This candidate, Pastor Matt Smith, requested that he also be given the opportunity to lead a service and preach a sermon and was given that opportunity.

During a dinner with the congregation as part of the call process, Pastor Smith was presented with an impromptu group interview experience. A female leader of the church challenged him, asking if he would be “threatened by women leaders such as her.” Recalling this exchange, several study participants indicated they had felt the question was inappropriate and made several people uncomfortable. That exchange caused Pastor Smith to take even more seriously his discernment regarding this call.

Also, during the call process, Pastor Smith shared the fact that he had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis during his second year at seminary. According to Call Committee members and others this fact was not seen as a barrier to calling Pastor Smith. And, in fact, the congregation did call Pastor Matt Smith who, after a period of discernment with his family, accepted the call.

An insight shared by one of the congregational leaders who had served on several call committees was that St. Matthews *may* be calling First Call pastors out of a “sense of insecurity.” He explained that because First Call pastors do not ordinarily have set expectations of a newly served congregation, calling them might involve “less risk” for the congregation since the newly ordained pastor wouldn’t have high expectations of them.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

As people indicated has always been the case at St. Matthews, parishioners were pleased to receive a “new, fresh pastor with family and children.” Members felt good that they were getting a young, vivacious, “ready to get going” pastor and someone who they thought could take care of their aging congregation. Most study participants indicated that they were happy with the selection of Pastor Smith and were ready to support him in his new call. Changes in those initial impressions over time were described as primarily related to Pastor Smith’s illness and the progressive changes they have perceived in him due to his illness. This issue will be described in more detail later in this report.

WELCOMING AND ORIENTATION

Study participants described their church as exceptionally welcoming. This was confirmed in conversations with 4 members who had joined in the last 1-2 years. All said they were “almost overwhelmed” by the welcoming they received. They were aware that existing members were quick to determine the gifts that new members brought into their community of faith. This has resulted in new members being quickly asked to enter into the ministry programs of the church.

It was noted by two study participants that the congregation is welcoming “*to others like us.*” This in part explained why there were no persons of color or whose language is other than English present in the membership of St. Matthews, despite their presence in surrounding communities.

In terms of welcoming the pastor and his family, many pointed out that they assisted the pastor and his family in their move to their new residence, the parsonage next to the church. In the last several years, they had done some remodeling, including adding air conditioning, in order to create a more comfortable home environment. The congregation also welcomed the pastor and family with a potluck at the church and arranged for newspaper articles in the local papers to announce the arrival of Pastor Smith and family to St. Matthews.

Orientation to the community was primarily provided on an informal basis, often through the pastor’s meetings with the ministry commissions. The fact that Pastor Smith’s wife was from one of the surrounding communities about an hour away may have led congregational leaders to assume that there was not as much need to provide formal orientation opportunities. It was also stated by some congregational leaders, “Not much was shared with pastor about some of our traditions for fear of defensiveness on the pastor’s part.” In other words, they described themselves as understandably sensitive about saying, “This is what the other pastors have done.” Pastor Smith also confirmed that members were hesitant to talk about or bring up previous pastors, for good or for ill.

Most study participants assumed that Pastor Smith would receive orientation through meetings with small groups in the congregation. Again, there was not formal, planned orientation process for Pastor Smith and his family as he began his call at St. Matthews. Reflecting back, several study participants thought that one of the most important parts of any orientation should be to inform the pastor of the extensive interrelatedness of families in the church. The vast majority of parishioners are related to one another and sensitivity to family connections was seen as essential for pastoral care and attention.

Pastor Smith did not express any concerns about the welcoming and orientation activities of the congregation and did indicate that he received sufficient information about the congregation prior to his acceptance of the call.

CONGREGATIONAL STRENGTHS

“We press on,” “We plow through” (appropriate metaphors for a rural congregation) were terms used repeatedly as members described the congregation’s response to challenges over the years. In a newspaper interview commemorating the 125th anniversary of St. Matthews, Pastor Smith credited the longevity of the church to “strong-minded, strong willed, courageous German folks of the congregation.” That statement seems to fit with the descriptive rural metaphors.

Whenever there was an interim period between pastors, members would step forward and assume some of the pastoral duties. Specifically, the lay ministers would preach, do visitation and work with the commissions to make sure that nothing “fell through the cracks.” A recent addition to the narthex placed greater financial pressure on the congregation than anticipated. It was stated that people did not complain much but stepped forward with new budgets and stewardship efforts.

A particular strength mentioned by Pastor Smith was the fact that members “know what their strengths are” and attributed this to the Natural Church Development survey (an ELCA congregational planning process) that was completed a few years ago. In other interviews with church leaders, this survey was remembered as helping individuals become aware of their particular gifts, rather than becoming aware of the gifts of others in the congregation. Also, some members said they were not sure that the pastor knew their particular gifts.

Another characteristic mentioned by probably 30% of all study participants was the fact that there has been a strong education emphasis within the congregation. Youth education was cited as something the people of St. Matthews felt especially good about while recognizing that they could do a better job of providing educational opportunities for adults. One adult education opportunity that was mentioned by only a few was the “Journey Together Faithfully” study (on homosexuality) that one of the lay ministers conducted a couple of years ago. A small group of members participated in that study and were described as entering into the discussions respectfully and without any divisiveness. The pastor chose not to become directly involved in leading that study.

Pastor Smith sees St. Matthews as having an important function in training new pastors. However, he believes that the congregation may not always be aware or intentional about this training function. In fact, about 1/3 of participants did indicate that the training of pastors is part of their calling without being able to be too specific about what this means to them.

An area of some pride for St. Matthews has been an ecumenical practice of engaging with three other area churches (Catholic, Episcopal, and a non-denominational Community Church) in sharing Lenten services. Also, since the 2002, St. Matthews has been involved in joint sponsorship of Vacation Bible School with the local Episcopal church, alternating use of their facilities every year. Preparation for this year’s VBS, to be held at

St. Matthews, was going on during this site visit. In addition, Pastor Smith has initiated an ecumenical text study group for local pastors.

Outreach to the community is another strength often cited as a congregational strength. In the past St. Matthews has sponsored families from Namibia and Vietnam and continues to contribute to local agencies that serve the poor. Contributions include designated offerings for the local food pantry, women's shelter and rescue mission, and collecting quarters over many years for world hunger. It was mentioned by several people that support often means providing financial resources, prayers, and publicity but not a lot of "hands on" assistance. One church leader who is currently leading a study on "Why Men Don't Attend Church" discussed the fact that men need "hands on tasks" to encourage them to become active in the church and is hoping this will increase the more direct assistance to the community. This individual personally is engaged in a community social service project that provides clothing, furniture, etc. to those in need. And, in fact, one newer member of the church remarked that this particular service caused him and his wife to become active members of St. Matthews after they received assistance from this individual and his project.

Another example of congregational outreach to the community occurred when a neighboring church building burned and St. Matthews offered to share their building so that worship services could continue for the congregation that lost their facility.

Another strength lifted up was the fact that, due to Pastor Smith's initiation, the congregation has participated in the Natural Church Development Program during the last two years. This has resulted in small group programs that have revitalized the congregation as well as the current emphasis on creating more "inspiring worship experiences." The latter focus is not driven by a particular style of ministry at St. Matthews but, rather, as one member stated, through the shared experience of "God's awesome presence."

"Family spirit" and "faithfulness" were cited as additional congregational strengths. It was repeatedly noted that church members always step up to respond to the needs of others in the congregation, especially when asked. "We pull together when needed because we know everyone personally" was one member's explanation for this kind of response by the congregation to needs within their midst. Regarding faithfulness, this was described as "allowing other members to follow the Holy Spirit where it leads them on their journey." This respect for diversity of faith expression was apparent in the group discussions. There are church leaders at St. Matthews whose leadership styles and faith commitments are notably unique and could, in some circumstances, "turn others off." This apparently has not happened. In fact, several leaders seem to have defused any negative reaction to their styles and comments by acknowledging their particular personal characteristics. For example they described themselves in a lighthearted manner as "talking too much" and "being overbearing on occasion."

Another frequently mentioned strength is the fact that St. Matthews "takes the youth seriously" by involving them in worship opportunities, youth gatherings, and community

projects. The significance of this strength will be noted in the mini-case summary regarding the participation of youth in this case study visit.

The lay minister at St. Matthews stated her conviction that one of the most important strengths of this congregation is that they are “centered on Christ.” The nods and affirmations of this statement by other case study participants confirmed the significance of this observation.

CHANGE AND CONFLICT

In the recorded discussions of the committee that called the current First Call pastor as well as in my discussions with the Call Committee chair, it was noted that there have been no major congregational “divisions” in the entire life of the congregation. While there have been “disruptions to the peace” of the congregation over the years, it was stated that these have caused them to grow in faith and ministry. Examples of some of those disruptions included cutting down treasured trees on the property that some wanted to retain, having a beloved pastor take a call to an area parish, some negative interactions with Synod representatives, and the transition times between pastors.

In almost all interviews and group discussions, it became clear that there were explicit and implicit congregational norms that have operated for many years within St. Matthews that have served to avoid, perhaps deny, as well as explain potential sources of conflict.

It was clear that the congregation did not want their newly called pastors to make any significant changes when they arrived. One of the consistent messages given to this researcher regarding change at St. Matthews was: “You don’t mess with the time of services.” That same message was conveyed to Pastor Smith during the call process and repeated since then. Along with the strong desire to keep the existing worship times, there is also a strong need to retain two services except in the summer.

Changes that Pastor Smith initiated at St. Matthews include:

- Moving the baptismal fount from the front to the back;
- Having the pastor say the “Prayer of the Church” during services rather than the congregation as had been the practice prior to Pastor Smith’s arrival;
- Certain Lenten worship practices such as the washing of feet; and
- Beginning communing people at the communion rail before everyone had presented themselves at the rail. This has since been changed.

These changes created discomfort for some in the congregation, especially the more long-standing members, and are still talked about by some. The baptismal fount was moved back to the front of the nave at the request of congregational leaders and the communion practice, which was tried on one occasion, was returned to what was present before Pastor Smith’s arrival.

The desire for change on the part of some is strongly counterbalanced by congregational norms that dictate that change must be done slowly and incrementally. Statements indicating such norms included:

“Introduce change slowly;”

“Nothing drastic should occur with any change;”

“Our congregation eases into change;”

“Things don’t change much at St. Matthews;”

“It takes time for change and for the Holy Spirit to work among us;”

“Our congregation is not opposed to change but want our traditions to be respected – then we’ll respect the pastor’s new ideas;” and

“It is important in this church that any changes being considered, however small, be explained to the congregation before they are tried.”

It does appear that one of the more significant changes initiated by Pastor Smith, the introduction of the Natural Church Development Program, has been embraced enthusiastically (as much as German Lutherans can muster) by the congregation.

Among the sources of tension for this congregation has been the emphasis put on the contemporary service in relation to the traditional worship service. There have been intentional efforts to find a compromise that pleases most of the congregation, especially in the summer when there is only one service on Sunday. That compromise involved having the first Sunday of every month be traditional at both services, and traditional at the early service and contemporary at the late service the rest of the month.

Compromise was a term used by many study participants in explaining why St. Matthews has not experienced what they would term “significant conflict” in its history. When asked how they defined compromise, many indicated the willingness of members to negotiate among the traditions of the church and **the** ideas and programs brought in by the pastor and congregational leadership. When compromise has been difficult, the congregation has placed responsibility on the President of the congregation to resolve the difficulties in consultation with the pastor.

Regarding concerns or potential conflict involving the pastor, some members reported that they have the comfort and confidence to approach the pastor directly with their concerns. Others are more comfortable in asking the President of the congregation to share their concerns with the pastor. Most people reported that the pastor encourages members to come to him directly with their concerns. The issue of anonymity of individuals with concerns is one the congregational leadership still struggles with in their communications with the congregation and pastor.

EXPECTATIONS: CONGREGATION AND PASTOR

As the congregation prepared to receive their new pastor they remembered looking forward to new enthusiasm within their community of faith, to new ideas and resources as a result of the pastor's recent education in seminary, to the stability of having a full time pastor again, to "a new perspective on what we're already doing," to "knowing the pastor will be there in crisis situations," and to a "pastor who will know our gifts and be our spiritual leader." Also, several members were hoping that there would be an expansion of the fellowship programs and opportunities at St. Matthews. In the past there were many congregational and family social activities that brought the community together; however, when Pastor Smith arrived they were "down to" just an annual fundraising b.b.q. Several participants in this study indicated that Pastor Smith's initiation of the Natural Church Development program that resulted in the creation of small group activities within the congregation has helped address this need.

Upon accepting his call to St. Matthews and beginning his ministry there, Pastor Smith became aware that his expectations coming in were not quite the same as the congregation's. His expectations for his ministry revolved around becoming a missional leader who would train and empower others in the congregation. Pastor Smith became aware early on that most of the members, including some of the church leaders, wanted him to take on more of a chaplaincy role since member visitations were a high priority for many in the congregation. This dissonance in basic expectations is one that Pastor Smith feels he has "taken in stride." His comment, "It's OK (to have these differences in expectations) because I love them and over time this (a missional emphasis) will happen." When this information was shared with case study participants at the final feedback session it was the first time many were aware of these differences in expectations. They also viewed Pastor Smith's comment regarding the different expectations as a warm affirmation of them as a congregation.

Given the congregation's positive response to the Natural Church Development program that Pastor Smith initiated, it would seem that the "fit" in expectations is evolving well. In addition, participants stated that, while Pastor Smith did not always meet the chaplaincy role they envisioned, he has been responsive when they have made this need known to him.

LAY-CLERGY RELATIONS

As would be expected, case study participants described themselves as having different degrees of relationship with the new pastor. One member of the Call Committee commented on the fact that, as with previous pastors, he had hoped to gain a friend but, instead he "gained a pastor." As he reflected on his comment, this individual said, "One can't expect the past to be duplicated or replicated with each call."

As would also be expected given the pastor's youth, the younger members of the congregation described having a closer relationship with the pastor than some of the older

members of the congregation. This was especially true of the youth as will be noted in the mini-case narrative later in this report.

Two significant factors come into play in reporting on lay-clergy relationships at St. Matthews:

1. Pastor Smith arrived following an unsatisfactory situation with his predecessor who was terminated after an eleven month First Call tenure at St. Matthews. One church leader described the congregation as having been “bruised” by that experience, causing some to be afraid of getting too attached to the newly called pastor and “not wanting to invest too much emotionally.” Others thought the term “bruised” was too strong a description. However, most had felt there was a need for healing that they anticipated would take time and that Pastor Smith’s arrival occurred while the healing process was still happening. One individual stated that she dealt with this by “walking in faith with the new pastor.” Another member stated that their calling of another First Call pastor after such a negative experience is proof of “the resilience of our congregation.”
2. The pastor’s multiple sclerosis (MS) illness and the uncertainty of what this means for him as well as the congregation has created some anxiety among all concerned. As previously mentioned, Pastor Smith informed the congregation of his illness during the call process almost five years ago. Since that time, members have noticed some changes in Pastor Smith, both physically and emotionally, that have heightened their concern. According to many of the case study participants, there has been limited discussion regarding the Pastor’s illness. This has led to uncertainty as to what he may, in fact, be experiencing emotionally and physically at this time. There have been small adjustments that have been accepted very well by the congregation, one of which is that Pastor Smith sits in a chair to greet parishioners at the end of the service. One member arranged to obtain a chair that was high enough so that the pastor could have level eye contact with most of the members as he greeted them.

Several members described themselves as “walking on eggshells” when attempting to determine how much to say or offer to help because they want to respect Pastor Smith’s integrity and privacy. In turn, Pastor Smith is himself uncertain as to the progression and impact of his illness on his future ministry. The unpredictability of this disease adds layers of complexity to the ordinary challenges of daily life and, especially, one’s ministry (my observation as the researcher.)

A couple of members described what can be viewed as a congregational growth-producing outcome of Pastor Smith’s illness. “His illness has eliminated a phrase common to many churches – ‘Oh, let the pastor do it.’” It was very apparent that many members are ready to step forward as needed but are not sure at this point exactly what to do. One person stated that “Pastor probably has an understanding of his needs but we as a congregation are not as aware as we would like to be.”

Two members expressed concern that the Synod would allow a church to consider calling a pastor with a potentially serious illness into a solo pastorate. This statement conveys a concern for the absence of colleague support should the illness create a disability that makes a solo pastorate more difficult.

Communication between the congregation and pastor regarding the effects of his illness will become increasingly important in the coming years.

Implied in the above discussion is the issue of boundaries. There appears to be intentional effort on the part of both the pastor and the congregation to respect each other's boundaries. One example of this has to do with the parsonage that is located right next to the church with the backyard and deck facing directly into the church parking lot. When asked about the effect on their privacy of the proximity of their home to the church, Pastor Smith's wife, Michelle, commented that congregation members have been most respectful of them and have not taken advantage of this proximity by "dropping in" or otherwise disrupting their privacy. An advantage of this proximity is that it allows Pastor Smith to work from his home when there is the need.

Another aspect of lay-clergy relations has been the presence of a lay ministry program at St. Matthews that has used Synod resources to train three lay ministers, one of whom currently remains at St. Matthews. The current lay minister is respected and appreciated by the congregation and serves in an important lay ministerial capacity.

In addition, the use of commissions in the areas of outreach, learning (education), membership care, celebrations, and maintenance has strengthened the role and influence of laity in the church. This led a former synod bishop, familiar with the commission structure, to comment, "There may be more chiefs than followers at St. Matthews." However, Pastor Smith and congregational leaders don't believe that this statement holds true at this time. Instead, they appreciate the role of commissions in empowering the laity for leadership in areas of mission.

SUPPORT

When considering congregational support for the pastor and his family, several persons described themselves as "walking a fine line" between offering support or waiting until the pastor requests this. Several leaders and the pastor referred to the attempt by the leadership at St. Matthews to establish a mutual ministry support team for Pastor Smith at the beginning of his call. It took almost a year to establish the group which some expected to be "a sounding board" for the pastor. For reasons that were not entirely clear, this group "never really got off the ground" with the result that there has not been a formalized structure for congregational pastoral support since that time. One member of the former support group said he did not want to be on it since it was just a "yes committee for the pastor." This misunderstanding of the role of the mutual ministry committee (my interpretation), has resulted in some friction between members of that committee and the pastor. It was reported that some members attempted to intervene and

assist with the misunderstandings. However, shortly after the intervention the mutual support group ceased to function. However, it is recognized that there are people within the congregation who the pastor can seek out for support.

Several congregational leaders view the pastor as not having sufficient support systems for himself and his family and are concerned that he may not have enough of a friendship network to provide adequate support in times of need.

Support systems for Pastor Smith have included occasional phone conversations with other Natural Church Development coaches and an ecumenical text study group in the area. In addition, Pastor Smith's wife, Michelle, stated that she has felt the support of members of the congregation who she believes are considerate and supportive of her role as a career woman (social worker), wife and mother of two small children. She indicated that the congregation does not impose expectations on her and allows her to initiate areas where she may want to serve. A support system that exists for the pastor and his family is his wife's family who live about an hour from Bridgeport. They serve as a ready "outlet," especially for Michelle Smith.

On a broader perspective, two members raised the question of Synod support and inquired as to the mechanism for Synod/congregation on-going evaluation of the pastor before problems arise. In asking this question, they were quick to point that such an evaluation does not have to be a negative but can lead to continued growth in the pastor and the congregation.

Finally, almost all those who were interviewed were not aware of the ELCA/Synod's program for First Call clergy and were unaware of any involvement that Pastor Smith had in such a program since the beginning of his call at St. Matthews.

WORSHIP AND CONGREGATIONAL PIETY

"A fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ and messengers of God's Word and love, serving as a beacon of light to our community." Over 20 years ago, this mission statement was identified as St. Matthews' calling and, according to several congregational leaders, continues to serve as a guide and rock in faithfully living out that calling within the larger Bridgeport community today.

The German heritage of St. Matthews is evident by the altar that came directly from Germany as well as the two old high back chairs on either side of the altar. It was pointed out, "No one dared suggest we get new chairs."

Given the tradition and "staying power" of this small rural congregation, it was interesting to experience a worship service where change was the basis of the meditation on the lessons of the day. Because Pastor Smith was gone this weekend presiding at a friend's wedding on the East Coast, the lay minister, Karen, presided and preached at this service. Her message began with the question: "Do we change or does God and the Holy Spirit change us?" Her reading of the gospel lesson moved her to state, "Change is

necessary and part of our journey of faith.” The relevance of her message in relation to my thoughts regarding the feedback session planned for the evening prompted me to begin that session with Karen’s proclamation at worship.

Entering the sanctuary this Sunday morning, one was met by paper mache fish hanging from the ceiling and seaside scenes everywhere. It was hard to miss the fact that Vacation Bible School was starting in a couple of weeks and young people were being invited to a seaside vacation where they would engage in “Bible learning at Galilee By-the-Sea.” Of significance was the use of the term “Bible learning” rather than “Bible study.” St. Matthews is a church that considers itself a learning focused congregation as much as they view themselves as a teaching congregation. The church commission that focuses on education is titled the Learning Commission. This emphasis on life long learning is carried over into the name given this year’s ecumenical VBS at St. Matthews.

As parishioners “dodged” the fish to enter the sanctuary and find “their pew,” there was a lightheartedness that was palpable among the worshipers that morning. Added to that was the full sound in the sanctuary from the organ in the loft. The impression was one of “pulling out all the stops” in order to fill the church with the joyful sounds of worship that morning.

As I entered the sanctuary I was informed that the last three rows are filled with mostly elderly members who have been accustomed over the years to sitting in the same pews in the company of their long time fellow members. Despite an attendance of less than 80 persons, the church was filled to the rafters with joyful singing of hymns from both the *LBW* and *With One Voice*.

The children’s sermon involved an explanation of some of the icons in the sanctuary, a message that was more suited to the adults in the congregation than the children at the altar. One delightful happening in the children’s sermon was when the Pastor’s youngest daughter, about three years of age, gave the wrong answer to a question about the color of an item pointed to by the lay minister. Both child and mother (sitting with her daughter on the steps of the altar) were not fazed by the wrong response or the lay minister’s statement, “You’d better work on your colors.” I sensed there was a comfortableness and spirit of forgiveness present among the congregation that was exemplified by that incident.

According to the site visit coordinator, Ron Bell, communion has been observed every Sunday for many years. The lay minister presiding at this service proclaimed that “all were welcome at the table.” Even in this environment in which fishes and seashells hung everywhere, reverence and respect for the sacrament was most evident.

In discussions with members throughout the visit, there was a thankful spirit of feeling blessed to have this church in their community. While not expressing any particular personal faith statements, members were eager to talk about the way in which they serve the wider community and each other when in need.

One emphasis this past year at St. Matthews was the provision of guidance on how to offer public prayer. In some of the monthly newsletters, “Crossroads,” guidelines were given for those called upon to offer prayers at the Sunday services. Even with these guidelines, members acknowledged that not everyone felt comfortable leading the congregation in prayer. One woman who had been a member for many years told me, “If I was called upon to pray at the service, I would have to drink the whole communion cup before hand in order to do that” – one example of the humorous, lighthearted approach I encountered among members in acknowledging their gifts and their limitations within the community of faith. At this service, the lay minister offered the public prayer.

Again, most study participants and members were more comfortable in citing their faith expression through outreach activities than sharing a personal story of faith. One exception was the newer member who came to the congregation along with his wife because of the outreach activities of the member who ran a furniture and clothing resource for the needy. That member was uninhibited in his expression of joy at having his faith strengthened and affirmed by the ministry at St. Matthews.

Another source of excitement for the congregation this morning was the “big parade” that was to occur that afternoon in a nearby town. St. Matthews had a small float outside the church that was going to be towed to the parade site after the service. The float was a small-scale replica of the St. Matthews’ edifice with windows big enough for children to look through and wave to the crowds. This was another tradition for the church and a way for them to demonstrate their presence in the larger community. Children, of course, were very excited after the service to have an opportunity to ride in the parade.

Following the service there was a fellowship time in the small narthex. The pastor’s wife, Michelle, was pouring coffee and lemonade and offering treats to everyone who stopped. I asked her if this was her “job” on Sundays and she quickly let me know that no, she had just happened to sign up for this particular service. The narthex is relatively small and looks out of a clear glass window upon beautiful farmlands and forest across the street from the church. One member mentioned that, when designing the addition to the church, they decided against putting a stained glass window there since “God’s creation is more beautiful than any stained glass window.” And, looking out on that scene, I had to agree.

During the fellowship time, there was much discussion about the parade that afternoon and the upcoming VBS program. Two public school teachers, recently retired, were in charge of the VBS program and were excitedly describing the theme of the program and how the decorations in the sanctuary depicted that theme. Members didn’t hesitate to come up to me and introduce themselves, letting me know how much they appreciated being selected for the site visit. I was very aware that the selection of St. Matthews for this site visit was an affirming experience for the congregation.

Another example of this congregation’s focus upon their mission is the fact that the outreach commission was reading Mark Allen Powell’s recent book on stewardship. And, more than just reading it, several members of that commission were eager to share what they had learned to date with anyone who would listen.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

A frequently heard statement during this site visit was that financial concerns are “always under the surface.” During my interviews, very few people expressed outward concern regarding church finances and were, in fact, very affirming of the decision of previous councils and call committees to, at minimum, adhere to Synod guidelines for compensation to their called pastors. Many who served on the Call Committee considered this an important obligation in carrying out their role as a First Call congregation.

One unanticipated financial pressure that the congregation has dealt with the past couple of years was that the projected giving for the 2002 addition on the church had come in under the estimate provided by the stewardship consultants while the cost of the construction was slightly higher than anticipated.

Although General Fund giving was up 5.6% this past year, the congregation did struggle to meet their monthly obligations and were not able to meet their pledge for Benevolence, falling \$4600 short of their commitment to the Synod and Lutheran Social Services of Michigan. Attendance and average giving per member remained the same this past year as the previous year. A focus on stewardship, using Mark Allen Powell’s book as a guide, will be an emphasis of the church council this year in an attempt to increase their resources for mission.

SENSE OF VOCATION

As previously mentioned, congregational leaders do not see their congregation as strictly a “teaching congregation” but rather put an emphasis on learning. Many described themselves as being in a learning relationship with each First Call pastor. One person, an educator by profession stated, “We take care of the rookies, train them just like student teachers and medical interns, and then they leave.” Two Call Committee members indicated that, “We can take someone out of seminary and we can take our over 40 years of experience and teach them the difference between what’s taught in seminary and the real life situation in a congregation.” Another member said, “It doesn’t bother us that our first call pastors eventually leave. We know we’ve done our job and the ministry goes on.” These statements are indicative of the “big picture” approach many members took in describing their congregation’s role in helping a First Call pastor learn and develop in the ministry.

There were also several individuals who questioned what exactly the seminaries were teaching their students since they perceived that First Call pastors came to them without the practical grounding in what it takes to serve “and administer” a congregation. I believe these perceptions were due, in part, to their experience with the previous First Call pastor.

Regarding St. Matthews’ connection to the larger church, there did appear to be a disconnect, similar to what was described in terms of their relationship with the Synod.

Some described a “fall off” in connection with the ELCA and felt “It’s getting worse.” When asked what this meant, individuals replied, “The national church doesn’t generate enough connection with local congregations” and that there was too much “canned material” coming from the ELCA rather than resources geared for their particular rural ministry.

These perceptions are, perhaps, one of the major reasons the congregation so appreciated this case study. In a church newsletter article following this visit, the congregational coordinator of the site visit who also served as the recent Call Committee chair described this case study experience as probably the most important happening at St. Matthews in memory.

Case study participants indicated that, historically, the most important connection with the wider church was through representation at Synod Assemblies. In addition, several pointed out their benevolence to the Synod and to world hunger as examples of their connection with the ELCA. A small group of congregational leaders and members also subscribe to *The Lutheran* magazine, stating they felt it a very helpful tool for understanding the wider church and that they encourage their fellow members to subscribe and read the magazine. (A personal note: This discussion was one of only two times when I found myself entering into the interview discussions – this time by strongly encouraging the members to subscribe and read *The Lutheran*.)

From these discussions on vocation I came away with a perception that a tension exists between St. Matthew’s historical pride in their self-sufficiency as a congregation and the need for greater understanding and connection with the greater church.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER CONGREGATIONS

I made a point of asking most of those interviewed what advice or recommendations they would they give to other congregations considering calling a First Call pastor, realizing that their responses would indicate much about how they viewed their experience. This question elicited some of the most enthusiastic responses of any that were asked.

Following are some of their responses (all of them verbatim):

It’s going to be a challenge. No bed of roses.

In most cases, people will love and care for the First Call pastor if it’s returned.

Be prepared to teach them (First Call pastors) the practicalities of ministry.

Don’t expect it to be a long- term call. Sometimes pastors can do better.

Have patience. There is a learning curve for both pastor and congregation.

Size of congregation is a consideration. “Big is good but smaller is better for working with a First Call pastor.

Caution: Do not unload pent up spiritual needs on the new pastor.

If you’ve had prior First Call pastors do not expect each to be the same. Each is different. Don’t base your expectations on past experiences with First Call pastors. Each one is a unique experience. It could be better or worse.

Don't be afraid to call a First Call pastor. There is so much mutual learning that goes on that's it's worth it.

Call committee needs to check out with the candidate if they're willing to put in the time to make it work.

Put all your expectations on the table to begin with and encourage the candidate to do the same.

Congregational members will be willing to pick up the slack and help out where needed.

Be willing to help your First Call pastor over and above the usual. Be ready and willing to pray and help out.

Invite other First Call congregations into your process of discernment.

Calling a First Call pastor is a wonderful idea because of the enthusiasm of the pastor.

The congregation must be open to new ideas.

Be patient and supportive of your First Call pastor.

Provide adequate orientation in the beginning.

It is apparent that the recommendations to other congregations are based on the overall positive experience St. Matthews has had with First Call clergy.

SUMMARY

One of the key findings of this study is the importance of open, transparent communication among all parties in the First Call process. This includes clarity of expectations of congregation and clergy in the call process and the development of communication vehicles throughout the First Call ministry that will allow the needs and desires of all parties to be recognized. In addition, frequent and continual synod follow up, as occurs in the first three years of the First Call program, seems especially important for a congregation such as St. Matthews that feels geographically and psychologically isolated from the wider church.

Finally, while serving on my own synod's candidacy committee, I appreciated the question each member of our committee would ask themselves at the conclusion of a candidate interview. That very pertinent question was: "Would I want this person to be my pastor?" At the end of this case study visit I asked myself these questions: Would I want this pastor for my pastor and would I want to be a part of this congregation? My answer was a resounding YES to both questions. In just a matter of days this congregation and their pastor made me feel a genuine part of their faith community and I could sense the working of the Holy Spirit in this place. [A mini-case follows that describes my experience with youth representatives that reinforced my positive experience at St. Matthews.]

Mini-case: The Finest Evangelists

As the congregational coordinator for the case study site visit and I walked to the St. Matthew's education building on a spectacularly beautiful Saturday afternoon in Michigan, with crystal blue sky and soft summer breezes making the temperature just

perfect, he remarked that he did not think there would be any youth showing up for my group interview with them. He expressed some real frustration about trying to delegate to one of the youth the task of calling youth representatives and inviting them to meet with me. He told me he had called this person yesterday and she told him she just hadn't been able to get to it. So, he reluctantly called three of the youth that he knew and asked them to come. Not getting much of an enthusiastic response from them and considering what a perfect afternoon it was to do anything but "go to church," we both decided I would probably have the late afternoon off. Ron had asked me earlier if he could sit in on some of the group interviews I was having for the purpose of learning more about his church through the eyes of his fellow parishioners and he was especially interested in hearing what the youth had to say. His presence in other group interviews was a positive factor so, despite some personal reservation about having two adults perhaps overwhelm the one young person that may show, I invited Ron to join me. That turned out to be one of the best decisions I made during this site visit.

As we got close to the building an old farm truck came rolling into the parking lot and two boys got out, followed by a mini-van driven by an attractive young lady. Ron and I were both pleasantly surprised to see that three of the youth had shown up and we proceeded to make sure there was plenty of lemonade and cookies available to them.

While initially reluctant to relate too much to this gray haired stranger from Colorado, they became more comfortable once I began by asking them what they'd be doing on this beautiful day if they weren't here. This led to an animated discussion of their future vocational and personal dreams. The youth, Lee, Amanda, and Mitch explained that they had known each other most of their lives through their parents' membership in the church. One of the young men was 14 years of age, the other 16 and Amanda was 17. The two young men described themselves as "brats" growing up and I noticed Ron nodding in agreement.

They said that they all attend different schools and therefore only see each other on Sundays and at the monthly Luther League meetings along with 4 or 5 other high school students. One of the reasons that Luther League is so important to these young people is the fact that they attend 7 different schools in the area so do not have opportunity for personal interaction during the week.

As these young people began to talk about the church and their pastor, it became apparent to Ron and me that these three were probably the best spokespersons for what the church means in the lives of its members. They described St. Matthews as being a "rare" church compared to others they knew about. They said, "It's just not like other churches. Here, everything just seems to flow." They talked about what it meant to be part of this church family and all agreed that one of the most important learnings they have had is, "We can do anything, make any mistakes, and we know that the church will be there for us and support us." All three of these young people gave one of the finest explanations I have ever heard of God's unconditional love expressed to them through the people in their community of faith. They continued, "Someone from the church is always there for you no matter what happens or what you do." For me, this was probably the most moving

encounter I had in any interview during my four days at St. Matthews. The sincerity and genuineness of these young people in describing what the church meant to them was truly awe inspiring.

Then, it got better. They described having “fun” at church to the point of regularly inviting their friends from school to come and see what their church is all about. All three of them said they do this and thought nothing of it. “It’s just something we like to do.” When asked what made it fun they started to describe how Pastor Smith relates to them. In their own words, they said “It’s not just a job for him but a real calling.” And, they defined calling as being something that is special in the eyes of God. They went on to say that Pastor Smith loves to joke with them, and they with him. Further, they said they were so impressed by the fact that when they brought someone new with them to worship, the pastor would remember their friends’ names when they came a second time. When asked what else helps them relate to their pastor, they said, “He is genuinely interested in us and is open to our ideas.” “ He shares in our joys and the bad times” and they especially remembered the times they had spent with him at their Lutheran camp each summer. They did express some concern having just learned that, due to Pastor Smith’s illness, he would not be able to join them this summer at camp.

What Ron and I found remarkable was the ease and comfort with which these three young people talked about their faith and involvement in the church. They were among the most uninhibited people I had interviewed when it came to talking about what it meant for them to be Lutheran Christians.

At this point I became aware of something happening in the chair next to me in the circle. Ron, the 70 year old patriarch of the church and one who typified the character strength often associated with a German background – meaning he was viewed by others as always strong and never swayed by emotion – was starting to tremble. When he attempted to speak for the first time in this meeting, he became very emotional with tears in his eyes. With a trembling voice he proceeded to tell these youth he never before had realized the total significance of the ministry at St. Matthews until listening to them today. He told them he had no idea what wonderful ambassadors they were for the church and the faith until today. From the mildly stunned and appreciative look on the faces of the students it was apparent that were very moved by what they were seeing and hearing from this gentleman who they had known all these years. I felt very privileged to have been present during this exchange.

Following our session with the youth, Ron commented to me that, in fact, the two boys “really were brats” and he recalled having to go up in the church loft in past years and having to intervene with them because of their disruptive behavior. He said he was so moved by what he experienced with the youth today and was so glad he was present in the discussion, as was I pleased by his presence and openness to the youth.

The next evening at the feedback session with the participants in the case study, I began by letting them know I would be telling them a secret at the end of our discussion. I said I would be identifying for them the best evangelists in their congregation. I looked down

at Ron who sitting next to me and noticed that he was writing on his note pad in big block letters the work YOUTH. And, at the end of our feedback session I did announce to the group that the youth were their finest evangelists. One of the youth who was present was beaming at that point.

A week following the site visit, Ron sent me an article titled “First Call” Congregation Study that he had written for the church newsletter. The following quote from his article sums up for me my experience with the youth of this church.

“Perhaps the most heart warming session was listening to the youth of the congregation express what they are experiencing in their lives today as they grow in their faith. The honesty and enthusiasm of their comments shows that there indeed are wonderful things happening at St. Matthew’s. How many of our adult members are willing to invite their friends to attend church with them because they enjoy the worship service and the activities taking place?”

For both Ron and me this experience was the highlight of the entire case study visit!