

**The Vocation of First Call Congregations**  
**Case Study Report**  
**Wiota Lutheran Church, South Wayne, Wisconsin**  
**Site Visit: July, 2006**  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

In southwest rural Wisconsin, Wiota Lutheran Church sits at the edge of a small, whistle stop town, with corn fields outlining the borders of its parking lot. The church building, a one-level, light stone structure, was constructed and dedicated in 1992.

Two miles east down a country road is a second church building that was constructed in 1841 and which is still used once a month. A neatly maintained cemetery, featuring several stately cedar trees and flower arrangements by each tombstone, is just a few steps from the church building. Inside the church, one immediately notices the white altar on the back wall of the sanctuary, with a circular wooden altar railing in front. The sanctuary walls are decorated with quilts of colorful squares contributed by all the member families at the time of the 150<sup>th</sup> year anniversary in the early 1990's.

Down the road the other direction about three miles west is a second cemetery at the top of a hill. It is also beautifully maintained. The tombstones surround a rectangular grassy space on three sides that used to be the site of the West Wiota Lutheran Church building.

Before I traveled to this rural setting, I was told by Pastor Sara Gillespie that one needs to be sensitive to rural culture and "understand rural people who can be hesitant and suspicious of strangers." I had also learned from a synod staff who had recommended this congregation that Wiota Lutheran Church "has learned to love their pastors right from seminary."

My site visit started on a hot and muggy Friday afternoon in July and ended on Monday morning with a brunch meeting at Irma's Kitchen restaurant in Argyle. We were given a small, non-air conditioned room and two large fans that attempted to keep us comfortable in 90 degree heat. Twenty three people (including the pastor) who had talked to me during that weekend were present and responded to a tentative summary report from me.

## **CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY**

Wiota Lutheran was identified by Southwest Wisconsin Synod in the ELCA as having had a history of "positive first calls." All of the last four calls were to single women, three of whom were first call pastors. The present pastor, Sara Gillespie, has been divorced and is actually in her third cal. Her first call was in a rural setting that she said went very well. The second call was in a large suburban staff setting where she served as an associate pastor for 2 ½ years which didn't go as well.

While the present Wiota Lutheran Church building was dedicated in 1992, there were initially two church buildings: (1) East Wiota, founded in 1841 which celebrated 150 “Years of Grace” about 15 years ago, and (2) West Wiota, founded in 1889.

In the late 1860’s the East Wiota church was in need of some repair and it was decided to tear it down. However, vocal opposition to this action reversed the decision. A few years later the subject of repair or tear down came up again. This time it was decided to “put the good old church into substantial repair.” It was remodeled and an addition added as well as a church bell installed. In 1906 a basement was dug in order to provide an area for fellowship and a place for a furnace. The Wiota congregation “realized their need and their children’s need for a place to worship their Creator and to feel the fellowship of their Savior, for which no cost was too great,” according to historical documents.

When the West Wiota Lutheran Church was built in 1889, it immediately “yoked” with the East Wiota Church, sharing a pastor. However, services were still held in both buildings on different Sundays and the two cemeteries continued to be used.

On December 15, 1987, the West Wiota Lutheran Church was struck by lightning during an early morning blizzard. As stated in the memorial plaque which holds the 900 pound bell, “Severe weather conditions hampered all efforts to save our church. It was consumed by fire in minutes. This scarred bell is the only thing that was salvaged. Memories of our beloved church will live on in our hearts forever.”

Their first woman pastor, Cynthia Wolf, who had been installed a couple months before the church fire, led the church council through a decision-making process. After much debate about whether to build another church – and after a generous insurance settlement on the burned-out church as well as property given by a member of the congregation – they decided to go ahead with a building project. About a year later, with Bishop Jon Enslin, Pr. Wolf led a dedication service for the new church on June 28, 1992.

## **CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXT AND PROFILE**

The Wiota Lutheran Church building, surrounded by corn fields, looks out across the highway on a large-scale dairy farm. The church is on one level and has handicap access. A spacious fellowship hall with a large, modern kitchen is attached to the sanctuary, with a few Sunday school rooms, an office, and storage rooms on the perimeter. The fellowship hall can be divided easily into several additional classrooms with accordion screens that are attached to ceiling dividers. The location of the church, its large parking lot and easy access make it a desirable site for weddings and funerals in the community.

Wiota Lutheran Church has 512 baptized members and worships about 114-120 each Sunday. The order and style of worship is largely traditional. However, Pr. Vicki introduced them to Marty Haugen’s Evening Prayer during Lent and Pr. Sara continued this and introduced them further to Haugen’s Sunday morning liturgy. According to a couple lay leaders, some members accepted this new service right away, while others said they didn’t like the new songs. One

family decided not to attend Sunday morning services for the six weeks that the service was used, but later returned.

For a small congregation, it has about 66 pupils in its Sunday school, including approximately 20 high school age teens attending regularly. However, one of the concerns repeated during my site visit was the “declining Sunday school” due to changing community demographics and changing family structures. To address the perceived problem of small classes and irregular attendance (largely due to several blended families), they decided to implement a rotational learning centers model for the 2006 fall Sunday school.

Congregational trends from 1998-2005 reveal that while membership has grown for the past seven years (26%), worship attendance has decreased by 17%. Regular giving has increased (26%), but the operating expenses have increased significantly (66%). This might be one reason why the congregation’s mission support and benevolence has decreased.

Last year 80 members participated in a workshop on “asset mapping.” Pastor Sara and six lay leaders had previously attended a conference training event. It was described as “what you’ve got and don’t know you have” and “to learn how to build on this knowledge.” At the congregational workshop, led by the pastor and one lay leader, the participants listed the following as possible assets and activities:

- Lefse Learners’ Club – teach youth and adults to make lefse
- Sappy Sellers – cleaning attics for things to sell for Sunday school fund-raising
- Spirit Raisers – members visit nursing homes for fellowship and games
- Family Fun Night – invite other congregations to a night to celebrate families
- Healthy Bodies/Healthy Minds – health group for yoga, aerobics
- Groups to teach about land, agriculture, history

While only one specific activity resulted from this workshop (a family music event related to the Family Fun Night), Pr. Sara noted that “some lay leadership has arisen in other areas – most visibly a decision to do a ‘Rotational Workshop Model Sunday School’ and some other smaller things, like a pictorial directory.”

There is an active Women of the ELCA organization with “Ladies Aid” meeting once a month and women’s circles meeting regularly. A couple of the circles meet in the evenings to encourage younger, working women to attend, although this has been slow to materialize. Service projects include making quilts and layettes for LWF. Lay-led Bible studies are central to these meetings as well as fellowship and food. Over the last few decades, about 20 women have attended national WELCA conventions and at least one woman joined other Lutherans on a service trip to churches in India that are supported by hunger funds.

Wiota has had a history of sending groups of youth and adults to the national ELCA Youth Gatherings. The whole congregation gets involved in fund-raising for their travel. Youth took leadership, with help from adults, in cooking a Norwegian dinner, a spaghetti dinner, Palm Sunday brunch, baked goods sales, homemade lefse sale, cookie walk, calendar sale and an “angel auction” where youth were “purchased” for a variety of chores at members’ homes.

There has been little adult Christian education in this congregation. One pastor tried to get a group started, but it wasn't carried on by the next pastor. There is an adult men's Bible study group which meets once a month.

## **CONGREGATIONAL THEMES**

### **Women Pastors are Good Nurturers**

It was the year of the burning of West Wiota Church in an unusual winter lightning storm in 1987 that Wiota Lutheran Church called its first female pastor, one just out of seminary. The call committee, made up of several men and one woman, had decided after weeks of deliberation to call a male pastor. When he did not accept the call, the committee felt dispirited and the chairman said that they would have to start all over again with candidates. But Dorothy, the only woman on the committee, protested. She said that the female candidate they had considered was rated second on their list, so why should they not call her instead of spending all the time it would take to start over again? The candidate, Cynthia Wolf, had just graduated from seminary, and there was some concern about that as well as her being a female clergy.

However, the argument about wasting time was sufficiently convincing. The committee then worked with the congregation to accept their recommendation to extend a call to Cynthia. One member recalls someone saying to the congregation, "There are younger women in the ministry now. Will you give them a chance to get started?" Some members were not happy about this decision, but "went along with it anyway," said another person. A woman who served on the most recent call committee to call Pr. Sara remarked, "If it was my child, I'd want her to have a chance."

Pastor Cindy is remembered as a "strong woman" who shepherded the congregation through tense and emotional times after the loss of West Wiota Church and the subsequent building of the new church. One member recalls that before Cynthia was called, she preached at the church one Sunday and that she told a friend afterwards, "I hope I never get a call from this congregation." But evidently she changed her mind.

Pr. Cindy was known as "a hugger." One time she called on an elderly gentleman and hugged him when she left the house. He said to her, "That's the first time I've been hugged by someone other than my wife." Several years later, at a farewell gathering for Pr. Cindy, he thanked her for "teaching them how to hug."

Another story about Pr. Cindy is still talked about. One Easter Sunday morning she didn't appear for the early service. When she was called out of bed, "she came running over, disheveled and embarrassed, but we just joked about it" recalled one member who added, "In another congregation, she might have been fired." Also joked about is the reason for oversleeping. The night before Easter Sunday she was with a number of friends who celebrated her birthday at a local bar.

Pr. Cindy is remembered fondly as "a person who liked to have a good time." Another person said that Pr. Cindy's sense of humor and her ability to get kids to do things they didn't think initially were "cool," endeared her to many members.

All four women pastors (who each served for about 5-6 years) were single. The second single female pastor called right out of seminary had grown up in Fresno, CA and wondered about serving in a rural setting. When Lisa was called, she consulted with a seminary advisor, James Nestingen, who had grown up in the area and who encouraged her to take the call.

One member recalls that Pr. Lisa learned how to “take advantage of opportunities of getting to know us.” The parsonage is right next to the church building and when a few members were taking care of the grounds, Pr. Lisa came over to talk to them. She continued to do this several times when they were watering trees and shrubs.

Before Pr. Sara, Pr. Vicki had been called into her first call. She had attended seminary after having a medical background and after a divorce. Pr. Vicki is fondly remembered as having an ability to relate to all members and “was there for everyone, especially before and after surgeries.” One member felt that she was “over-qualified” for their congregation, but that people appreciated her and learned a great deal from her. “She helped us to be continually learning,” said Gary, so that “we wouldn’t stay in the same groove.”

Several people commented that the congregation benefited from having women pastors who were single. “Women pastors have a nurturing effect. They are generous with their time, being single and not having a family,” was stated by one woman, with agreeing nods from others in the group. However, people also realized that being single was difficult for these women serving in a somewhat isolated rural context. One pastor remarked after a few weeks into her ministry, “Where are all the men around here?” The person recalling this said, “That’s a drawback. There’s not a lot of social life for them here.”

Some of the pastors have attended rural ministry workshops at Wartburg Seminary as well as talk with other rural pastors about what they’re experiencing. This has helped them understand more clearly the issues facing farming families and how best to communicate within a rural context.

### **“Fit” is a Two-Way Street**

Looking back on the four single women pastors, one person realized that all four women came from cities (or at least in their recent past), but “they were able to adapt to this rural place.” One gets the feeling that it wasn’t easy for them, nor was it a smooth process. “Younger pastors had a harder time understanding this community,” said one woman. She further explained, “They had to work on accepting a rural community. When people saw these pastors were willing to do this, they invited them into their homes.” Another member agreed and added, “If the pastor seems warm and concerned to get to know you, we in turn go the extra mile.”

With a small group of members, including Pr. Sara, I probed these kinds of comments with a question about whether a “sense of fit” between the pastor and the congregation was a factor in this acceptance. One person said, “You have to fit to our mold at first. Over time, you can change things, but you can’t make drastic changes.” Pr. Sara, hearing this said, “Fit goes both ways. Trust is a two-way street.” Another woman commented, “Having a female pastor is a fit.”

How a pastor elicits trust was probed in several conversations. One of the recurring responses was that when the pastor spends time with a family at critical and life-changing times, trust is not only established with that family, but with the whole faith community. “You really need a pastor during an illness” and not only before an operation or critical time of a health decision, but “spending time afterwards, following up as well.”

### **Pastors as People; Pastors as Ministers**

Several people said they came to see their women pastors as not only “nurturers,” but also as shepherds. “I treat Pr. Sara as a daughter or sister, but I also look up to her as a shepherd,” said one middle-aged woman. When Pr. Sara heard this, she agreed and added, “I think they’re also interested and curious about what new pastors are thinking.”

There were many references to how men and women in the congregation took these single women pastors under their wing. A former church secretary, Doris, became a “mother to several of these women and still stays in touch with them.” To get ready for Pr. Sara, the parsonage was thoroughly cleaned and furniture was contributed by members since Pr. Sara didn’t bring any. Sara’s parents who helped her move in were pleased. “You’ve got a real clean place to get into here,” said her mother. Jeff, a young man on the call committee for Pr. Sara, gave her detailed maps of the county and explained the best routes to visit members.

It was clear that many members perceive their pastors as “regular people” as well as their pastoral leader. “When the pastor makes a mistake, we make a joke about it,” was the way one person said this. A member on the present “Mutual Ministry Committee” remarked, “The congregation has a high respect for a professional and look up to an educated person – but they don’t put her on a pedestal.” Another person commented, “We don’t expect our pastors to be perfect.” David, the present Church Council President, remarked that “rural people respect the office of the pastor as well as the office of the Church Council President.”

A repeated refrain was that members need their pastors to be “down to earth,” as one person said it. They emphasized that in their preaching, pastors should not give theological lectures, but use language that ordinary people will understand. One older gentleman took me aside at one point and said proudly, “Our pastors have become better preachers and better pastors from their first to their last year with us.” Another person, reflecting on how their pastors have matured and gained confidence over the years, said with a chuckle, “I think we should send a bill for training these new pastors!”

A memorable encounter about preaching came from one woman who said that Pr. Cindy began using stories she had heard from members as examples in her sermons. When this woman heard her own remarks used in a sermon, she went to Pr. Cindy and said that she must not do this. When Pr. Cindy began to explain that she didn’t use the woman’s name, the member retorted, “But, I know who you’re talking about!”

Members are very concerned that their pastors relate well to their youth. According to one member, some of their pastors have had more gifts in this area than others, but the expectation is for the pastor to engage with youth in a way that encourages they remain involved. For one adult youth leader, this means that the pastor needs to “let down her hair,” and allow the youth to have

fun together as well as learn about the faith. Youth and their adult leaders were happy that Pr. Sara accompanied the 20+ youth who went to the 2006 ELCA Youth Gathering in San Antonio in July.

## **CONGREGATIONAL SELF-IMAGES**

### **“We have long, sturdy roots.”**

When asked why they think their congregation has a strong Women’s organization when a lot of congregations don’t have this, one woman quickly answered, “It’s long, sturdy roots.” This was reinforced for me when I attended one of the two yearly evening cemetery services and heard family members tell poignant and funny stories of past generations of faithful members. [*See Mini Case Study: Cemetery Stories*]

### **“Family Trump Card.”**

Each of the four women pastors has brought change of some kind to the congregation. Pr. Lisa worked with the congregation to offer the Lord’s Supper every Sunday for the first time. One woman recalls that the lay leaders in worship argued, “If communion is only offered once or twice a month, and your children are not there those Sundays, they could go a few months without communing. Do you want that?” She added, “To get people to accept a new change, we have used the ‘family trump card.’”

One man remarked on how many families in the congregation have blood ties. “We are closely knit as a congregation. If you’re not related to them this year, you might be next year. It keeps the peace, because you don’t argue with your relatives.” A woman in the group disagreed with the lack of family argumentation, but agreed with the notion of the congregation as extended family.

### **“We roll with the punches.”**

If someone doesn’t like the change that a pastor has made, they often speak to a Council member and sometimes to the pastor. “People can speak their minds, but it doesn’t escalate; you learn that’s how disagreements are handled,” said Pr. Sara.

“When new ideas are tried here, we roll with the punches. We think, ‘Let’s wait and see and give something time to be tried,’” was the way one member summarized how changes are treated by many in the congregation. When the new liturgy was tried for several weeks, there was some griping about the songs, but one member said, “If we don’t try them, we’ll never know if we’ll eventually like them.” Another member remarked, “If we can get along together in this congregation, we can get along with any new pastor.”

In the recent past, some members have been hurt by remarks from other members. The tendency is not to confront the person who hurt one, but to talk to others about it. According to one member, “People can carry grudges for years, but don’t make it an issue.” Another person who has reflected on why disagreements don’t escalate surmised, “People who know each other and their families put what a person says in context.” A young man remarked that “We are more accepting of differences. There’s not an expectations that we’ll all agree.”

Church Council President, David Carpenter, acknowledged that with any group of people rumors spread from time to time. As a leader who hears some of these, he has decided he can't "work on a rumor mill." He continued, "I need to hear directly from people who have a problem. This helps keep things calm."

When Pr. Sara made an executive decision on money, some on the Council were upset. David said to Council members, "This is what our pastor did. We will need to deal with it as a Council." This experience led him to work more closely with Pr. Sara and he now meets with her before each Council meeting to go over the agenda in order not to be "ambushed." David told me, "It took a little time to negotiate a relationship with her." But evidently it has paid off since "the Council is now 100% behind her."

### **"Loyalty is to the congregation."**

When asked why the congregation is perceived by others as strong, a woman said, "Loyalty is to the congregation." Several members referred to strong family ties in the congregation, not only between generations of family members, but between members as well who think of their congregation as one, big family. This is manifested in several ways. Whenever there is a funeral for a member, many people volunteer to help with refreshments. "Here there is a good, strong working nucleus of people. At funeral receptions, the food pours in," said one member. Another person later said, "When a family has a funeral, they don't have to worry about anything afterwards. We take care of all the refreshments and clean-up."

Another example of loyalty is the strong core of people who attend worship every Sunday. One person said it this way, "Your week doesn't start until you go to church." She added with a smile, "I've got to go to church to see this particular person – actually a whole list of persons."

Wiota Lutheran has had a long history of lay people taking over the services when the pastor is on vacation, and "just as many people came to these services," said one woman. She continued, "We want not only pastors, but everyone to succeed."

### **"Lutherans have come a long way."**

When I probed statements I heard frequently about how they were a friendly, welcoming congregation, asking for specific actions and examples, I heard:

"We welcome visitors to our congregation. We make an effort to go up to new people after church and talk to them."

"We ask people about their job, about the community. We never get into politics in this congregation."

"We are good with visitors because you recognize a stranger since everyone knows everyone else."

"Friendliness is a sign of the Spirit of God."

"We're friendly, but we're probably some of the poorest singers in Wisconsin Lutheran churches."

"I don't mind greeting people, but don't ask me anything about myself!"

"When someone is in the hospital, people take the initiative to go and visit. You can ask somebody to do that, and they're right there. In fact, often you don't even have to ask."

"We can be shy and private and still be cordial."

“Lutherans have come a long way in being outgoing and friendly to others.”

One newer member agreed with the friendliness of the congregation. She had left another Lutheran congregation in the area because she disagreed with their decision to leave the ELCA which had splintered the congregation. “As a new member, I was at first skeptical about getting involved, but they made you feel like you needed to be involved,” and so she did.

**“It takes a whole congregation to raise a child.”**

After hearing several comments about how youth, from middle school through high school, are involved in the life of the congregation, I tried to probe for the reasons behind this rather envious fact. Here are some of the remarks I received:

“Youth is a big, big part of any congregation.”

“It takes a whole community to raise a child – and a whole congregation too!”

“Teens see their parents as Neanderthals, but when they can identify with someone who is not their parent, like a younger couple, they can learn and witness.”

“When adults and youth make cookies together, there’s camaraderie.”

“Kids like these connections between people here. Being related to others makes them feel secure.”

“Parents have a big influence on their kids coming to Sunday school as teens. They say, ‘If you’re coming to church, you might as well go to Sunday school too.’”

[When four teens were “auctioned” off to help clean Sandy’s mother’s house, they stayed longer than was scheduled.] “The kids went beyond their time. They said, ‘We need to finish this other room.’ They didn’t care that they had gone over their time.”

“Adults here cherish their youth.”

[From Pr. Sara] “Young people participate as acolytes in Confirmation, and then as readers, greeters/ushers with their parents. These are the same opportunities that the adults have.”

“[From a teenager] “To be honest, I go to Sunday school because my parents want me to. It’s hard getting up Sunday morning, having been up late Saturday night. I also want to believe and have a faith. That makes me feel better.”

[From Pr. Sara] “I haven’t heard one kid say, ‘I can’t wait to get out of this place (the small town context).’”

One younger man recalled that the youth were taught to make lefse by older women in the congregation to raise funds for travel to the national youth gathering. Things got a little crazy near the end of the evening. “When we made lefse together, the kids didn’t know how long they’d been working that night. There was a flour fight in the kitchen and adults got into it too. They said, ‘As long as we clean everything up, it’s OK.’ At first I wasn’t pleased with this mess, but decided you can do this and teach respect and responsibility.” He ended by saying, “If you’re going to have kids here, they need to have some fun.”

Throughout my time with Wiota Lutheran members, I kept hearing a refrain about the number of young adults and their families returning to the community after moving away. When I asked about this, one person said, “They [young families] want their kids treated like they were. Some said, ‘I want my kids to grow up here.’” Another person commented, “You have to remember where you came from to know where you’re going.”

## MINI CASE: CEMETERY STORIES

On a muggy and sweltering July evening, Wiota Lutheran Church held a candlelight cemetery service at the site of the former West Wiota Church which burned down in 1987. With limited parking space, I parked in the grassy ditch outside the cemetery grounds. Cornfields surround this cemetery and in the gathering dusk, I could see people walking around the cemetery, placing containers with candles on top of the tombstones. I was told these candles would burn through the night and that someone would come in the morning to put them out.

I joined about 30 others who had set up their lounge chairs just inside the gates of the cemetery, facing the memorial stone for the burned church which held up the old church's 900 pound tarnished bell, saved from the ruins. From a freakish December night storm, lightning had struck the wood-framed church which rapidly burned to the ground. Now a rectangular grassy expanse is all that remains, with a sidewalk leading up to its phantom side.

I was earlier informed by Pr. Sara that this year's service would depart from previous years since the local church historian was attending a farm show out of town. He had led people around the cemetery, stopping at gravestones and telling stories of the departed saints. For tonight's service, people had been told that they would be the story tellers and that we wouldn't walk around the grounds because of the heat and humidity – still in the mid-90's.

Before the service started, a member struck the old bell three times, its resonant tones echoing across the surrounding valleys. Pr. Sara began the service with a welcome and reminded people of the changed plans for sharing stories of loved ones. She also apologized that the piano hadn't been brought along and that we would sing the various hymns acappella, led by two singers.

An opening liturgy began with the pastor saying, "We come together this evening to remember all those who have gone before us. We offer up our hearts and voices in remembering their faith and their work, which is an example for us today." The assembled congregation responded, "Blessed be their memory." The litany ended with, "We give thanks for the sure and certain hope that we will be united with them in heaven, where they shine today in glory," and the people murmured, "Blessed be their memory."

After a brief prayer by Pr. Sara, she invited anyone to come to the front of the assembled congregation and share a story or memory of a departed loved one. Dorothy, the organist, had been primed to get this started and she began by reading from a relative's history of the family, going back to the 1840's. One of the stories was about a Norwegian pastor from Norway who was brought over to start a new congregation. This pastor wrote a book about the "strange and rough

Americans” from this area who were moving away from mining to clear the land for farming.

Dorothy’s cousin, Lenita, who earlier had told me of a synod trip she made to India, stood up next. She began by saying that before the service started, she had counted the gravestones from her family in this cemetery, covering five generations, and it totaled 38. Most of them lived to an old age and were hard workers. Her grandmother always cleaned up the church kitchen, even into her 80’s, and when asked to sit down and relax, she responded, “No, no, I’m just fine.” “Grandma never held an office of leadership, but was one of the faithful workers,” Lenita reflected.

An older gentleman, Harold, came to the front, standing straight and somewhat stiffly and told several stories of relatives. One of them, a young woman who was dying, asked others to write down her funeral plans. She wanted to be buried in a favorite dress and requested certain old hymns to be played. Then she looked at them and said very firmly that she wanted a fork to be placed in her right hand in the casket. This took them aback and when they asked her why, she said that at every church supper, after the main meal, people were asked to keep their forks, because “the best is yet to come.” Harold said that at the wake for this relative, everyone asked about the fork, so the family had to keep repeating that their loved one felt that “the best is yet to come.” He ended his stories by saying, “There are many angels in our midst.”

Gary, a younger man, told several stories about his relatives, including an uncle you never saw without a cigar in his mouth who took him along on his many odd jobs in the farming community. It was such fun because “you never knew where he was going.”

He also described his family Sunday meals and how they sat around after a big meal arguing about politics – New Dealers vs. Republicans. Gary remembered these as being “heated, but they never came to blows.” As a young boy he listened in and was fascinated by these family debates.

When Gary related how his father died when he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, he choked up and said he regrets not having talked more with his father about “serious things,” even though his father played ball with him and took him fishing. One of the topics he now wishes he had discussed was his father’s interest in science and technology. When his father was given a calculator, he thought it was a “wonderful new thing.” Gary continued, “My father would have been amazed by today’s advances and very interested in his grandson’s use of the computer.” Gary closed by saying that he intentionally spends time with his son who just entered college as well as talking to his son’s roommate who is studying “chaos theory.”

Later in the evening, several people told me more personal stories about themselves and others in the congregation. Because of privacy concerns, they are not all publicly reported here.

The service continued with the singing of several old hymns, including, “In the Garden,” “Blessed Assurance,” “Children of the Heavenly Father,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and “Amazing Grace.” The service concluded after the offering, the Lord’s Prayer and Benediction with a children’s song, “Jesus Loves Me.”

By this time, as dusk turned to darkness, the only light issued from the hundreds of votive candles, twinkling and dancing in the light breeze on top of the gravestones. I began walking with Lenita around the gravestones and took a flash photo of her in front of one of her many relatives. As we walked back to where refreshments were available off the back of a pickup truck, she told me more about her son who was buried there. When she told the story earlier, she had just said that her son and first husband are buried there and that she chokes up every Easter when trumpets begin the service since her son had been a trumpet player. Now as we walked in the dark, she related how she found her son in a nearby woods. He left a wife and small daughter behind. Lenita talked about how important it was to have people in the congregation who see you through difficult times in the first place and then are there to remember these times with you later and support you.

As darkness fell, I joined others around the truck that was holding refreshments and drank punch and had a chocolate chip cookie. I initiated a conversation with an older man whom I had not previously met. Wes told me about his grandfather and uncle who came here from Norway as indentured men and worked on several farms to pay for their passage. They saved money to buy five acres, but didn’t have a well. So they soon sold this property to buy 15 acres with a small house. He pointed to lights in the distance where each of these properties had been. When his grandfather realized that there was no well on this second property and that he wasn’t able to dig one with a shovel, the family carried water each day from a mile away. Later, they brought in a well digger and decided to put the well very close to the house, even though they couldn’t get it very deep, so that they wouldn’t need to carry water very far.

When I mentioned to Wes what I’m studying, he volunteered that Pr. Sara “has become a better pastor – more confident in the 1 ½ years since she’s been with us.” As I was about to move on to someone else, he said, “At my age, I think more about the past and not the future – at least not future projects.” He continued to say that he’s been thinking of ways to provide for the church financially into the future.

I left this almost mystical setting – with a low fog setting in and the candles still brightly glowing – with a deep appreciation for being there and for the

graciousness of the people who shared deep sorrowful stories as well as delightful and funny tales as they remembered “all the angels in our midst.”

## **CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES**

### **Rural Population Changes**

Some members expressed a concern about the future of the congregation. They are aware that the membership is aging. An older member commented, “I have a concern about the future of this congregation. There are many of us who are in our 80’s and 90’s and with younger people leaving the rural communities, what will our congregation be like?”

When I asked a few members if there were people in their community, like immigrants, who might be interested in their congregation, I didn’t receive very clear answers. A member responded that many people come from great distances to worship here. Another person commented that they have noticed a lot of diversity in towns like Monroe, especially Hispanic people. But there didn’t appear to be an interest in reaching out to new groups or unchurched populations. One gets the feeling that this would be hard for many who treasure the “tight-knit family” identity that pervades the congregation.

### **Dwindling Sunday School**

Concerns about “a dwindling Sunday school” has led to a major change in the way Sunday school will be organized. Instead of separate classes, there will be “interest centers” set up around the room and children will be rotated through these active, hands-on learning experiences. While several people during my visit said that change was OK, “if done in little, bitty increments,” this Sunday school change will be a major one, affecting many children and adults. It will be interesting to see how members experience and react to such a change.

Perhaps a further educational challenge will be to build on the experiences that their youth have recently been exposed to, including what they learned at the Youth Gathering in San Antonio. One teenage girl quickly replied, “That people don’t live the way we do; they don’t have it as good as we do. Another young person took away from the event, “That we can change the world – make a difference.”

A teenage girl who was planning on attending this event changed her plans when a friend of hers was killed in a car accident just before the event. She talked about how she is searching for a faith that helps her understand this tragedy.

Also shared in this youth group was an interest in finding out what other people believe, including Buddhists and Hindus. “Not that I would go over to that faith,” one teenager assured me, “but I’d like to learn more about them.”

### **East and West**

In spite of the fact that East Wiota church and West Wiota church were “yoked” from the beginning (sharing a pastor and a church council), there still are lingering loyalties to these two congregational sites – and cemeteries. Some claim that building a new church in 1992 helped

diminish the split loyalties. One long term member told me, “The best thing that ever happened to us was the burning of West Wiotia Church.” However, each summer there are two separate cemetery services in the two locations.

When I asked David, the Council President, whether there is concern about maintaining the East Wiotia church building, I was told, “There’s been some discussion in Council about whether to let go of the East Wiotia church, but we’re not ready to do this yet.” He further clarified that there are two separate cemetery funds that receive only small support from the general church budget.

### **Non-Member Use of Church**

According to one woman, the biggest controversy right now is the use of the church facilities by non-members. While it is a good resource to the community, “non-member weddings are often disrespectful. They leave a mess and we’re now feeling that we’re being used.” Another person remarked that the Council needs to review their policies about this and perhaps charge more for those who use the building.

### **Dealing with Controversial Issues**

During my visit, there were indicators that congregational members are not comfortable talking about controversial social issues. When I later talked to Pr. Sara about this, she commented, “People know that the two pastors around here who split from the ELCA were against the hot controversial issues like homosexuality in the church.” Evidently, these pastors caused a major schism in their respective congregations. Thus, Wiotia members are afraid that the same thing could happen there.

When the anti-gay marriage amendment came up in the Wisconsin legislature, there were a couple members who came to her to discuss their opinions in private, even sharing how this issue impacts them personally. However, these controversial issues are not usually discussed publicly.

### **Pastoral Expectations**

When I commented that there seemed to be a good commitment to young people in the congregation, Pr. Sara agreed that “they will pay good money to see young people work and they financially support their fund-raising efforts.” However, she added that there is not always follow through on the stated commitment to youth, noting that “while members say they want the pastor to spend more time with youth, they don’t want it to come at the expense of visiting them.”

She continued, “Understanding and juggling expectations is a constant frustration. How much time should I spend with the different groups – WELCA, youth, community activities, hospital and home visitations. People can easily feel neglected or unimportant if you don’t visit them often.” In the last six month’s pastor’s report to the Church Council, Pr. Sara has averaged 16 home or hospital visits each month.

Some congregational members shared with me that they expect their pastor to help them relate their faith – and biblical theology – to their lives. At the Sunday service I attended, I sensed that Pr. Sara does a good job with this expectation. She had a children’s sermon time that lifted up

themes from the gospel lesson and then preached about practical ways we can be disciples of Christ. She reminded people about the importance of taking time to be healthy, to relax and enjoy God's creation – all part of the Christian lifestyle. As it turned out, Pr. Sara needed to excuse herself right after the sermon since she was feeling faint and ill, departing right away for the parsonage. The next morning when she joined the members for the brunch feedback session, she said that the heat causes this reaction and that she needs to take to heart what she proclaimed to her parishioners.

## **SENSE OF CONGREGATIONAL VOCATION**

Wiota Lutheran Church has a strong commitment to being church in such a way that everyone is valued, appreciated and cared for. This has long, sturdy roots in Wiota's history and in generations of saints who have laid a foundation and standard to uphold. The cemeteries have 4-5 generations buried there – an image of the stability and continuity of families that have established an ongoing culture in this family church.

One example of this continuity is that older generations who are parents and grandparents of Wiota's youth pass along their own experiences of previous national youth conventions as exciting and transforming and many continue to accompany youth groups to these events.

Connections of this congregation to the larger church appear to be well established. In addition to the youth gatherings, more than 20 women over the years have attended national WELCA conventions. Members more recently have attended synod or cluster church events and workshops given by Wartburg Seminary.

One key operating principle that makes this congregation "work" seems to be that holding grudges is not healthy. When talking further with Pastor Sara about this characteristic as one of the congregation's strengths, she agreed with this and added that members don't always agree with a decision, but they state their disagreements, vote on the issue, and then go along with the decision.

Another key principle might be stated as Pastor Sara named it – "They do not triangulate by pulling the pastor into their disputes with each other." She further commented, "I may be notified that Person A had a falling out with Person B, but as far as I know, I am not expected to get in between them and 'fix' the problem."

Does this congregation have a calling or vocation? I think it does. But the leaders and the synod will need to explore together what this might be. The congregation has been recognized by the synod as a healthy context for first call pastors. Perhaps the synod should also find ways to have the congregation serve as a resource to other congregations who could benefit from the wisdom of Wiota Lutheran.

At the end of my summary report to Wiota members during our brunch on Monday morning, I left them with an image to consider about the future of their faith community – "The best is yet to come!"