

THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUILDING!

As I write this paper I again pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to give me the mind of Christ.

My first call into ministry was to Capital Drive Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin as associate pastor. It had over 1000 adult members and perhaps 500+ children. After 3 years I took a call as "Missionary at Large" to Grace Lutheran Church in Wilmington, Illinois. It had been a mission of the English District, LCMS for some 16 years. It had fewer than 20 active adults and 8 children.

I point this out to make a comparison. The Milwaukee church had just built a new building; it could seat about 500 with overflow. The church in Wilmington had seating for about a total of 50, using overflow.

Our Synod is talking about "planting new churches". We should really be talking about "planting congregations"! The Church is the total of all Christian people! We confess in the Nicene Creed, "I believe in the Holy Christian Church - the communion of saints".

When Christians come together to worship and to do witness outreach such a group is a congregation of saints. Often today, we build a building which is where the Church meets and it is identified as "the Church". The congregation is the group of God's people!

Why am I making this distinction? Because I believe we have identified the Church too heavily with a building. When an active teen (Bonny Rabe) stopped to talk to me the first week at the mission in Illinois, this is what she asked me, "Pastor, when will we get our church?"

The Church was there in 1944 when it first met in an empty auto repair garage, later when it met in an 85 year old building and again when it met in a leased, old, abandoned government building.

I have stood in some of the greatest church buildings in the world — St. Peter's in Rome, Notre Dome, in Paris and Grundtvig's Church in Copenhagen. Many of them today are not the primary meeting place of local Christians for worship; they are tourist attractions.

Church growth pundits tell us the best way to begin new churches is to recruit members of a local congregation who are clustered in an area at a distance from their church building. They will be your beginning base of members. They tell us to do a demographic study to find where to build our church building, where there are people like us: middle class, white, black, or with similar incomes etc

If the small number of people in Wilmington had tried to follow this "Church Growth" guideline it would not be there now. The closest Lutheran congregations were in Kankakee or Joliet and to my knowledge none of their members lived in Wilmington. The locals were a mixture of farmers, business people, or workers at the nearby military arsenal. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not against congregations building houses of worship when they are needed. But a great deal of the joy that little mission experienced came in the process of struggle in getting to the point when they could or should build.

First they sold the old building. With the funds from this they refurbished an old government recreation hall offered to us by the city for \$1 a year. Our men and women working together retiled the floors, replaced the broken windows, painted the walls and even replaced the whole heating system. When this was completed we had a very useable well equipped building for our congregation. Now we could also seat about

100+ people. Now we could grow!! From the funds still left from the old building we bought 10 acres of land and put a sign on it "Future home of Grace Lutheran congregation"!!

How did we grow in numbers? Our members invited their friends and neighbors to come see what the Lord had done here and to **join them in a class on the "Basics of the Christian Faith."** **Many of the members had not studied the basics since they were 12 or 14.**

The "Class in the Basics of the Christian Faith" is a simple evangelism tool. Forget the term "Membership Class" After just one year our membership grew about 50%. Why? Because before having a fancy building we began already acting like a congregation.

A group of ladies from Grace began visiting the "Home for Army and Navy Widows" in Wilmington. Incarcerated boys from the Illinois Youth Commission camp near us were visited by the pastor, and "This Is The Life" films were shown, and members gave them Christmas gifts.

As a young pastor, I was blessed without measure by the Lord's showing me that the way to grow the Kingdom was in getting lay people involved in every phase of physical building growth and evangelism involvement. When it was time for a church building we were ready.

We had outgrown the temporary building and began serious planning for a new church structure. This step forward gave us more joy since we all had gone through our early growing pains together.

Money was raised through family pledging and investment in our LCMS Church Extension Fund and unexpected gifts: i.e. St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Coal City closed; the handful of members joined us and gave half the selling price of their building to Grace and half to their retired pastors.

All of the worship equipment needs were pledged by members and friends: 26 pews with kneelers, 60 hymn books, paraments, offering plates, even the light dimmers. These were given in honor of loved ones. No plaques were attached. A thank you book with the loved one's names and gifts (no prices), was recorded as a permanent fixture in the church narthex.

Now came the new building itself. The building committee comprised 8 lay people with various backgrounds but with one focus. They wanted to build the very best facility to God's glory. Money was not their primary concern. The Lord provided and monthly reports were made.

From this point on I can't remember exactly how the Lord provided us with funds, but He did and without fund raisers or fund drives. We just went ahead. We hired an architectural firm and local contractors, a church furnishings company and artist H. Milbrath of Milwaukee to fabricate the unique Communion Ware.

The Lord let this writer be a part of all the above, as a leader, not a commanding general. I took the idea of a prayer chapel open to the community 24/7, from my Milwaukee congregation. One glass wall opened to the sanctuary so it could be used for child crying purposes and overflow.

After the dedication services, with Dr. Andrew Melendez and Dr. Oswald Hoffman of the Lutheran Hour preaching, we settled down to continue serving the community as before. Calls on the Widow's Home continued, boys from the boys camp began worshiping with us, and students from Africa, Asia, etc. from the Greer School for road equipment training were regular guests at services

In 3 years time the congregation grew to just under 200 members. We continue to invite the community to the Basics Class, members inviting non-members and also we paid for ads in the local paper. A year after the dedication, a new member, a convert, who took over as Sunday school superintendent came to the leadership and complained, "We need more space; we have so many kids!" So a new building committee was formed to add classrooms and more fellowship area to the building.

In another 3 years, the addition was finished and the dedication service for the new "Christian Growth Wing" was led by Dr. JO A. Preus. In the 6 years following this congregation continued to grow and stabilized between 300-400 members. WOW!!

The purpose of this study paper was not to focus on any individual or group but on the fact that we need to plant congregations of the CHURCH. Let them struggle and later enjoy the church building when it is needed. As this writer looks back at where the Lord has led him to serve, I remember the people and the struggle, not so much the buildings.

To any congregation planter who may read this paper let me say, focus on the people not the building!

. It was my prayer that I would be able to let the Lord work through me "For we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do". Eph 2: 10 He answered that prayer. What you see in these pictures is His working, to Him be all the glory!

"He gave some evangelists and some pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints" Eph. 4: 11-12 It is our task to equip God' people for witness. Here are some tools:

EQUIP THE SAINTS!

The Bethel Bible training and the Kennedy method of witness are good training methods but the time needed to train and the time needed to use it in witnessing are negatives. The simple Change of Name of the "Membership Class to the "Class in the Basics of the Christian Faith" or "Christianity 101" works best and is the easiest!