

The United Lutheran Parish, which began with seven ELCA churches in Shawano County, Wisconsin, is a cooperative ministry endeavor of Bethlehem Church, Pella; St. John's Church, Leopolis; Zion Church, Tigerton; Immanuel Church, Morris; St. Matthew Church, Bowler; Peace Church, Tilleda; and Elias Church, Herman. These seven churches officially joined as one parish on July 16, 2000, when their four pastors were installed at Zion ELCA, Tigerton in a service which included the ordination of Pastors Jim and Carol Johnson by Bishop John Beem. Pastor Shari Routh and Pastor Howard Buenting joined them to form the first Pastoral Team for TULP.

In 1998, Bishop John Beem of East Central Synod of Wisconsin, Mission Developer Rev. Davis Darrington, and other synod staff joined with significant congregational leaders of these seven churches, and began conversations regarding their need for pastoral assignments for their churches. They reviewed and began problem-solving as a core group regarding the complications facing smaller churches attempting to remain viable in their communities. The struggling financial situations of some of the churches, the limited number of available pastors to fill openings, and the isolated sites of some of the churches were all issues faced by the church leaders and their people. These seven churches lie within this 40 mile radius between Wausau and Shawano, Wisconsin. There were three natural "pairings" already in place within the seven-point parish, with a history of sharing pastors and ministry within those pairings. The success of such a venture, it was noted, was the combination of the faith and diligence of the people of God.

Many meetings eventually led to the formation of a Mission Statement:

"The seven-point cooperative ministry of The United Lutheran Parish is intent on assisting each individual congregation in carrying out their own defined ministry and mission. Together, under the direction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit and with encouragement from one another, we commit ourselves to share our faith, hope, and love in the strong name of Jesus, in our rural setting."

These seven churches formed an Advisory Council, consisting of church presidents and other leaders at each site, with the purpose of assisting each individual church council in joint decision-making, policy formation, and financial commitments. The individual councils continue to set policy for their own churches regarding issues relevant to their own history, context, and voices of their people.

The United Lutheran Parish Preamble contains these words:

"We are separate, independent congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. However, we believe that the church is more than our own congregation. Thus we join hands with neighboring congregations in order to give witness to Christ's love and life-giving power for changed lives in our community, country and world. The seven-point parish is not one parish serving multi-locations. It is multi-locations with their own missions and identity, working together through joint ministries."

The Parish defined agreements regarding each site's financial obligations to the TULP budget, the maintenance of their own properties, Sunday School or VBS programs (unless in cooperative arrangement), specific joint financial obligations, and mission commitments. Synod reports and annual reports would be prepared by each church site. Once the Pastoral Team was in place, joint adult education programs were arranged, joint confirmation programs coordinated, committees formed, and decisions were made regarding worship scheduling, visits to shut-ins and the sick, social ministry projects, and opportunities for fellowship within the parish.

Bulletins were synchronized in regard to liturgical flow, with each site devising their own bulletin covers, printing their own site announcements. Later, Sunday bulletins were prepared centrally, then sent to each site for final copying. Worship Planning Team members (representatives of each of the seven

churches) began to work with a pastor to make decisions regarding music and liturgy for the worshipping community. All seven churches began singing the same hymns each Sunday, using the same worship tools (LBW and WOV) for the cause of unity. The churches made decisions regarding frequency of communion distribution, so that each site could have pastors distribute communion twice per month during worship.

Pastoral care visits to shut-ins and those in special need were charted and divided by the Pastoral Team. Weddings, baptisms, funerals, and special programs were planned at the discretion of the pastors. First Communion throughout the parish was offered to fifth graders who successfully completed their preparation classes. Confirmation classes began in the fall, with Gr. 7, 8, and 9, with Confirmation on Reformation Sunday for Gr. 9.

A TULP Central Office Site was selected in Tilleda (a former parsonage) where a part-time coordinator/treasurer, Diane Kryll, would serve the parish. Some sites chose to employ secretaries to assist in bulletin preparation, newsletter mailings, and to handle general business matters specific to that church. A parsonage serves the parish at Pella, where Pastor Jim and Pastor Carol Johnson became residents. Pastor Shari Routh agreed to initially serve part-time, commuting from New London. Pastor Howard Buenting agreed to contract as a part-time pastor for TULP, following his retirement in 2000.



The Red Tulip with a Cross became the logo for TULP, by its symbolic representation of a united central base, and separate functioning petals, bound in Christ's mission and commission.

Each pastor served a pairing of the churches each Sunday, or the single site, St. Matthew's. The scheduling cycle continued in a rotation of the four pastors staying at each site for two weeks, then rotating. It became important to synchronize worship times for certain sites to facilitate this movement. Currently two pastors rotate among 6 congregations - worship schedules have been altered to allow each pastor to lead worship at 3 sites each Sunday.

The Pastoral Team has clearly defined pastoral duties, meeting weekly for staffing review of special events, planning, sermon preparation, reviewing special needs and prayer requests, in prayerful consideration of the parish and area. Division of labor, or defined areas of ministry for the Team include these areas: Administrative duties; Evangelism/Stewardship/Outreach; Adult Education; Social Ministry; Worship Planning; Youth Education; Youth Ministry; Pastoral Care; WELCA and Men's groups; Fellowship.

Leadership from the individual churches needed to be significant and reliable from the beginning, in order for the new programs, joint projects, and ministry opportunities to address the needs of the people. Lay ministry within the parish was noted as significant and vital, from all seven sites. Bill Kriegel of Tigerton became a graduate of the synod-sponsored Lay School of Ministry, to further equip himself for lay ministry commitments, and agreed to serve in pulpit supply or other parish needs occasionally.

Worship attendance within the parish gradually began to grow within a few months, as did membership and baptism at some sites. Pastors were intentional, as were evangelism groups, in attempting to reach out to those whose anxieties and questions needed to be addressed. A monthly TULP newsletter was developed and mailed to over 600 home sites within the parish. Eventually, Wednesday evening worship was put in place, at one (rotating) site within the parish.

It was noted by the people and by the pastors that the prayer life of the parish led to a greater movement of the Spirit to solidify the purpose and capacity of this cooperative parish ministry. Hospitality and compassion to inquirers and visitors was needed and began to rise. Willingness of church members

to adjust to change, to negotiate, compromise, and instill hope and enthusiasm in others became a visible product of that faith-building. The Pastoral Team's love for the people and willingness to be available and approachable was recognized as an important element in bringing about a more peaceful transition period for the seven churches.

On July 22, 2001, The United Lutheran Parish celebrated its first full year of joint ministry with a joint worship at Pella Park, led by all four pastors and the joint TULP choir led by Linda Krueger of Zion. It was an occasion of shared Word and Sacrament, and good food and fellowship as the seven churches came together to remember their connectedness as a community rooted in Christ, bound together, yet separate. The large crowd which gathered provided a witness of faith to the community at large. It was decided that this would be an annual event.

Since that first anniversary, some things have changed, others have not. In June of 2003, Pastor Shari Routh left The United Lutheran Parish to serve as an Associate Pastor at a church in Fond du lac Wisconsin. In September of 2003, John Hielsberg agreed to become a Laity Associate on a part-time basis. John is a graduate of the Lay School of Ministry (as is his wife, Alice, who assists him in an unofficial capacity). He leads worship on Sundays and at special services when necessary. He also visits shut-ins and nursing homes on a regular basis. Worship with communion was adjusted at some of the sites in order to ensure that an ordained Pastor would be available on communion Sunday.

In 2004, the newsletter, which had been completely created, printed, assembled, and mailed in-house, joined hands with Liturgical Publication in Brookfield to improve the quality and reduce the amount of labor in its production. The newsletter is still created at the TULP office, with input from all seven congregations, but it is then sent electronically to LPi for printing and assembly. The result is a very professional looking document that has been received well. The costs of printing and assembling are subsidized by advertisements from local businesses who wish to support this effort.

In 2005, Pastors Jim and Carol Johnson left The United Lutheran Parish to answer a call to serve several congregations in South-western Wisconsin. We then extended calls to Pastor Doug Helling from Weston, and Pastor Jennifer Czarnota from Ohio (originally from the local area). Pastor Doug has a $\frac{3}{4}$ time position and Pastor Jennifer has a full-time position. After the new team had time to adjust to each other, Pastor Jennifer was given the role of Lead Pastor and job responsibilities were broken down between the members of the new team. As time went on, it was decided by the Advisory Council that we should change our reference from a 7-Point Parish to a Multi-Point Parish – thus allowing for changes of member congregations in the future.

In May, 2006, Lois Graper, a member at Peace in Tilleda, graduated from the Lay School of Ministry. She will continue to provide pulpit supply when needed and also has helped teach confirmation classes. In July, 2006, Pastor Howard Buenting entered full-time retirement after 45 years serving as an ordained minister. The United Lutheran Parish call committee is currently reviewing the staffing needs and looking to the future as to how best the congregations of The United Lutheran Parish can be served, keeping in mind our mission statement and commitment to the individual congregations.

In 2008, Immanuel Lutheran Congregation voted to leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and also to leave The United Lutheran Parish. That leaves 6 of the original congregations. With this change and the loss of our contracted Lay Minister, schedules were adjusted to allow 2 pastors (1 full-time, and one $\frac{3}{4}$ time) to lead worship at 6 sites, along with the help of lay people. In 2009, Pastor Doug Helling was reduced to $\frac{1}{2}$ time, at his request. The Office Manager position was enlarged to allow

that position to take up more of the mechanical duties to allow the pastors more time to concentrate on their ministry to the people. Worship schedules were adjusted to allow each of the 2 pastors to lead worship at 3 sites each Sunday. Each pastor also stays at one of the groups for the entire month, allowing more of a time to make a better connection with the members of each congregation.

In December, 2009, Pastor Jennifer Czarnota resigned her position at The United Lutheran Parish. The Council offered a 6-month 75% supply contract to Pastor Dennis R. Creswell from Wausau. He accepted the contract which was extended several times, and on June 20, 2011 accepted a call to serve as a 75% Lead Pastor. He continued to serve the parish through October of 2014.

In September of 2010, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in the Town of Pella voted to leave the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and also The United Lutheran Parish. Pastor Doug Helling also announced his plans to retire at the end of 2010, but offered to continue on as a supply pastor for the future beginning in 2011. As a group of 5 congregations, we developed a task force to present ideas to the Advisory Council on how to serve these 5 congregations and remain financially secure. In August of 2013, St. Matthews Lutheran Church in Bowler was decommissioned as a church, and membership was transferred to Peace in Tilleda. In December of 2014, Zion Lutheran Church in Tigerton elected to go on their own and leave The United Lutheran Parish. They are currently being served part time by a retired ELCA Pastor.

TULP is currently served by a Lay Pastoral Leader, Lois Graper, who is a TEEM seminary student at Wartburg, and will be ordained at the end of her program. Lois is a past graduate of the Lay School of Ministry, and has served her congregation, Peace, and The United Lutheran Parish in various ways over the years. Lois was authorized by Bishop Gerald Mansholt to preach and preside at Holy Communion and serve as Lay Pastoral Leader of The United Lutheran Parish beginning in 2015. With the help of a staff lay preacher and several other lay pulpit supply preachers, worship is offered at each of the three locations every Sunday, with Holy Communion served the 1st Sunday of the month at St Johns and the 2nd Sunday of the month at Elias and Peace.

We look forward to a time of renewal as we have passed the first 15 years as a joint ministry. The United Lutheran Parish looks quite different than it did 15 years ago, but it still remains a shared ministry of the three congregations that remain. We are looking to the future and considering new ways to offer specialized programs for our congregations, and will continue to support and nourish our shut-in and elderly population, our youth, and the "unchurched". We will also strive to meet the needs of our changing congregations. Change is not new to us, and we realize that no matter what changes come upon us, the one steadfast and certain thing is that Our Lord is there for us - always! And His love will carry us through these times of change and we will emerge strong and faithful in His name. The Lord has indeed blessed us, and we pray for continued strength and guidance as we continue to fulfill our mission.