

A Vision for Bethany Lutheran Church: Faithful, Vibrant, Sustainable

One year ago, the leadership of Bethany faced a decision: Do we simply seek to maintain our current ministry to a supportive, but aging, congregation? Or do we dare to take on the challenge to reach a new generation, by increasing our engagement with younger adults and their families?

After holding many conversations, surveying the congregation and some prayerful soul-searching, the Council discerned that God was calling us to step forward in faith and “go for it”—initiating a process to call a second full-time pastor to engage our target audience and bring Bethany more “up to date and into the future.” At this year’s January Annual Meeting, the members of Bethany voted overwhelmingly to move forward with this vision.

From the beginning, we knew that one person (no matter how gifted) could accomplish this vision alone. This was going to have to be a TEAM effort! So, here is what has taken place since last November:

- We made it clear that we expect children and their families in worship by doing the following:
- We tightened up the Sunday morning schedule to make it more “family-friendly”—making it easier for families to engage in both Sunday School and worship
- We established a “Creation” Station in the sanctuary to engage small children, so parents could focus on the Word.
- We initiated a pattern of having Sunday School children help lead the 10 AM worship on the second Sunday of every month (which is tomorrow, by the way!)
- We have already seen a significant increase in children at worship!
 - Tonight, 20 of our High School Youth are attending the Synod’s “Godstock” retreat, and already, 34 have signed up for next summer’s National Youth Gathering in Houston.
 - Recently we distributed 50 Bibles to Bethany kids and 32 celebrated First Communion last Sunday.

In addition:

- We have upgraded Wi-fi in our building and expanded our presence on Social Media.
- We added attractive new signage to help visitors and those of us with memory issues.
- We just welcomed our largest New Member class in many years.
- 8 new members have joined the Adult Choir this fall.
- We have now paid down a \$2 million dollar mortgage to under \$400,000

A recent Natural Church Development congregational survey (taken in July) showed that Bethany has made significant progress in 6 of the 8 “Quality Characteristics” that measure congregational health and vitality, and we are now “above average” in every category.

As you saw in the Video, and as you yourself have probably noticed: **Great Things are Happening at Bethany Lutheran Church!** Bethany is healthy, alive, **Vibrant!** Can we get better? Of course! And with God's help and your support, the best is yet to come!

As Pastor Luci reminded us last weekend, these stories of health and vitality were made possible because others before us had already laid a solid foundation—a foundation that goes all the way back to the apostles and Christ himself.

Our Bethany church “Founders” were determined to “pass on” the faith they had brought to America from Scandinavia and northern Europe. Among the first things they did when they came to Rice Lake was to establish a church, with the understanding that they were laying a foundation for generations to come. Indeed, 142 years later, Bethany has continued to thrive by building on that initial foundation of faith.

While the original congregation was established in 1875, it was 99 years ago (in 1918) that a very bold vision was launched: to build a much larger facility on Messenger Street. The project was finally completed in 1923.

Over the years, Bethany continued to proclaim the Good News, serve those in need, and grow new disciples of Jesus Christ. Twice the building underwent major expansion and remodeling: in 1966 and again in 2005.

Thanks to God's grace, strong leadership, committed members and dedicated volunteers, Bethany Lutheran Church has (for most of its history) remained a

- **Healthy,**
- **Vibrant and**
- **Faithful** congregation, as it is to this day. Again, amazing things are happening!

The Question your Council leaders and I are wrestling with is this: Is this exciting, lively, and vibrant ministry sustainable? Is the Foundation on which we are building strong enough and deep enough to support the vibrant ministry of today? Will it enable Bethany to continue this vibrant ministry into the next generation?

Jesus spoke of two builders: The Wise man who built his house on the Rock, and the Foolish man who built his house on the sand. (Matthew 7:24-27)

The one true foundation of Bethany Lutheran Church is Jesus Christ. He is the unshakeable rock that shall not be moved. Our strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow is our faith in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, there are two things (goals) we can do and must do to strengthen our foundation for mission:

1. Our first and most immediate challenge: We need to **deepen and broaden our financial support for the day to day ministry of Bethany**. As you may have seen in the November NewsBreak, the current level of giving is not enough to support the day to day ministry of our vibrant church, and this trend cannot continue indefinitely. At the same time, I believe **this is a challenge we can meet**, as all of us gathered here tonight unite and work together to lay a foundation for the future. This year, Ruth and I significantly “stepped up” our weekly giving to Bethany Lutheran Church. Now we encourage you to do the same. The *Foundation for the Future* brochure offers a number of ways you can help. And **we are really counting on your support at this very crucial time in our history**.
2. A second way to strengthen our foundation for the future is by **taking care of our building—our center for ministry**. Certainly one of Bethany’s strengths is our tremendous facility, and we can thank members of generations past for always looking ahead to future needs. The latest addition in 2005 was a great gift to current members as well as to future generations, and we have made tremendous progress in paying off the mortgage. Thanks to your amazing generosity, the original mortgage of over \$ 1.8 million has already been reduced to less than \$400,000. That is truly something to celebrate! When Bethany members come together, trusting in what God can do, wonderful things always happen!

But paying off the mortgage today (or in the near future) will not guarantee that this facility will be ready to serve future generations. Each year I have served at Bethany, a different major maintenance project has drained our entire contingency fund, meaning there is little money available to do creative programming and mission. My challenge is this: If the generous members who have worked so hard to reduce the mortgage can now take on the added challenge of ensuring this building is cared for in the future, more of our weekly offerings can be directed toward our core mission of growing faith and sharing Christ.

Beginning in 2018, gifts to the Bethany Building Fund will be used not only to pay off the mortgage, but also to ensure Bethany is well-maintained without negatively impacting ministry.

A tremendous opportunity is before us today! We are the people who can (and must) see to it that Bethany remains Vibrant for today, and has a solid Foundation moving into the future. If you share the vision of a Bethany that is both **Vibrant** and **Sustainable**, then I know you will do whatever you can do to make this vision a reality. You will give generously to the overall Ministry of Bethany, and you we see to it that our building is cared for, for the sake of our children and grandchildren. I thank you, in advance, for your generous support!