

The History of Bethlehem Lutheran ELCA

Bethlehem Lutheran has a very interesting history which includes that of two congregations (First English Lutheran and Bethlehem Lutheran) that in 1944 gave up their individual identities and merged into a larger, more vigorous fellowship. It was quite an innovative, creative step that the leaders and members took fifty years ago. It was unusual, too. It took forty years more before the parent synods of those two separate congregations would come together in one large national church -- our present ELCA. So it was a courageous, even a bold step, that was taken right here in Bayport in 1944.

The beginnings go way back to the 1880's. Scandinavian immigrants had been coming in increasing numbers to the St. Croix Valley in the 1860's and 1870's. "Baytown," as Bayport was called until 1882, was called "South Stillwater" for many years after that--until 1922. A Community Hall had been built in 1879. It was used for various local events including nondenominational church services and Sunday School.

However, the Swedish settlers began to worship in private homes, rather than walk the three miles to Trinity in Stillwater for Lutheran services. In 1884 they began to talk of organizing their own congregation and building a church for themselves. The actual date of organization was August 9, 1886. The official name was "The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Bethesda Congregation of South Stillwater." There were thirty-six charter members. Construction of the church was started soon after and was completed early in the following year. Services in the Swedish language were held regularly. Rev. A.F. Tornell was the first pastor.

In January 1887 a lot for a parsonage was purchased from the St. Croix Railway and Improvement Company for \$50.00 but the parsonage was not built until 1897.

The Sunday School was organized in 1888 and continued in faithful service during all the years of the congregation's existence. There was also a Young People's Society (Luther League) first organized about 1896. Written records go back only to 1917.

The Ladies Aid was organized in 1888. It did much to support the congregation--financially to the amount of \$6,500 and in various other ways. In fifty years the membership increased from five to forty-seven.

In 1924 a basement was put in under the church building. This extra space helped greatly to accommodate the increasing number of congregational activities especially those of the Ladies Aid. Also in 1924 the name of the

congregation was changed to "First English Lutheran Church" and English was accepted as the language of the congregation.

The Swedish congregation had a good choral music tradition. In the first years musically gifted women led the songs. In 1891 a choir was organized. There was a male quartet which sang frequently at church gatherings. In 1891 the Ladies Aid purchased an organ and a bell for the church.

The First English Lutheran Church (Swedish) was usually connected to a parish with Trinity in Stillwater so confirmands from South Stillwater had to walk to Trinity for instruction. However, from 1896-1921, with few exceptions, confirmation classes gathered for instruction in their own church. But when C.E. Benson became pastor for the second time (1922) all confirmation classes were held in Stillwater. This was the situation until 1936, when a class of eleven children were confirmed in Bayport.

During the period 1936-44 the life and work of the congregation progressed more or less routinely. With the onset of World War II many of the young men were inducted into military service. A considerable number saw service overseas.

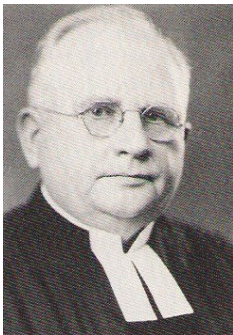
Nine pastors served the Swedish church from the founding until 1944: A.F. Tornell—1886-88; Joel L. Haff--1888-90; Jonas Magny--1891-95; Carl O. Olander—1896-99; Andrew Bengston--1900-05; C.E. Odell--1905-09; Johannes Lundquist--1910-13; John A. LeVine--1916-22; C.E. Benson--1914-15; and in 1923-44.

The history of the Norwegian antecedent congregation of present day Bethlehem Lutheran paralleled that of the Swedish congregation. The Norwegian congregation was organized in South Stillwater on November 1, 1889. The official name was "Bethlehem Norske Evangelical Lutheran Congregation." There were nineteen charter members. It seems that Bethlehem began as an independent congregation with no synodical affiliation. The first pastor who also served congregations in Stillwater, Hudson and River Falls was P.K. Mellang. He died after only one year and was succeeded by Rev. N.L. Blomholm in 1892. The church was built in 1895. Before that time services were held in the homes of members.



FIRST ENGLISH LUTHERAN

Organized August 9, 1886. Church built 1887, used for worship by merged congregation 1944-1953. Building torn down 1953.



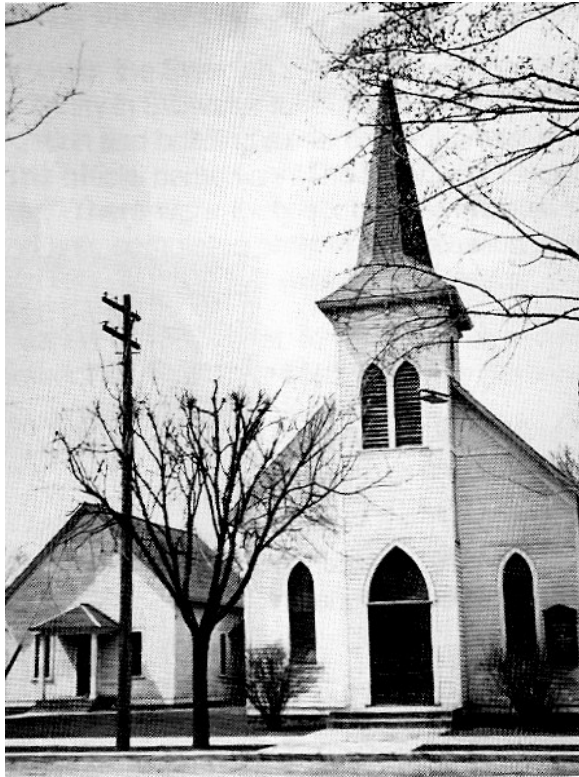
C.E. Benson

The Norwegian congregation had the usual number of organizations--Sunday School, Ladies Aid, Luther League, Men's Club. The ladies had a Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation organization. It was primarily a missionary society.

Oscar Thompson was pastor of Bethlehem from 1927 to 1944. Early in his pastorate, on October 8, 1928, the congregation officially adopted the Constitution of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America and became affiliated with that synod. At that time, too, the name of the congregation was changed to "Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Bayport," and English was accepted as the language of the congregation.

There is one interesting "Bethlehem legend" that may or may not be authentic. According to this legend the bell of the Norwegian church had been the bell on one of the St. Croix River steamers. Somehow that bell fell off the ship into the St. Croix River. One of the Norwegian church members heard about this and thought that it would be a good bell for his church, so he paid someone to retrieve it and donated it. This legendary bell plus the one from the Swedish congregation still speak joyfully of the 1944 merger as they continue to ring for worship services each Sunday.

So we see these two Scandinavian congregations coexisting for more than fifty years. Their places of worship were located just a few blocks apart. What were the influences that finally led them to merge?

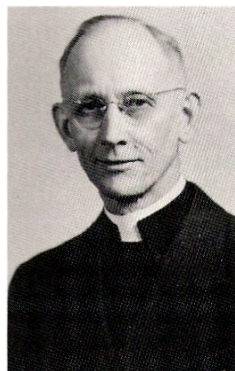


BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH (Norwegian)

Organized November 1, 1898

Church built 1895

Church building was torn down & parish hall sold - 1944



Oscar Thompson

Lois Wattman, whose father was Bethlehem's pastor from 1950-77, wrote a very interesting and perceptive account in 1975 entitled "The History of Bethlehem Lutheran church." She saw four factors that led to the actual merger:

(1) Both congregations were served as second churches by their respective pastors. This meant that each congregation's activities were secondary to the schedules of their big sister" congregations in Stillwater and Hudson. (2) There was growing dissatisfaction with this arrangement. The various organizations often exchanged programs. More importantly, if one church did not have services on a given Sunday, the members simply attended at the other church.

(3) The ethnic lines of the two congregations were becoming very blurred.

(4) Bayport was a small community and really could not support two Lutheran congregations.

So there was a climate favorable to merger planning. In January, 1942 representatives from the two congregations met to discuss formally the possibility of a merger. On February 19, 1942, a vote in favor of the merger was taken at both congregations. On May 22 of that year a joint service was held and a week later there was a joint father-son banquet.

The next year laymen from the two congregations contacted their respective synodical authorities to convey the mutual desire for a merger. One point that had to be cleared was which district had jurisdiction over the Norwegian congregation. It was finally determined that though it was geographically in the Southeast Minnesota District of the Norwegian Lutheran Church, because of the connection with the Hudson congregation, Bethlehem was under the jurisdiction of the Eastern District of that Synod.

Discussions and cooperative efforts continued. After many, many meetings a plan was devised that proved to be the final step in the merger. It was Pastor Thompson of the old Bethlehem church who was the real mover.

His proposal was that the Norwegian congregation's name would be used and the merged congregation would become part of the Augustana Synod and would call a pastor from that Synod. The First English church would be used for services until such time as a new church could be built on the site of the old Bethlehem and finally, the Norwegian organist, Evelyn Nelson, would become the head organist (a position in which she would continue playing for more than twenty-five years.)

This plan was acceptable to both congregations. On August 9, 1944, the merger was completed when the two congregations met together and formally merged into one congregation. The new Bethlehem Lutheran Church began with a membership of 345 baptized, 80 children enrolled in Sunday School, and an annual budget of \$8,000. On

October 22, 1944, Reverend Carlton Berg, who had been serving First English Lutheran for a short time just before the merger, was installed as pastor of the new Bethlehem congregation. And so the stage was set for a new act in the play "Swedes and Norwegians under One Roof." It seems there was a real spirit of joy in being together and much hope for future growth and expansion. A note in the bulletin for August 9, 1945 expressed this sentiment well: "Hail to the future of the Lutheran Church of America--a future that has been presaged in the birth of the Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Bayport. Thanks be to God!"

One of Pastor Berg's first tasks, among many others, was to make contact by corresponding with the many young men of the congregation serving in the armed forces. Special Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan services were held in May and August to express sincere, heartfelt gratitude that the war was finally over.

Membership in the congregation increased significantly. On January 27, 1946 dependence on Home Mission Aid from the Synod was discontinued and Bethlehem became entirely self-supporting.

On November 11, 1946 the congregation began discussions about a new church building. A building committee was elected and an architectural firm was chosen to begin the planning.

In 1948 the decision was made to build a new parsonage at 160 S. 4th Street in Bayport. On October 30, 1949 the fifth anniversary of Bethlehem was observed and the new parsonage was dedicated. On that day also the farewell service was held for Pastor Berg who had accepted the call to a congregation in Saskatoon, Sask.



Canton L. Berg

Bethlehem's Pastor 1944-49

On February 1, 1950, Reverend Alf A. Wattman began his long pastorate at Bethlehem. A year later, on February 9, the new church building committee was authorized to proceed with plans for the new building. (Committee members - Myrna Connors, Wm. ("Dougie") Goulette, May Rowland and Marion Thompson are still BLC members.) On April 18, 1952, the congregation authorized the building committee to call for bids. Axel Thomsen & Sons of Stillwater was awarded the general contract.



Alf A. Wattman

Bethlehem's Pastor 1950-1977

Following the worship service on May 4, 1952, ground-breaking ceremonies were held and the cornerstone was laid on October 5, 1952.

On May 10 of the following year, the rite of dedication of the new church was conducted by Dr. Emil Swenson. A new organ donated by the Lydians utilizing profits from the sale of cookbooks was installed as part of the new building. Cost of construction had been \$186,000.



Bethlehem Lutheran 1952

A news item in the Bayport newspaper described it as an "imposing edifice . . . of colonial design with Kasota stone used in its construction. A white steeple, reminiscent of New England, provides the center of interest on the exterior."

On September 17 and 19, 1954, the tenth anniversary was celebrated. At that time there were 666 baptized

members, an increase of over 40% in the ten years since the merger. In that period 120 children were baptized, 88 confirmed, 44 couples were married, and 44 deaths occurred. In 1959 Bethlehem began using the new hymnal. Average attendance was 277.

The 1960's were another era. Early in that decade the three women's organizations--Lydians, Ladies Aid and Missionary Society--were merged and became the Bethlehem Lutheran Church Women (BLCW). On January 1, 1963 Bethlehem became a member of the newly merged Lutheran Church in America (LCA).

Also in that decade four sons of the congregation entered the ministry: 1962 Lynn Strand, son of Dr. and Mrs. Elwynn Strand 1963 Gerald Thompson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Burnell Thompson 1965 Duane Olson, son of Mr. and Mrs. Lars Olson These three were ordained during the annual District conventions at Gustavus Adolphus College. 1966 David Burmaster, son of Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Burmaster Ordained in a service right here at Bethlehem. In May 1978, Tim Wattman graduated from Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary and was ordained at Stronsburg, Nebraska.

The 25th anniversary was celebrated on October 19, 1969. The growth of the congregation has continued under the leadership of Pastor Wattman. Mrs. Eileen Gelford and Mrs. Carol Anderson had directed the choirs since the merger. Evelyn Nelson had served as organist ever since the merger.

The planning for an educational building finally culminated on Thanksgiving Day 1969 when the cornerstone for the building was laid.

The \$90,000 building was completed the following year and dedicated on May 20, 1970. A Memorial Fund for this project had been established in 1958 with a gift from Marie Anderson, a local school teacher and member of the congregation. Over the years many other memorials were added to it. A great deal of the work was done by members themselves. A loan of only \$6,000 was needed to finish paying construction costs. That loan was paid off within a year. At that time the enrollment in the Sunday School counting pupils, teachers, officers and Home Cradle was over 300. Baptized membership in 1968 was 948.

In June 1977 Pastor Wattman's long ministry at Bethlehem ended. His health and strength had ebbed somewhat and he was no longer able to cope with all the requirements of a busy pastorate. He moved to Minneapolis and worked part-time for some years. The Wattmans now reside in the Augustana Apartments in Minneapolis.

A series of Youth Directors/Interns did much to develop a good youth program, including Carol E. Anderson, Russ Dudero, Tim Watson, Chuck Henneman, Gary Cumings, Brian Bergin, Harlan Robbins, Ron Johnson, Larry Egbert, Gene Anderson, Tom Anderson, Karl Speiker, Joe Severson, Carol Gaard, David Strommen, Jim Schreyer, Ann Spooner.

A notable achievement of 1977 was the retirement of the \$25,000 indebtedness incurred for the repair of the steeple. Supply pastors served for several months after Pastor Wattman retired.

In November, 1977 Pastor Michael Furney was installed. During Pastor Furney's time, the life and work of the congregation continued at a strong pace. Pastor Furney purchased a home in Stillwater shortly after he began his pastorate at Bethlehem.

The parsonage was sold toward the end of 1978. The proceeds were placed in a special fund. A series of strong chairpersons, aided by capable council members ably assisted Pastor Furney in his ministry. Stewardship kept up with the rate of inflation and the need for various new programs.

Pastor Furney resigned effective October 31, 1983. Various supply pastors filled the pulpit until August 1984.

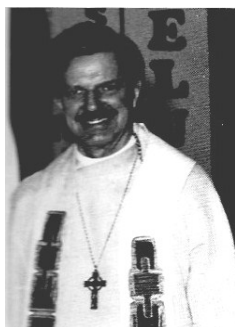
After an extensive self-study and search process, Bethlehem called Pastor Paul Harris to serve as the church's fourth pastor. He came to Bayport in August, 1984 with his wife Sally, a Professor of English at Northwestern College, son Kenath (13) and daughter Arwynn (16 months.) He was installed on October 7, 1984.

Pastor Harris brought a diverse and interesting background to ministry at Bethlehem. A graduate of Wheaton College (Illinois) and Yale Divinity School, a Rockefeller Brothers Fellow and Ford Foundation Fellow, he had taught philosophy and theology at the University of New Haven, the University of Minnesota and other schools before his ordination in the Lutheran Church.

Pastor Harris combined scholarly expertise with a love of pastoral ministry, a global perspective, and care for developing the ministry and life of the congregation.

During the fall of 1984 more phone lines were added, Bethlehem's first copier purchased, an adult education program begun, and the Cursillo community started.

This was the beginning of a long string of physical, programmatic and spiritual developments at Bethlehem.



Michael Furney

The old commitment to Global Missions was revived in 1984 and has developed into many strong mission relationships. Bethlehem has helped support several missionaries in Tanzania: Dr. Frank Jones, a medical missionary in Moshe, Tanzania; Charlie LePage for ten years at Dar es Salaam; Dr.

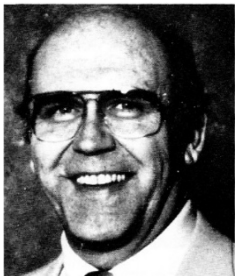
Mark and Linda Jacobson's AIDS project and Selian Hospital in Arusha. A close relationship also developed with Iringa Lutheran Diocese in Tanzania and Bethlehem's sister church, Image. Christians in Image built a large church themselves, but could not afford the steel sheets for the roof, so Bethlehem provided funds for a roof, benches, and bicycles for the pastor and local lay leaders (evangelists). A new theological training college for pastors and evangelists opened in April, 1994, aided by a four year, \$12,000.00 commitment from Bethlehem. Additionally between \$4000 and \$8000 has been given for hunger projects each year through special offerings.

A new worship schedule began in the fall of 1984 which allowed for Sunday School and Adult Forum between the services. Other adult education opportunities developed including House Church, retreats, and a variety of Bible studies.

In 1987 years of dreaming and planning came to realization with removal of the old balcony and the installation of a 22-rank Walker pipe organ at the back of the sanctuary. The new organ was made possible through the generosity of Alice Anderson and the congregation.

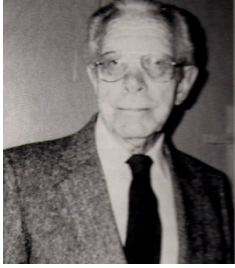
The need for space for fellowship, education, youth and other activities had long been felt. In 1988 a \$200,000 matching grant by the E.C. Madsen family gave impetus to the project. In 1989 the congregation voted to proceed with a building fund appeal. The decision to build the connection was a commitment by the people of Bethlehem to its future. Over \$200,000 was pledged that fall, and "The Connection" was underway.

Pastor Harris was named a 1990 Bush Foundation Leadership Fellow (the first parish pastor ever to be so honored) and was given a leave of absence for the first ten months of 1990, much of which he spent in Africa studying hunger causes and responses.



Jim Voelker

Pastor Jim Voelker came as Interim Pastor for that time. In October 1990, Pastor Voelker helped break ground for the Connection, which was dedicated a year later.



Sabin Swenson

Pastor Sabin Swenson served as Visitation Pastor from 1977 to 1987. He was deeply beloved of the congregation. He died on June 17, 1994.

Pastor Roland Brandt ably served as Visitation Pastor and was loved for his quiet, gracious spirit and unhurried manner.

The building of the Connection brought a new financial challenge, but the congregation was so convinced of its call to ministry to youth and families that it was decided to hire a full-time Youth and Family Minister. A bequest from Freda Remseth gave major assistance for the first two years. On January 1, 1992 Chris Berthelsen became Bethlehem's first full-time Youth and Family Minister. She brought many gifts to her work including creativity, warmth, and musical talent.

Debbie Teed served as Parish secretary with great skill and a friendly manner that made volunteers and visitors feel welcome and comfortable in the office. Wilma McGowan began part-time parish work in 1986 assimilating new members, evangelism, volunteer recruitment and assisting with a full range of parish work.

Our Sunday School grew under the direction of Dan and Ginny Peulen who gave wholeheartedly to their position. They created an exciting experience for the children.

After Eileen Meader's 36 years directing the choir, Catherine Tornabene directed the choir for 6 years. Maggie Speich then brought great energy and ability to the position. She began two bell choirs and started a woodwind ensemble in addition to directing the chapel Choir with zest. Juanita Sockness brought dedication and competence to her service as both church organist and accompanist for the Chapel Choir. Andree Aronson was a promising new addition to the musical staff as she directs the Angels and Choristers choirs.

Through its 50 years Bethlehem has never been short of challenges. By the grace of God these challenges have been opportunities for growth and faithfulness. Thanking God for a goodly heritage and looking forward to expanded opportunities for mission and service, the people of Bethlehem, living on earth and in Christ, join together in saying, "Now thank we all our God ...". For what has been, "thanks." For what will be, "yes."

In 1994, after ten years of ministry, Pastor Paul Harris resigned to accept a call to Como Park Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Pastor Steve Nelson was then called to serve as interim pastor. Associate in Ministry, Chris Berthelsen served the congregation by herself for six months during this interim time. In August of 1996, Pastor Richard Larson was called to begin work at Bethlehem. He has been the pastor of Bethlehem up to the present.

1997 was a year of many changes and new developments. The congregation developed a new mission statement, WE CELEBRATE, WE GROW, WE SERVE. 12 teams were organized around these three areas of ministry. Maggie Speich resigned her position as Music Director, in order to pursue full time ordained ministry. Susan Fredricksen was hired as the Office Administrator. She continued in her position until 2006. John Albright was hired as the organist and choir director. Kim Vangsgard continued as the director of the Praise Group, then called "Lighthouse." Kim continues her work with the Praise Group. As of 2004, the group has been working with the new name, "Bridge of Harmony."

In 1998 a group of leaders in the congregation, working together with the pastor and the music director, conducted a Worship Summit. At these series of meetings the congregation developed expectations and standards for worship at Bethlehem. A style of worship that values tradition, but is up to date with the best in contemporary music, worship that is carefully planned and sets an atmosphere for spiritual growth and inspiration, worship that shows quality and is sensitive to the needs and diversity of all people: these are the values that were established, and continue to be guidelines for worship planning at Bethlehem today.

In 1999 the congregation realized a long held dream. It established the Shining Star Child Development Center. It originally provided day care services for children, pre-school through sixth grade. It evolved to providing services for infant through pre-kindergarten. The first day care director was Katy Selb/DiGiacomo. The next director was Heather Potting. Mary McKnight was hired as the third director, and then Gayle Jacobson. Shining Star was a specific way that the congregation realized its mission to serve the community. More recently the Bethlehem congregation handed over management of the child-care center to private ownership. Connie Carlson and Cory Mohwinkel began the Pony Pre-School in 2008. This has been and continues to be an outstanding success.

In 1999 the congregation re-instituted the Village System. All the households of the church were organized into 12 months in order to facilitate finding volunteers to be ushers, readers and coffee makers on Sunday

mornings. The system has evolved into a very effective volunteer program with a village leader in charge of each month.

In January of 2000, Chris Berthelsen, the Associate in Ministry (AIM) in Youth and Family Ministry resigned after 8 years of very effective, passionate and creative ministry at Bethlehem. Her departure was felt deeply by many, young and old alike. Chris returned to Luther Seminary full time to pursue her life-time goal of ordained ministry.

The year 2000 marked the beginning of the re-establishment of our partnership with the Image Lutheran Parish, in the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania. Bethlehem had been one of the first in the synod to establish ties with a church in this area. Now, as several congregations in the St. Paul Area Synod are starting the Iringa Companionship Project, Bethlehem is renewing its commitment to Image.

The year 2001 saw more changes as Ronda Renee Koch was hired as a new AIM Youth and Family Director. A new Yamaha Grand Piano was purchased for the sanctuary and the basement fellowship hall was remodeled. The congregation said farewell to both Music Director John Albright and Youth and Family Director Ronda Renee Koch in the same year.

Two major events which highlighted the year 2002 were the Bethlehem Choir Reunion, under the leadership of former choir director Eileen Meader, drawing 75 people for a reunion choir concert, and the establishment of the Bethlehem Foundation, an endowment fund set up for the purpose of serving Bethlehem's mission. The foundation is served by a board of seven people, under the legal guidance of attorney Dwight Cummins. Later in 2002 the congregation hired a new Youth and Family Director named Tom Graff.

At the beginning of 2003 a new organist and choir director was hired named Roy Henderson. Roy continued to be our director until his death in 2009, providing inspired direction to the choirs, leadership from the organ bench, and coordination of worship planning. Also in 2003 Pastor Larson was granted a three-month sabbatical from the congregation during the months of June, July and August. During this time Pastor Larson participated in continuing education events at the Christos Center and in Colorado. He also traveled with church member Jeff Haviland to our sister congregation, Image Lutheran Parish, in the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania. During Pastor Larson's sabbatical the congregation was ably served by Pastor Dick Borgstrom.

2004 was a year of reflection and inspiration as the congregation engaged in a two-phase visioning process with the aid of TeamWise Works consulting. Phase One took place in May, with the theme of "Taking the Pulse of the Congregation." Listening groups were formed, and a great deal of helpful

information was gained from members of the congregation about the future needs of our church. Phase Two of the process took place in October with the writing of our Values, Purpose and Vision statement. The following is the statement which arose from this month of intense work.

OUR VALUES – Bethlehem is...

- *an open door, welcoming all*
- *a place to receive Gods unconditional grace and love*
- *a community responding in love and service*

OUR PURPOSE *The purpose of Bethlehem is to nourish people in faith so that all know God’s promises and feel God’s love.*

OUR VISION *By the year 2010 we will serve 100,000 souls in faith and love in the community and around the world with the gifts we have received from God.*

The year 2005 was an exciting year of discovery as we determined our course based on our new vision. Youth and Family Director Tom Graff resigned to take on another assignment in January. This began a conversation about future staffing needs. It was determined that Bethlehem would be best served by a Ministries Coordinator, who worked with communication and volunteer coordination, and a full time ordained pastor who focused on Youth and Family Ministry. At this time the property next door to the church became available for purchase. These new opportunities truly seemed to be signs from God that his spirit was ready to move among us. There was also much potential for growth for Bethlehem since a new development west of the City of Bayport was expected to bring many new households to the community.

Bethlehem hired a full time Ministries Coordinator, Jean Groppoli, who began work in August, 2005. The Bethlehem Call Committee interviewed and selected Rev. Karen Williams for call to the position of second pastor, focusing on Youth and Family ministry in November of 2005. The house next door to the church was purchased and several groups of people within the congregation worked hard all summer to prepare it for use for an outreach program of some kind. The house is now called Dane’s Place. It is a family shelter house, named after Dane Johnson, a young marine from the congregation, who had a passion for under-privileged children. Dane was killed tragically in a motorcycle accident in September of 2005. Dane’s Place shelter house has served many families in transition ever since. It is a key outreach tool of our congregation. Dane’s Place has also given rise to the annual Pig Roast fundraiser, which has become a major community event to raise awareness and support of the Dane’s Place ministry.

In 2007 the decision was made to begin a Saturday night worship service. This service was held in the fellowship hall. It was more informal in style, with power-point worship slides and casual folk-style music. Chuck Davis and Susan Nielson provided music for this service for four years, until the service was discontinued in 2011.

After Roy Henderson passed away, and after the beginning of a severe economic recession, the congregation began to feel the financial pressure to reduce expenses. Pastor Karen Williams took over the duties of the music director and became organist and choir director in addition to her pastoral duties. During the years of 2008 to 2010 the congregation experienced many financial challenges. Painful reductions in staff and salaries and other expenses needed to be made. In June of 2010 after having to go half-time, Jean Groppoli resigned her position as Ministries Coordinator, in order to pursue full-time work elsewhere.

In May of 2010, Pastor Larson received his Doctor of Ministry degree in Congregational Leadership and Mission from Luther Seminary in St. Paul. From Pastor Larson's work and his doctoral thesis, a new theme for Bethlehem was established, "KOINONIA, A Church in Partnership: With God, With Each Other, and With the World."

During the years of 2009-10 the congregation went through a study of human sexuality as the ELCA was deliberating over the status of same-sex committed relationships, and the role of homosexual clergy in the church. The Bethlehem church council, after in-depth study and reflection, decided to conduct a survey at the 2010 annual meeting. The survey revealed that the congregation was divided 50/50 over the issues, which reflected the state of the overall ELCA church. Bethlehem has remained a strong partner with the ELCA. Members have agreed to disagree over the issues and still be a worshipping community together under one Lord. In January of 2012, Bethlehem held a special congregational meeting to vote on two questions, "Will we affirm same-gender marriages in our congregation?" And "will we support the pastor if he/she chooses to conduct a same-gender wedding off the church premises?" Both questions passed by a 2 to 1 margin.

In the summer of 2010 the congregation hired Emily Bruflat as the new music director. She assumed the duties of choir director and organist. In October of 2011 her hours were expanded to include direction of the hand bell choir and the Sunday School music program. Emily continued with the congregation until she accepted a call to another congregation in 2015.

In the fall of 2010 Pastor Larson was granted a sabbatical to go to Tanzania, Africa, in order to be the pastor/teacher at the Tumaini University in Iringa.

In January of 2011 another exciting outreach ministry was begun, the Second Sunday Supper. On the second Sunday of every month Bethlehem serves a delicious free community meal to anyone who wants to come. 50-75 people are served every month.

Also in January of 2011 a Mission Renewal Team was formed to work in conjunction with the St. Paul Area Synod Mission Renewal Program. Four other synod congregations worked together with Bethlehem in a cohort, studying ways to listen to God, to each other, and to the community.

In May of 2011 the difficult decision was made to discontinue the associate pastor position. Pastor Karen Williams was granted a three-month sabbatical after which she then pursued another call.

During the summer of 2011 a Youth and Family Task Force was formed to design a new model for Youth and Family ministry at Bethlehem. The recommendations from this task force were used to hire a new part-time Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministries.

Amy Peterson was hired in 2012 to assume the Children, Youth and Family responsibilities. During this time the church offered the Bethlehem Children's Ministries, (BCM) an after-school program for grade school age kids on Wednesday afternoons. Currently this program is called "Bethlehem After School Kids." In early 2018 Amy Peterson resigned to take a position in another church. The church then hired Katie Engelking in the fall of 2018 to be the new Children, Youth, and Family Coordinator. During the interim between the two directors the Youth and Family programs were ably led and organized by volunteer, Jenny Schoolman.

After Emily Bruflat resigned in 2015 the church hired St. Olaf College graduate David Anderson to the position of Worship and Music Director. David stayed for two years before moving on to graduate school. From 2017 to the present we have been served by Gustavus Adolphus College graduate David Lim. David will be pursuing his doctoral degree in 2019.

In the summer of 2018, Pastor Rich Larson was granted his third sabbatical, after having been at Bethlehem for 22 years. During this sabbatical Pastor Larson served as an Ambassador for the Bega Kwa Bega program in the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania.

Currently the congregation operates with a Mission Statement that revolves around the image of a tree and its four major parts. The roots of the tree represent the WORSHIP and Music Ministry of the congregation, where our

faith is fed. The trunk of the tree represents the STEWARDSHIP of the congregation, the structure that holds up and supports the entire tree. The fruits of the tree represent the MINISTRY of the congregation where we take care of each other, we learn, and we serve. The branches of the tree represent the outreach and MISSION of the church, where we connect in partnership with the community and world.

Our vision statement is, "We are a church in partnership: with God, with Each Other, and with the World."