



Lutheran churches grow into 1 in north Lincoln

BY ERIN ANDERSEN / Lincoln Journal Star | Posted: Friday, September 11, 2009 11:20 pm

The new Spirit of Hope Church is more than a partnership between Nebraska's largest ELCA church and a tiny congregation in a northwest Lincoln neighborhood.

It is a love story, says the Rev. Mary Jensen, coordinating pastor of the new church.

"It is something the Holy Spirit was calling us to do," says the Rev. Larry Arganbright, lead pastor at Sheridan Lutheran and now Spirit of Hope churches.

Spirit of Hope is the result of a merger between Sheridan Lutheran and the former Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Belmont.

Last week, Prince of Peace closed its doors after 49 years at the corner of 12th and Benton streets in Belmont.

This weekend, the new church - Spirit of Hope - holds its first services at 9:30 and 11 a.m. in a rented storefront building at 5801 N.W. First St., in the Highlands.

The new congregation will be a mix of Prince of Peace and Sheridan members, as well as newcomers searching for an ELCA church in the rapidly growing northwest quadrant of the city.

The story - two stories, actually - begins on opposite ends of Lincoln.

Prince of Peace Church members are contemplating the small church's future. With 175 members, only about 80 of those active, the congregation is getting older.

"The church wasn't shrinking, but it wasn't growing either," said Saundra Frerichs, a Prince of Peace member for the past 17 years. "It was a concern for most of us. We wanted to increase what we were offering to the community and what we're accomplishing at the church."

The existing church lot was too small to build on. The congregation contemplated moving or building elsewhere.

"We were not getting very far on it," Jensen said..

Meanwhile Sheridan Lutheran faced the opposite problem. Its congregation was growing - fast. During the past 10 years, worship attendance has tripled, Arganbright said.

And although it has only been six years since Sheridan Lutheran moved into its massive facility at 70th Street and Old Cheney Road, it has already outgrown it, he said.

So Sheridan Lutheran considered its options: As a regional church, could it start a satellite congregation in another area of Lincoln, or "plant" an entirely new ELCA church?

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Then the Nebraska Synod of the ELCA asked Sheridan Lutheran to "birth a new congregation so we could replicate our DNA," Arganbright recalled.

Arganbright contacted Jensen to let her know Sheridan Lutheran was considering starting a new ELCA, possibly in its area of town. Over the course of the conversation, the idea of partnership between the big and little churches emerged.

That was two years ago.

Since then there have been meetings, committees and votes. Sheridan and Prince of Peace members have embarked on joint missions, such as The Barnabas Project in Belmont, a store offering free clothes to neighborhood residents. They have become friends.

On July 27, 2008, the proposal to close Prince of Peace and merge with Sheridan Lutheran to create Spirit of Hope was put to a vote of the Belmont congregation. An overwhelming 91 percent of the members voted yes, Jensen said.

"They are very open to new things," Arganbright said of Prince of Peace members. "They have a passion to want it to grow."

And Sheridan, with an average 1,500 people a week at its Sunday services and an average age of its members at 28, has a history of attracting people, particularly younger families, Arganbright said.

"This isn't Sheridan North," Arganbright said. "It is a brand new congregation, a joint project of Prince of Peace and Sheridan Lutheran."

It will offer a blending of worship styles from both churches. Already, the choirs have merged. And before the month's end, Spirit of Hope will begin Wednesday at the Well, modeled much like Sheridan's popular Wednesday evening education, worship and family-time program.

"The positive part is that people are not leaving. The church is not coming apart. It is growing and changing," Frerichs said.

To date, more than 60 Prince of Peace members have told Jensen they will join Spirit of Hope. A good number of Sheridan's north Lincoln families are also planning to join the church. Both Jensen and Arganbright say they hope the new church will attract others who are perhaps not affiliated with any church.

And although the Highlands is a bit of a drive from Belmont, Spirit of Hope will continue the mission presence started by Prince of Peace and Sheridan Lutheran.

"What we are seeing is a beautiful love story coming together to form this new congregation in the work of God's kingdom," Jensen said.

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