

## *A Vision for Good Shepherd Lutheran Church*

### *January 2004*

*This is a narrative about Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, written in January 2014 by Mary Jones (not her real name) who has been a member of the congregation for five years.*

It's a cold, snowy day and I'm pulling my car up to the covered entrance at Good Shepherd's door. I come in this way often. I remember that I first came to Good Shepherd through the back door on a weekday morning. Now I use the covered entryway to bring my wheelchair bound 4year-old son in for his Tuesday-Thursday playgroup, Parents Day Out. The church provides baby-sitting for the parents and we get together for coffee and talk. I couldn't bring him here in bad weather if it weren't for that covered entrance. It's so easy to get in and out, and the elevator at the end of the building near the entrance lets us get anywhere in the church.

That back door - that's how our family came to Good Shepherd. It was one of Good Shepherd's "back door" ministries that first got us involved.

Actually, an older neighbor who belongs to Good Shepherd invited me. We'd met when we moved onto her block, and she welcomed us with a pot of soup and some homemade bread. As we got to know each other better, she and her husband offered to baby-sit our kids so that my husband and I could have a night out. Their grandchildren live out of town and they don't see them very often. We're a long way from both our kids' grandparents and love having adopted grandparents here in town. They're not just babysitters, though. We've gone to places like Carillon Park and Cox Arboretum, and we've been bowling, miniature golfing, and picnicking. Many other older couples in the congregation have been working with the local schools to help pair seniors and young families to do just the same kinds of things. Sometimes several couples will drop off their kids and have a night out at the Frazee or dinner and a movie while the "grandmas and grandpas" look after the little ones.

Anyway, my neighbor's the one who told me about the Parents Day Out group and went with me the first time and made sure I found my way around and met people. I quickly found a group of mends and one thing led to another. Our family has been involved at Good Shepherd for five years now.

Being a part of Good Shepherd means so much to me. I've come to see that prayer is the backbone of our congregation. People are diligent and faithful in their prayer lives and understand the importance of their personal and group relationship with God. Our sanctuary and prayer garden are often open for private meditation We have been through difficult times and joyful times, but we know that He has been there in our midst at all times. Several of the ladies planted the beautiful prayer garden we have in the courtyard more than ten years ago, and they still take care of it. They also share their gardening skills with other gardening enthusiasts. Some of the Sunday School children have planting projects, too. Sometimes when I just need a few quiet moments, the garden is where I go.

Of course, we have lots of opportunities for everyone - young and old - to get together and have fun. For years now we've had an annual talent show, chicken noodle dinner, pumpkin pie fellowship, burning of the greens, and simple soup suppers and worship during Lent. My husband and I are looking forward to Cupid's Caper, a dinner dance held every February; and my whole family likes the family summer campout and the fishing derby.

Everyone knows what's going on at Good Shepherd, thanks to our full-time Communications Director who is accountable for all parish communications, including the weekly and monthly parish newsletters - sent to every home electronically. We have a working relationship with the digital design and TV production classes at the nearby high school to help produce printed and broadcast media to communicate our message. Some of the students in these classes have even begun to come through the back door to some of our youth activities.

All through the building television monitors and bulletin boards explain the church's programs, ministries, and events. The congregation uses print and electronic media extensively. Just yesterday I received my e-mail Staff newsletter, a flyer announcing the new education programs, and an automated phone call for the prayer chain list. There's an automated calling system for quick communication. Last week we received a reminder call about the special worship schedule for this coming Sunday. Newspaper articles about happenings in the congregation appear almost weekly. But the best communication is the "word-of-mouth" excitement shared by members with their friends.

We average almost 500 worshippers each week. That's almost 60% of our membership. My family and I go to church services almost every week, usually to the contemporary service Sunday at 10:00 a.m. because we like the music and the contemporary language. There are teams of worship leaders who design and lead the worship according to the Biblical themes of the day, and the music is always inspiring and upbeat. The heart of every service is the inspirational sermon. Sometimes we want to get an early start so we join the more traditional service earlier in the morning. There's also a Sunday late-morning service, which is a blend of the traditional and contemporary Lutheran liturgy. When we can't come to worship on Sunday, we can go to a simple Saturday evening worship service. If the weather is nice the Saturday service is held in the courtyard. No matter which service we attend, our children often leave during the 'service for a separate kids "learn and worship" time, which they really enjoy.

Four times a year we have a special service to celebrate our unity as a congregation. In fact we just had one for All-Saints Sunday - celebrating the lives of the saints we had lost in the past year and supporting each other in our sorrows and joys. Everyone was invited to stay for a "Celebration of the Saints" dinner. There is a group now planning for the Pentecost Festival Celebrating the Gifts of the Spirit. At that service we will recognize and honor all the people who give of their time, talent, and treasure to our congregation. All of the worship services are centered in our Lutheran understanding of the Gospel - emphasizing grace, Word, and sacraments.

All of the worship services have outstanding music, planned by our Director of Music. Our children sing in a children's choir, and there are choirs for older kids, bell choirs, praise teams, instrumental and vocal ensembles, and traditional choirs. The youth group has a praise band that plays for the Saturday evening and some Sunday worship services.

We work hard to make visitors feel welcome. There is a group that follows up with every visitor with a letter or a phone call, and often a personal visit - just to let them know that we appreciated their visit and that we hope they find a church home. There is also a group who keeps track of attendance. I remember one winter a few years ago when we hadn't been to church for a few Sundays because the kids were sick, someone from the congregation called just to make sure everything was OK. And, if you call the church you don't get a recording. Many congregational members volunteer their time to make anyone who contacts Good Shepherd feel welcome.

No one falls through the cracks. For our senior members, teams of Stephen ministers and our visitation pastor provide home visits, regular greeting cards, birthday remembrances, meals, and communion visits. Our seniors say they do so well because the congregation never thinks of them as "shut-ins" and is always looking for ways to include them. After every congregational dinner volunteers take food and the good wishes of our congregation to our seniors. I understand a committee is studying the possibility of opening a senior care center a few days a week. Our parish nurse makes home visits, does health screenings, prays with those she visits, and serves communion. She also visits families who can use a little help as new parents. The congregation is convinced that our nurse can be a key to another back door, helping people get to know God's love.

And when one of our members dies, the congregation is there to surround the family in love and lift them up in prayer. One of our unsung ministries, the funeral care group, makes sure that all of the details are covered, from ushering, to music, to seating, and they provide meals for the family. They also make sure that family members receive appropriate grief care.

The Good Shepherd facility is a busy place and often the parking lot is full to overflowing. I think that's at least partly because of the many programs the congregation offers as a part of the life-long learning experience. There is a full schedule of classes for young people and adults on Sunday mornings, and many classes are offered during the week as well. Our members have learned how important it is to dig into God's Word and build their lives on His promises. There are also morning and evening women's circles and service groups, numerous Bible study groups, and youth programs. All of these groups help people identify and use their spiritual gifts and abilities to care for others inside and outside the congregation.

We are pleased as a congregation to be able to open our doors to many community organizations. As long as their goals are consistent with our mission, we make space available. That's why we have been blessed with such an excellent facility - so we do have it to share. Dance groups, support groups, neighborhood groups, computer groups - all are welcome. The restroom and shower facilities on the third floor help make our building useful in many ways. Our outreach ministries group is exploring the possibility of being part of a

coalition of congregations that provide temporary shelter and meals for homeless families. Our congregational administrator makes sure our facility is maintained and ready to be shared. Whenever outside groups are in our facility, we keep them informed about our ministries. We're always looking for ways to help outsiders find their way inside.

The boy scouts, cub scouts, girl scouts, and brownies meet every week, and the congregation is always looking for ways to assist them. Several of our friends have come to Good Shepherd through that back door of scouting. The scouts look for ways to be of service to the congregation as well. They help maintain the landscape, rake the leaves, and weed the flower beds. Sometimes it's just a volunteer service project, and sometimes the congregation pays them to help them raise funds for their special projects.

I mentioned the elevator earlier. It was installed as part of a program the congregation called Building to Serve II that was completed a few years ago. The church offices are now on the ground floor east end of the education building and all of the other changes to our facilities planned back in the 1990s have been realized.

The office is always an active place. In fact as we add staff and new programs, sometimes we wonder where we're going to put all the people. I already mentioned that we have a staff person who is the congregational administrator. There's also a staff person who identifies and cultivates the gifts and talents of the members and makes sure people get involved where they want to be and where they are needed. But everyone on our staff is skilled at getting people involved, and when we do get involved, our staff always makes us feel appreciated.

We have many programs for our young people. The congregation celebrates key life stages for families with children - baptism, first communion, confirmation, and high school graduation. A fellowship program for 4th and 5th graders helps this age group begin to learn what it means to be active disciples. The Head 2 Heart (catechism) program is flourishing for young people who are searching for greater depth of faith, service, and fellowship in grades 6-8. There is a thriving youth group that meets regularly. The youth take an active part in worship services, and even coordinate monthly Saturday evening worship experiences. Each summer they spearhead a drive for a mission trip, and every third year they have a major project to raise the funds to take as large a group as possible to their national youth gathering. An "early-riser" teen club is supported by adults from several congregations and provides teens with breakfast, music, and an inspirational message once a week. The congregation wants to show our youth how important they are in the family of God. We stay connected with our college students who are away from home by sending them care packages, cards, and e-mail newsletters. And we know how important a church family is to students and young adults who are away from home, so we have ministries that reach out to students and young adults in our community.

We're looking forward to having our children grow through the stages of faith because we feel we have a whole congregation helping us. A wonderful by-product of the youth programs has been that parents have really gotten to know each other well. Besides working together on the youth projects, we have fellowship support groups to help each other with the

challenges of parenting.

I mentioned earlier that several people were trying to start new programs. That's a great thing about this congregation. It's easy to get things done. The Church Council meets just a few times a year to make sure, along with the senior Pastor and staff, that everything we do supports our long-term vision. All of the work of the congregation is organized into ministry groups for Worship and Witness, Lifelong Learning, Parish Life, Outreach, and Resources. Each ministry group is led by a paid staff person who is accountable to the Senior Pastor for the activities (and results) of the group. Our young moms group is working with the Outreach Ministry team to find ways to be supportive of families with new babies. Sometimes as we evaluate our ministries, we find that we no longer have the resources, interests, and talents to support them. We've learned to celebrate their success, let them go, and look for new ways to serve.

People care about my family. My husband wasn't very excited at first about this church thing, but people have helped him get involved in some recreational activities. The church softball team and volleyball team and golf outings got him involved with a number of the guys in the congregation. They invited him to be a part of an early morning breakfast study fellowship. I can't believe it when he's out the door for Bible study at 6:30 a.m. once a week, but he rarely misses.

There are all kinds of home groups, special interest groups, and support groups. People travel together, study together, read books together, dine together, bike together, or exercise together. Some meet almost every week. Others are more informal. Our congregation has learned that as a congregation (just like individuals) we have many and various spiritual gifts. We are working hard to find ways to share our gifts and enhance ministry by working with community agencies and other congregations. We have joint choir concerts (exchange concerts) and we share pastors and sermons. We share education programs, including vacation Bible school, with neighboring congregations.

Good Shepherd is involved in many community outreach programs - Jeremiah's Letter and the St Paul's lunches, Habitat for Humanity, Learning Connection, and the Hygiene pantry all receive enthusiastic support. We spend several-Sundays each year highlighting the possibilities for outreach, and the climate of the congregation encourages people to find their unique gifts for ministry outside our walls. Beginning a new outreach ministry is pretty simple. Someone comes up with an idea, gets a quick approval from the appropriate ministry leader, gathers a group of like-minded folks, and begins their work. It amazes me that the church runs without a lot of standing committees and meetings. Our people would much rather be involved in planning, communicating, and doing. If resources are needed, they are provided. Congregational giving always seems to cover the needs. People eagerly volunteer because they know exactly what will be expected of them and how long they will be needed to work.

For example, my husband is pretty handy with tools and enjoys home repair projects. He and a few of his friends help older members and neighbors with minor repairs around their

homes. They hope to expand this ministry to a cooperative venture with other local congregations to create a home repair "talent pool" directory. Some of the members of the Habitat for Humanity ministry are sharing their expertise in this area as well.

Giving to others was a new concept for my family and me, but we have learned from the examples and testimonies of many others in the congregation. My family has learned that stewardship is a way of life, and we try hard to practice proportional giving. Sometimes it's a stretch, but we always seem to have all we need. As a whole, the congregation gives generously from its resources (at least 20%) to benevolence programs through the national church, our synod and many local groups.

Sixty years of ministry. My family has only been here for five years, but I can see why Good Shepherd has survived and thrived. It has a wonderful sense of its tradition, but it also is bold in seeking its future. We hold on to those things that are good and true and lasting, but we also understand that we have to change with the times. Looking back and looking forward keeps us focused on the vision of ministry that God has for us. He created us; He gave us our gifts; and now we seek His will for our lives, so that we might serve Him and share His message of salvation. I rejoice that my neighbor opened that "back door" for our family, for it has brought us to the front door of His Kingdom.