

Bethel Lutheran Church - Congregational Meeting (March 15, 2015)

Background information:

“Be not afraid.” – every messenger of God ever

Anyone who has paid honest attention to Bethel’s finances, worship attendance, and the state of our physical property over the past decade or more should be aware that these three areas have been out-of-synch for quite some time. Without devoting a lot of wasted energy towards finger-pointing or blame, the result of this situation has been a slow and inevitable whittling away at our financial reserves as we have sought to maintain our presence in this specific place despite an inability to afford to do so.

This situation reached an important milestone in early February 2015 when a combination of lower-than-expected offerings and higher-than-expected bills used up the last of our financial reserves. From that point forward, we began operating “hand-to-mouth.” Please note: this occurred despite the proactive action we took of passing a budget for 2015 with an aggressive 20%+ reduction in our expenses from 2014 (that reduction was projected to place us in the black based on prior years’ revenues and expenses, but is not holding up early in the year).

Though it might be possible for us to continue to operate hoping that things will somehow work themselves out, it is the unanimous decision of your Council and Pastor that we need to begin to have candid and open dialogue about what direction we want for Bethel’s future. Even if things turn around and the projected budget works out for 2015 (which is possible), it is clear that we have allowed ourselves to operate in survival mode for far too long. God wants us to thrive, not merely survive.

While taking this conversation to a congregational level may seem “fast” to some, the truth is that we’ve been dancing around the edges of these topics for years – well before I began serving as your pastor in January 2012. Until we ran out of reserves, though, it’s been easy for us to avoid fully engaging in looking at these realities. We no longer have that excuse.

In this packet of information you will find a brief explanation of 5 different options we can explore as a community of faith. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages, and we need to better understand as a group where our collective passion lies. We cannot continue to “play it safe” by following old patterns that are, ironically, about as far from safe as we’d imagine. Please read over this information, pray about it, contact me or any Council members as you so desire, and attend any of the house meetings we have scheduled for the next 2 weeks. It is critical that we enter into this discernment with open hearts and a willingness to be challenged by the Holy Spirit – and I include myself in that challenge.

Blessings in Christ’s name,

Pastor Chris Ode

Structural/Facility Concerns for Bethel Lutheran Church

As much of this conversation centers on the current and future use of our facility, it is important to take a moment to honestly assess the state of our building. The following is a partial list of repairs/renovations which need to be addressed (somehow) if we are to continue to operate out of this space:

- Upper/Lower Fireside Room: insect and water damage has weakened (possibly severely) a main support and needs to be replaced in the near future – likely mold and additional rot problems related to this as well
- Narthex: water damage in multiple ceiling locations indicates a high likelihood of rot and/or mold
- Offices: dry rot in the floor outside of the Church Office (growing soft spot)
- Chapel: multiple cracked windows
- Fellowship Hall: multiple cracked windows, torn window treatments, high likelihood of asbestos in the ceiling
- Kitchen: numerous equipment concerns related to the age of the appliances
- Plumbing: multiple fixtures require significant “run-time” before they run clear and without rust – no fire suppression system installed in the building
- Siding: multiple locations with flaking paint or damaged siding
- Windows: nearly all are single pane (significantly increasing our utility bills)
- ADA accessibility: as our congregation ages, the lack of ramps and/or elevators is increasingly becoming an issue
- Organ loft: rat damage to the organ eventually needs to be repaired
- Multiple locations: numerous examples of broken furniture, severely soiled carpets/flooring, or other aesthetic and/or safety concerns
- Parking lot: numerous potholes and cracks creating a potentially unstable walking environment, inadequate lighting, problems with people dumping trash off of the lower lot

Any option we choose that entails continuing to conduct our ministry from the current facility needs to also include a realistic plan for addressing these concerns in a timely manner.

Option 1: Continue on as we have and hope for the best

Candidly, this option is nearly impossible to follow without eventually having to return to this conversation at a later date. We would continue to move forward under our current budget with the expectation that “things will work out” and that we’ll receive enough offerings and rent each month to cover our expenses.

Things to know about this option:

- I cannot continue as your pastor under this approach. The stress of not knowing “will I receive a paycheck this month?” is incredibly distracting and has already begun to impact my sleep and other health matters. That said, I care deeply about this community and would be willing to stay through the process of calling a new pastor.
 - Any unexpected and/or large expense incurred during the year would leave us quite vulnerable financially.
 - The issues listed under “Structural/Facility Concerns for Bethel Lutheran Church” would need to be addressed – some of them in the very near future (e.g. the Upper/Lower Fireside Room damage).
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Option 2: Close the church and disseminate the proceeds to other ministries

Fairly self-explanatory: we close the doors, sell the facilities, and donate the proceeds to various outside ministries (e.g. Compass Alliance, Hopelink, Northwest Washington Synod, etc).

Things to know about this option:

- Personally, I have zero interest in this approach – but you need to know that it’s there.
 - Our membership would transfer to other congregations in the area – perhaps en masse, perhaps not.
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Option 3: Continue in this location and deliberately focus on a ministry of hospitality and welcome

Over the years, we have made a deliberate effort to welcome “outside” ministries and organizations into our facilities. This has been especially true over the past 3 years as we’ve expanded to over 2 dozen groups who regularly meet in this space. This form of hospitality/welcoming ministry is quite valid, and we could choose to make this our focus as a worshipping community.

Currently, “tenant” groups provide over \$40,000 in revenue each year, and the possibility exists to expand on this amount through rental increases and the incorporation of new groups (and new rents). Additionally, including these groups and the greater Shoreline community in a series of annual giving campaigns would provide significant additional income each year that a campaign is conducted.

By increasing our efforts to connect with the other groups we could build a truly multicultural form of ministry rarely seen anywhere.

Things to know about this option:

- The issues listed under “Structural/Facility Concerns for Bethel Lutheran Church” would need to be addressed – some of them in the very near future (e.g. the Upper/Lower Fireside Room damage).
- Given the large number of tenant organizations we work with (and the need to expand on this for financial reasons), it is imperative that we reorganize our staffing with a focus on property management.
- That said, we don’t have the financial resources to simply hire a property manager without making further cuts elsewhere – and the most feasible option would be to reduce my call from full-time to something else. This would allow us to hire someone who could devote their energy to maintaining and improving the facility, bringing in new tenant organizations (which we need from a financial standpoint), and managing the details of renting to so many groups at once (e.g. scheduling, complaints, repairs, etc).
- With this sort of cut to my position, I would seek outside employment (part or full-time, depending on availability) in order to supplement my salary, though I’d be willing to stay on to lead Sunday worship and basic pastoral care.
- We would need to begin regular annual giving campaigns focused on encouraging donations from individuals in the tenant groups as well as the larger community – a campaign managed by someone other than myself. Casting our net wider in this way would bring in financing unavailable to use were we to focus on increasing rent alone.
- In theory, a blend of congregant offerings, increased rental revenues, and regular annual campaigns would allow us to continue to operate this site and eventually build a

new form of ministry from within it – though this latter part will be dependent on the energy of volunteers as well as my own time when not at this hypothetical other job.

- Some of our tenant groups are clearly interested in keeping the relationship at just that “landlord/tenant”, so we’d need to be honest with ourselves about just what would be possible when it came to collaboration with them.

Option 4: Move the congregation to a new site (elsewhere or on a portion of the current plot) and use the proceeds to focus on a combination of building the worshiping body and various forms of outreach.

In practice, this option would see us reinvent Bethel as a form of “new start” in the community: rather than focusing on the building as a tool to be used in its current form, we would convert it into assets we could use for ministry in a different form. There are several ways to go about doing this, and we’d need to work together to find the right fit for our community.

Things to know about this approach:

- We would need to discern what form we wanted a “new Bethel” to take (House meetings? Renting a storefront? Buying a small building?) as well as where it would occur.
- Ironically, it would be easier for us to expand to multiple worship services in a new site than in our current one (since we’d no longer be renting out space to other groups during the “plum” times for additional services). I have long been of the opinion that providing multiple diverse gathering opportunities is our best bet for expanding Bethel.
- Depending on the form we decided to use, we could approach some of our current tenants (e.g. Aaron’s Place, Lutheran Counseling Network) about coming with us since they primarily use space at different times than we do (weekday mornings vs evenings and weekends) – this would allow us to offset some of our financial costs as well as continue some of these existing relationships.
- Realistically, we would lose some existing members were we to leave this location.
- The arrival of Light Rail in 2023 coupled with our location (large lot on a main thoroughfare with bus access and numerous walkable businesses) virtually guarantees a sizeable return were we to choose to sell the property.
 - Related to that: please note that this option does not include “parceling out” the existing site – doing so is akin to Option 1 in that it attempts to maintain the status quo as much as possible rather than commit to a new direction.

Option 5: Go into deliberate conversation with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church (Shoreline), Bethesda Lutheran Church (Montlake Terrace), or a similar congregation and explore a merger or similar method of pooling our resources together.

Two of our sister congregations are wrestling with financial concerns similar to ours. We could choose to engage with them in deliberate conversation about a merger, yoking (i.e. multiple congregations served by the same pastor and/or staff), or other area ministry approach.

Things to know about this option:

- Bringing together multiple congregations takes time, energy, and a commitment to collaborative ministry. While we built towards this outcome, we would still need to deal with the day-to-day realities of managing and maintaining our property (possibly including some of the facility-related concerns brought up previously).
- Following a merger (for example), there would be a time of transition as we learned to live within the new relationship – as the experience of Edmonds Lutheran Church shows, this can take several years to reach mature stability.
- There is no guarantee that a partnership, merger, or similar arrangement would result in us keeping the current facility – we’d need to enter these conversations knowing that we might wind up moving ourselves to a different location in the end.
- Realistically, we would lose some existing members were we to leave this location.
- I have no idea what would happen regarding pastoral leadership: it is possible that some combination of the current clergy in these sites would remain, it is also possible that there would need to be a complete change of pastor(s).

Thank you for taking the time to read over these options and some initial thoughts concerning each of them. This is by no means the last word on any of this, but rather an attempt at giving you the basics before beginning our conversation. Again, let us take solace in the words of so many of God’s messengers whenever they approached humanity about “the big stuff”: “Be not afraid.” We have many options available to us. We have many resources that we can tap into to make something amazing. But before we can do that, we need to first come together as a mature, loving, community in Christ – willing to ponder hard questions and look our own ministry in the face. God is not done with us – not by a longshot.

Blessings to you all: it is an honor to serve with you.