

Bethel Story First Years through 1948

The first Norwegian Lutheran group in Hudson was a mission of the Norwegian Synod. It was served by the pioneer pastor, the Reverend Lauritz Larsen. He was a native of Norway and came to America in November, 1857 with his family. He was called to serve the new settlement of Rush River in Pierce County, Wisconsin. He learned English and shortened his first name to "Laur." As a mission pastor, he traveled extensively organizing congregations, conducting worship services and administering the sacraments.

In Hudson, Pastor Larsen conducted services once a month. Services were held in a public hall in the downtown area and used the ritual of the Church of Norway. He left the area in 1859 and Hudson went without a regular pastor for several years. During this time, other pastors would occasionally stop to hold a service.

The first Lutheran minister to preach regularly to Hudson Norwegians was the Reverend O.J.K. Hagestad. He also served the Rush River Parish from 1863 to 1876.

On March 15, 1873 several Norwegian families met at a private home in Hudson to discuss the possibilities of organizing a congregation. It was agreed that a new congregation be formed and be named "Norsk Evangelsisk Luthersk Menighed Av Hudson og Omegnen" – the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Hudson and vicinity.

On March 18, 1873 a meeting was held at Olson Hall in Hudson and officers were elected. A.D. Olson, Ole Lake, Ole Gunderson and Ole Hammer were chosen as officers. The new congregation was now a reality.

On April 12, 1873 a meeting was held at the home of Ole Gunderson to form a committee of three to determine the best location for a church. Meetings were to be held the first Sunday of each month. It was decided to purchase the lot north of the St. Croix County Courthouse at a cost of \$375.00.

In April 1874, Kvindeforening (ladies society) was organized. The group met once a month at the home of a member. The meetings began with devotional time followed by sewing items that could be sold at a bazaar. This group of women were very progressive. When the second payment for the lot was due, the Kvindeforening had the funds to pay it.

Plans for the new church were drawn in February 1875. It was to be 30 feet wide and 75 feet long with a steeple. It was insured for \$1,500.

Reverend Hans J. Krogh gave the first sermon in the new church in 1876. He lived in Baldwin and held services every 10th Sunday in Hudson from 1876 to 1880. Even though the congregation had organized in 1873, it did not have a constitution until 1879. At that time the

name was changed to “The Norwegian Evangelical Congregation in Hudson and Community.” Reverend J. O. Scheie was the first resident pastor. He served from 1881 to 1882. Although he stayed only two years, he provided much inspirational help in making plans for the church. When he left, Pastor Krogh assumed the pastorate again and served the church from 1882 to 1888.

He was succeeded by Reverend J.H. T. Lee in 1888 who served the congregation from 1888 to 1894 and again from 1903 to 1918. Pastor Lee came from Norway in 1881 and graduated from Luther Seminary in 1888.

During this period the congregation was affiliated with the United Norwegian Lutheran Church. Under the leadership of Pastor Lee, a “Mandsforening” was formed - Lutheran Brotherhood and an “Ungdomsforening”- Young People’s Society was also formed, which later became the “Luther League.”

Around 1890, a steeple and chancel were added to the church.

Pastor Lee was followed by the Reverend Hans Fossness who served from 1894 to 1898. During this period the basement was added to provide more room for the growing Sunday School and for the installation of a modern heating plant. Also, at this time the name of the congregation was changed to “Bethel Norwegian Lutheran Congregation of Hudson.” The date was April 27, 1897. From this time forward, the church was to be known as “Bethel”- the Old Testament meaning of “The Place of God.”

At the turn of the century the Kvindeforening became the “Ladies Aid Society”.

Pastor Fossness was followed by Pastor Holm Holmsen who served from 1899 to 1903. In 1901 a lot was purchased for the purpose of building a parsonage. The Ladies of the Kvindeforening provided \$1,400 for the lot and building materials.

Pastor Lee returned to serve the congregation in 1903 and stayed there until 1918. He was followed by Pastor B.M. Brandfort, who served from 1918 to 1922, but there is little record of his service. These were difficult times for the church because the congregation was moving from the Norwegian language to English.

The Reverend Oscar Thompson was installed as Pastor of Bethel congregation on January 28, 1923, and his ministry lasted until 1948. There were 70 families in the congregation and worship services were conducted in English and Norwegian, but English was dominant.

After 1923, all church records were kept in English. Under Pastor Thompson’s direction, the school was reorganized with attendance and stewardship kept.

A decision was made to enlarge the church sanctuary in 1925. This was done by moving the chancel back and by building two transepts to give the church the shape of a cross.

In 1927, mission "circles" were organized under the "Women's Missionary Foundation" but separate from the "Ladies Aid."

Bethel organized its own Boy Scout Troop (Troop 140) in 1929. For many years, Alvin Weitkamp was its scoutmaster.

Pastor Thompson developed a weekly "Messenger" which went to all parish homes every Saturday. Church music was very important to Pastor Thompson. He directed and sang in the Senior Choir the entire time he was pastor.

A Junior Choir was started in 1938 by Edith Hanson/Sather. In 1947, the church bought a Hammond electric organ, and the organist was Edith Hanson Sather for many years.

In 1943, the disbanded Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Hudson presented Bethel with its replica of Thorvaldsen's "Christ" statue which was placed above the altar.

Pastor and Mrs. Thompson marked their twenty fifth anniversary as well twenty-five years as pastor of Bethel in 1948. During his time at Bethel the church had come of "age" - Bethel had been part of a two-church parish but now Bethel stood by itself.

Bethel Story 1948 through 1998

In 1952, a Sunday School addition was built behind the existing church, extending north. The two-story building was known as the "parish house."

In 1955 the congregation made the decision to erect a new building. It was voted on to construct on the site of the parsonage, just north of the building. The new structure would connect to the existing parish house. Services continued in the original building while the new building was being built.

First services in the beautiful new house of the Lord were May 10, 1959. Prominent on the new altar was the same replica of Thorvaldsen's "Christ" that had graced the former church. After the new building was completed, the original church was demolished.

The 1960's became a period of expansion. Membership grew more rapidly with more adequate space. A parish worker was called to assist the pastor. The congregation expanded their global vision to include sponsoring Rev. Richard Hueter serving in New Guinea. There was also expansion in communication. The congregation voted to have weekly broadcasts aired over radio station WAVN in Stillwater.

Bethel was blessed with a wonderful musical ministry. Pastor Thompson, Edith Hanson Sather and Pastor Scheide's wife, Martha, worked tirelessly at achieving and maintaining a high standard of music quality. In 1965, the congregation voted to purchase a pipe organ.

On October 8, 1967, the new Cassavant pipe organ was dedicated.

Women continued to play an integral role in the life of the congregation. With the advent of the American Lutheran Church in 1961, the term "Ladies Aid" gave way to American Lutheran Church Women (ALCW).

The house adjacent to the church on the north was purchased in 1965. This gave Bethel a quarter of a block. The house was named Bethel House and served as an annex for church activities for five years. In 1971 the decision was made to expand space for education and other activities. Plans were made and the north wing of the Sunday School building was built. The Bethel House was raised to make room for this expansion and the north parking lot.

In 1970, a full-time associate pastor was called. Rev Orrin Tietz accepted the call to share preaching and pastoral work alongside Rev Scheide.

In 1973, Bethel celebrated its Centennial Anniversary with a membership of slightly more than 1,300. That same year, Rev. Norman Scheide concluded 25 years of ministry at Bethel. Rev. L Donald Docken accepted the call as senior pastor, arriving in 1974. Rev Orrin Tietz concluded his ministry at Bethel that year.

Pastor Docken's 15 ½ year ministry at Bethel was a period of rapid growth in membership. He was assisted by seminary students but in 1976 the council recommended that staff be added.

In 1977, Albert Schilling was hired as an assisting pastor and Rhonda Shiell as youth director. Late in 1979, Rev. James Gronewold replaced Schilling and served as Bethel's associate pastor. In 1979, Bethel reached out beyond its own walls to support the United Mission Appeal and pledged a three-year commitment to sponsor a refugee family from Laos.

In 1983, with a membership of nearly 1,800, Bethel had a Sunday School enrollment of 400 students. Organizing classes for these many students each Sunday was no small task. It took many volunteers. Much credit is given to Cynthia Huntly for her 20 years of leadership as Sunday School Superintendent. Other key people in aiding her were Karen Pavlis, Barb Holt and Terri Wilcox.

In 1983, Associate Pastor Gronewold left Bethel and was replaced by Rev. Samuel Kochel who carried on the ministry started by Gronewold of adult education, youth, evangelism, visitation of shut-ins and planning congregational gatherings.

It became apparent that the congregation was outgrowing the church facility. In 1986, the congregation approved building plans and a capital fund-raising campaign got underway. In May, 1988, a groundbreaking ceremony for the church addition took place. On March 5, 1989, the new church addition was dedicated. Bethel had an enlarged narthex, an elevator, added restrooms, enlarged Fellowship Hall, additional Sunday School rooms, conference and scout rooms, new staff offices and a new workroom.

While amid construction and remodeling, the congregation had to meet several other challenges. Pastor Docken previously announced that he would be retiring that year, 1989, and Pastor Kochel subsequently offered his resignation and accepted another call. It became necessary to form two separate call committees, one to call an interim pastor to fill Rev. Kochel's position and one to call a senior pastor.

Rev. James Hartsoe was called to Interim Pastor. In September 1989, and the Rev Dennis Nelson accepted the call to become Bethel's Senior Pastor.

In the late 1980's, Bethel began a three-year commitment of time, talent, and money to the Phillips Neighborhood in Minneapolis. Other programs that Bethel became involved in were the Befriender Program, Via de Christo, Men's Fellowship breakfast, continuing Bible Studies, the long tradition of women's circles, as well as programs for youth.

In 1990, Pastor Karen Johnson accepted a call as Bethel's first female pastor. Her position was Associate Pastor in the ministry of life and growth. Her focus was programing, congregational life, worship, education and ministry, and visitation.

Also in 1990, the women of Bethel began the Scandinavian Food Fest. This event featured food and crafts that reflect Bethel's Scandinavian heritage. The two-day event raised funds which were used in several areas. The initial need was to purchase new tables for the fellowship hall, but the proceeds from the Scandinavian Food Fest later went on to help fund the refurbishing of the Fellowship Hall and kitchen, to support Luther Point Bible Camp and other projects.

In 1991, Bethel called a second associate pastor, making it the first time in Bethel's history that three pastors were on staff. Pastor Van Bredeson began serving in the ministry of education, youth, and family. He taught parenting classes, couple's communication classes and peer counseling. He put together youth activities that continue today: hiking, skiing, camping and canoeing. He introduced Bethel youth to mission trips. One of Pastor Van's other contributions was his recipe for caramel rolls. Each year at Easter he guided the high school youth in making rolls and selling them. The funds helped support youth activities. That tradition continues into 2023.

In 1988, the Befriender program started with training sessions conducted by the Wilder Foundation. In 1990, the council set a pattern for giving to missions beyond the confines of the congregation. This meant that benevolence giving would grow in proportion to the congregation's budgeted resources for mission efforts. In 1991, a Missions and Justice Committee was created to give focus to the congregation's social ministry efforts.

The Bethel Endowment Fund was created in 1996 to extend Bethel's ministry beyond the confines of its budget. Interest earned on the fund provides grants each year to support Christian religion, Christian charity and education for Christian life and service.

The love of great choral music has been evident at Bethel for many years. The tradition is due to many accomplished musicians who set standards in the early life of the congregation. Roberta Pominville was choir director for several different choirs, ending her musical leadership as the Senior Choir Director.

Delores Willi was the principal organist and involved in the church's musical ministry for 40 years. With her retirement in 1997, Layton (Skip) James was hired as organist and senior choir director. He had been principal keyboardist for the St Paul Symphony Orchestra.

Pastor Johnson left Bethel in 1997 to accept a call to Augustana Lutheran Church in Cumberland, WI.

The Women of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (WELCA) continue to serve Bethel as the women of the Kvindeforening did in the early days. The service is reflected in collecting of the Thank Offering which is sent to the national WELCA office for Lutheran World Relief. The service of this group is seen in the many colorful quilts that are sewn each year, displayed on the pews, and then sent to Lutheran World Relief for distribution. Clothing, food, and sundries are collected for local distribution and many families benefit from the "adopt a family" initiative at Christmas. The heart of Bethel's WELCA is the circle. They meet monthly for Bible study and offer services for WELCA projects.

Lenten Services at Bethel have always been well attended. In the mid-1990's a more informal style of worship was adopted. Holden Evening Prayer format and music was introduced. Sermons were dramatic characterizations of Biblical people and a pre-worship meal was served. This format of fellowship and worship has continued.

A highlight of the 125th year anniversary celebration of Bethel's beginning was the introduction of a musical setting of the liturgy, composed by organist Layton James. This was dedicated to the glory of God in honor of the 125th anniversary and the 40-year musical ministry of Delores Willi.

The mission statement summary adopted by Bethel's council in 1996, "Welcome, Equip, and Send" serves as a reminder that the congregation claims to welcome every person to a living faith in Jesus Christ; to equip people with a mature faith that works in real life, and to send people in service of others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Bethel Story 1998 through 2023

As stated by Pastor Dennis Nelson in his 1998 Annual report: "Bethel is a congregation that is *Alive in our Heritage and Hope*. That simple phrase is one that expresses well the spirit of this faith community during the year-long celebration of our 125 Anniversary year. Life. Heritage. Hope. The life that is shared by the people that constitute Bethel today is one that was shaped and made possible by the faithfulness of God and of the people God moved to establish this congregation. That is our heritage.

Moreover, the faithfulness of God is a reality, today, one that encourages us for this moment in history in which God calls for us to be faithful. God is stirring in us, urging us to be the faithful link between yesterday's church and those who will love and follow Jesus in the years to come. That is our hope.

Starting in 1998, Bethel's membership grew to just under 2,000. Bethel added a new position that year hiring Pam Stofferahn as the director of Christian education. Pam would go on to attend Seminary and was ordained in the ELCA in 2005.

Rev Joanne Sorenson was installed as Associate Pastor in July 1998. One of Pastor Joanne's unique contributions was the introduction of mission trips to Jamaica, then later to Tanzania. This has become a world vision gift to the congregation.

A task force formed in 1999 to study future space and facility needs. Pastor Nelson suggested the vision of a satellite location. Youth programming continued to expand under the leadership of Pastor Van Bredeson with mission trips, ELCA National Youth Gathering, ski trips, camping in the BWCA, retreats and Bible Camp weeks, to mention just a few activities.

On September 11, 2001, the most significant historical event of the past fifty years took place. Pastor Nelson: "It is true that some of our basic perceptions about life in this land have been changed by the truth that our land is not immune to the disease of terrorism. But like the early settlers establishing Bethel Lutheran Church, it is more clear than ever how vital it is to follow Jesus. The mission of our congregation is still the same: to make Christ known."

This same year, Bethel took the first concrete step in acting on congregational approval of purchasing 40 acres for a second campus. It was also the 10th year of the Scandinavian Food Fest. Pastor Joanne led her first adult mission trip to Jamaica with a team of 15, offering their skills at construction, classroom teaching and electrical wiring to schools in the Kingston area.

The next couple of years were filled with strategic planning led by Dr Kent Hunter, an outside consultant. Through surveys and interviews, he developed a “philosophy of ministry” for Bethel to follow for practical decision making in the unfolding of the mission plan for our two-campus ministry. Along with Bethel’s Master Plan Development Committee, Dr. Hunter, together with an architect, developed a basic land-use plan. In 2002, Rally Day, the kickoff to Sunday School was held at the site of the future second campus.

In 2003, a building committee was formed. Architects and contractors were evaluated and negotiated with. In September 2004, the congregation approved to move forward with the second campus. A capital campaign was conducted in the fall of 2005. Groundbreaking for Bethel’s second campus took place in May 2006. The first service at the Highlands Campus was in March 2007, with a dedication ceremony April 15, 2007.

The process of launching a second campus was about a 12-year adventure. There were many ups and downs, unexpected turns of a hard sort and delightful surprises, too. In Bethel’s 134th year, the long tradition continued, of being a congregation opening its doors to a great variety of people to encounter the living God. This tradition is rooted in the courage and foresight of pioneers who began serving the people of Hudson by sharing the treasure of the church and the good news of God’s unfailing love. Bethel had become a congregation of over 900 families. With Pastor Nelson’s guidance and God’s will, Bethel’s expansion became a reality.

The process that led to Bethel Highlands is certainly not all that happened in these years. The Mission and Justice Committee continued to involve many Bethel members in serving dinners at Loaves and Fishes in St Paul; Dorothy Day Center, Grace Place - a transitional housing center; Habitat for Humanity, as well as, giving generously to Cecil Newman Center in Minneapolis, Operation Help, and Lutheran World Relief. The Young at Hearts adult group was formed as well as Bread Callers, who take bread to those who visit Bethel. H.O.M.E. (Hudson Outreach Meals for Everyone) was started in 2005. This is a community meal, served twice a month at Bethel for anyone with a need for food and fellowship. At the time, eight Hudson churches participated.

Bethel became more “globally minded”, when a group of 19 people made their first trip to the Iringa Diocese of Tanzania. With Bethel’s generosity, over \$14,000 was raised to bring a new sound system and install it in the Cathedral Church. It was also possible to buy a car and several bicycles to improve the ministry of our sister church. At a later trip, stained glass windows designed by parishioner Patty McCann and assembled by several Bethel members, were taken over and installed at Cathedral in Iringa in 2010

After nine years, Pastor Sorenson moved to serve a congregation in Fall Creek, WI. Pastor Bob Bipes began work as an interim associate pastor in the fall of 2007.

The inauguration of Bethel Highlands Preschool took place that same fall. The preschool board is accountable to the congregation through the Church Council. It is therefore a part of the congregation's program of ministries and not a separate entity. In the long term, the preschool ministry will be entirely self-funding. In the beginning year, while startup expenses were high, some of the costs of the school's operation were paid as part of Bethel's operating budget. The original enrollment that first year was 69 students.

When Bethel Highlands opened, it presented a new challenge of how to handle Sunday School at both locations. After much consideration and planning by Pastor Van and Lisa Ruettimann, the director of Children's Ministry, 1st through 5th graders attended Sunday School at the Highland's on Sunday mornings; sixth and seventh graders met on Wednesdays at Downtown Bethel, as well as the Senior League meeting later in the evening on Wednesdays. Small group format of Sunday School continued to be held at the Downtown campus until 2011.

On November 2, 2007, Kari Burke-Romerheim was ordained into the ELCA and installed at Bethel as Associate Pastor for Congregational Life and Growth. Pastor Bipes moved into a part time position of Visitation Pastor.

Vespers, a Sunday evening worship time, began in 2006. It was all student-led by Bethel's own youth. It drew youth throughout the community to worship through witnessing to Christ, sharing scripture and music by the in-house Vespers band. Ben Hilding, his brother Stephen, and their friends, started the ministry that continued through 2016.

By 2011, the Highlands Preschool continued to be at full capacity each year. But changes were afoot with Pastor Dennis Nelson announcing his retirement. The calls of Pastor Van and Pastor Kari were co-terminus with Pastor Nelson's. This meant that six months after Nelson's retirement, the other two calls would end. This term was later voted on by the congregation to be eliminated from any future contracts. A Transition Team was appointed and worked closely with Holy Cow Consultants to map out a plan for a new Senior Pastor. A call committee was appointed by the church council. With the help of the ELCA synod, the search for a senior pastor of Bethel began.

Pastor Kari Burke-Romerheim took a call to Rush River Lutheran Church in Pierce County. Pastor Van Bredeson did youth consultant work in the Twin Cities before being called as Interim Pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Somerset, WI, where he was a few months later called/installed as the Senior Pastor there.

Pastor Dennis Nelson retired in August 2011, after faithfully serving Bethel for 23 years. With his retirement came the installation of Bethel Lutheran's fifth Senior Pastor since 1923. Pastor John Lestock was installed in early fall 2011. Two seminary students, Ben Hilding and Alicia Hilding, were brought onto the pastoral team to help in the transition of hiring two associate pastors.

The Bethel Highlands Columbarium Memorial Garden was constructed at the Highlands Campus in 2011. It was designed and built by two Bethel members, Todd Halunen and Paul Gavic's construction company. It took many hours of planning and volunteering. The result is a place of peace and beauty that will serve hundreds of families as they entrust their loved ones to the eternal care of God.

In July 2013, Ben Hilding, a son of the congregation was ordained into the ELCA and installed as Pastor of Youth and Family at Bethel. On the same day, Alicia Hilding was ordained into the ELCA and installed as Bethel's Associate Pastor, responsible for adult education, small groups and prayer ministry.

With Pastor Lestock's leadership, Bethel took its first mission trip to Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota in October of 2013. The mission for the weekend included delivering school supplies collected by the congregation to Wolf Creek School. A cleanup project took place at the Pine Ridge Retreat Center, as well as winterizing some homes. A relationship between residents on the reservation and Bethel Lutheran Church was established. This relationship and the mission trips continue into 2023.

The maintenance of two properties is an ongoing process. The Highlands has updated the sound system, projectors, added sod for the preschool playground, upkeep on the landscaping of the grounds and the Columbarium to name a few needs. The downtown location saw a transformation of the upper Sunday School rooms. With the removal of several walls, the space became a large open room. The walls in one corner were lined with reclaimed wood and a rugged cross added. On the other end of the room a fireplace was added, along with sofas and comfortable seating. The space was named the Engedi Room. It became a youth gathering spot as well as an informal meeting space for many congregational groups. The library that had been in the overflow area of the downtown sanctuary, was moved to a room upstairs. This allowed for more of a library feel in the room and allowed more flexible seating in the overflow area.

Music has always been an integral part of Bethel Lutheran. The adult Senior Choir under the direction of Layton (Skip) James, performs regularly at Sunday services. Layton James, former principal keyboardist for the St Paul Chamber Orchestra, brings the Casavant pipe organ to life each week at services. Skip, through his many professional contacts, brings guest musicians in to share their talents. The contemporary music band, New Song, continues as the music format at the Highlands. The adult handbell choir started in 1997, was directed by Lonna Possehl for over twenty years. The choir started out playing chimes. Parishioner Audrey Ward, purchased the first three octaves of Malmark Bells that the choir has used ever since. Through the years, the choir has added more bells to now include five octaves.

In 2016, Bethel began the rebranding process which included a new logo design, mission statement definition, website design and electronic materials. The use of the new software

program from the year before continued to improve communication between the staff, small groups, youth, and registration for events. Electronic giving became a user-friendly option. “Connect. Grow. Serve.” became our church’s mission.

In 2016, Bethel was in a year of transition. Pastor Ben and Pastor Alicia Hilding took other calls to a parish in Alexandria, MN.

Pastor Kris Kurzejeski became a Bridge Pastor in 2016 while a call committee began the search for a new pastor of youth and families. Pastor Ladd Sonnenberg answered the call and was installed in September 2016 as Pastor of Youth and Family Ministries.

Another call committee was assembled to fill the open Associate Pastor position. After serving as the bridge pastor for almost a year, Pastor Kris Kurzejeski was called as the Associate Pastor at a special congregational meeting in March 2017 (a $\frac{3}{4}$ time position for a two-year term). She became fulltime in 2019.

Bethel added some other key positions to keep up with the activity and growth. A full-time facilities manager, Director of Children’s Ministry, Music and Worship Coordinator, and Director of Senior High Youth Ministries.

A long-range planning committee was formed, and with the help of a church consultant, began work on a strategic plan for Bethel’s future. In 2018, the Columbarium Committee saw months of work come to life when the Memorial Wall was installed and dedicated in July. This was the final phase of the Garden. There were 75 plaques on the Wall at dedication, with room for more to be added. The committee continues the upkeep on the flower boxes and winter containers within the Memorial Garden.

Bethel has continued to open its doors to the community. Some years as many as 30 different groups have used our facility on a regular basis. In 2019, Bethel opened its doors to a Hmong congregation that had been seeking space to use for worship. This is an intergenerational group of people who come from all over the valley. It is an honor to share our resources.

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Bethel’s only debt had been a \$3.725 million mortgage issued in 2007 with a term of 25-years. In December of 2020, Bethel made its final payment on that loan, and it was now paid in full! This accomplishment came from deep commitment of the congregation and the hard work and talent of Bethel’s church council through the years.

2020 also went down in the history books, for another reason, and will be one we will never forget! A pandemic of the Coronavirus brought everything in our world to a halt. As the first wave of the virus was beginning to spread, many people went into quarantine. But in true Bethel spirit, many from the congregation were asking, “How can I help?” “What can I do to assist?” As difficult as this covid crisis was, it spurred on creativity, innovation, and new beginnings.

Although worshipping “in person” was shut down, with knowledge and help from several staff members, live streaming helped to keep the congregation connected. This also expanded our worshipping community beyond the river valley to several states around the country. The pastors recorded a mid-week inspirational message each Wednesday on YouTube and Zoom. These virtual platforms also were used for conducting meetings, Bible studies and book studies. As Pastor Lestock stated, “This pandemic has brought out some of the very worst in our lives, country, and the world. Yet, I would also suggest, it has brought out some of the very BEST in humanity and the Church!”

Without hundreds of people coming through the doors of Bethel for worship each week, it became a challenge to meet the financial needs of the church. However, Bethel entered these very uncertain times in good financial standing. Once again, the people of Bethel kept their strong commitment to funding and fueling this ministry!

In 2021, with vigilance and caution, in- person worship services started back up, as well as senior adult lunches, book and Bible studies, many youth activities and a drive-up format for the Scandinavian Food Fest.

Before the pandemic started, a facilities task force was formed to evaluate the future space needs of Bethel. Along with surveys, listening groups and congregational gatherings, the task force helped to clarify how Bethel can continue to grow the mission and ministry that God has blessed us with. Due to the pandemic, the task force needed to pause the process. The task force will develop another survey to gauge congregation member’s opinions and support for the next steps.

In July 2022, Pastor Lestock announced his retirement after ten years at Bethel. He preached his last sermon in September. Pastor Bob Bipes also retired from the Visitation Pastor position after 15 years in that position. Pastor Randy Fett arrived as an Intentional Interim pastor to facilitate the search for a new senior pastor. In December, Pastor Jeff Smith assumed the role of part-time visitation pastor.

2023 is Bethel’s 150th Anniversary. The membership is 2,439 and a budget of \$1,863,000. God has richly blessed this congregation as we continue to build on our heritage. Bethel is a place for all people to **connect** with others, to intentionally **grow** their faith and in turn, to put our faith into action and **serve** others as Jesus directs us.