

Report to Congregation  
Intentional Interim Pastor  
February 10, 2008

You called me to be Intentional Interim Pastor for a nine month period which began with my installation on November 11, 2007. I have now been serving in your midst for two months since I was on a leave of absence for one month.

I have appreciated the warm reception, and the opportunity to get to know many of you. You were helpful to me in that 51 of you met with me to respond to my questions. This is my opportunity to share the things that I have learned, not only from your responses, but also from my personal observations of the workings of Gethsemane Lutheran Church and School.

I pray that as the people of God in this place you will hear with open ears and ponder carefully what I have to say. Just as this first Sunday of Lent is a “new beginning” in the Church Year, may this report serve as a springboard to a new beginning in this congregation. Lent, a time of repentance and renewal, calls us as individuals and as a congregation to a new way of life in Christ Jesus. Repentance, as a matter of fact, is a part of the daily life of a Christian as indicated by Luther in the first of his 95 thesis.

As God’s people, you have new life through baptism, you have been freed from the penalty of sin, and you have the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

At times I will share observations and comments from members of the congregation that were shared with me personally. I do not intend to include all of the information that I received during interviews with people, rather the most common threads. My intention and purpose is to be helpful in building up the body of Christ at Gethsemane (Ephesians 4:15-16). Where I have reported factual information inaccurately, I would appreciate your correction.

When I share my own observations, it will be with the intention to inform, encourage, admonish, and offer hope in Christ. Therefore, I would encourage you to ask the Lord to give you an open heart and mind. There will be matters that do not apply to you personally. If you are convicted of sin, remember that God is faithful and forgives the sins of the repentant (1 John 1:8-10).

At times I will make recommendations. These are just that, recommendations, not commands to the congregation. You, the members of Gethsemane, will need to determine whether these recommendations will help you fulfill your mission.

God calls us to be faithful in doing His work. He doesn't promise results, as we sometimes desire. After all, this is His Church. God will supply as He wills.

I believe that you desire to follow Christ and to be shaped by Him as you live out your lives as members of Gethsemane and as residents of this community. Just as you have been released from your sins by the Heavenly Father through Christ, so through Him you are empowered to extend mercy, kindness, encouragement, and forgiveness to one another.

A broad range of members met with me. A significant number were charter members of the congregation, or nearly so. There were also those of you who became members recently, as well as people from various lengths of membership.

Location was the primary reason that many of you gave for first associating with Gethsemane. It was close to where you lived, or it was the closest LC-MS church. A significant number of you came because of the people who are here. You felt welcomed. These two reasons, location and people, keep most of you as members of Gethsemane today. In spite of challenges in the congregation along the way, especially the past several years, you have remained, while others have left. Many of you have remained because this is your "home." However, depending upon when Gethsemane became your church home, the congregation may look much different than it once did.

Gethsemane has been blessed with faithful pastors during her history. God's Word has been preached and taught in a sound manner. Members of the congregation, in most cases, have been respectful of pastors and the pastoral office, even when there were disappointments or disagreements. You are to be commended for your adherence to sound doctrine and your respect of the pastoral office and those who have occupied the office. Your acceptance of me and respect for my ministry among you has continued in that same vein.

As you have entrusted me with the specific responsibility of leading and guiding you through this interim journey, I thank God for the relationship that has already developed. I pray that through this report, we as pastor and people will have common ground in which to move forward in the work of God's Kingdom through Gethsemane Lutheran Church and School. As I report, I will also reflect back to you, many of your own observations.

There are a few matters that are of concern to a significant number of you. I would first like to comment on three concerns that were frequently expressed in your visits with me before moving into more specific areas.

## **I. General Areas of Common Concern**

One-third of you expressed concern that there was not unity in the congregation, and you hope that unity can be restored. While there are differences of opinion regarding numerous matters in the congregation and school, I do not see evidence of a severely conflicted congregation. I have not noted factions such as had developed in the congregation at Corinth. As I said two weeks ago in my sermon on 1 Cor. 1:10-18; in order to restore church unity, we need to first of all acknowledge our differences. This report can also be a springboard for unifying action.

A second major concern voiced was that the congregation might not survive the financial challenge that currently exists. Fifty percent of you fear, quite bluntly, that the doors might be closed, and that you would lose both the church and school.

A third significant concern expressed has to do with the large number of members who have stopped attending Gethsemane, and the fact that a significant number of members of Gethsemane are not involved in any activity. These three major areas of concern will be addressed further during the course of this report.

## **II. Congregational Life**

### **A. Unity**

In order to get at this business of unity, I'll first share responses to the question I asked regarding conflict in the congregation. I said that human beings normally respond to conflict in three basic ways:

- They escape or deny
- They attack or criticize, or
- They work it out

Then I asked, "In so far as you know, how do the staff and members of Gethsemane normally respond to conflict?"

Your responses were all over the place! Here's what you said (with the number in parenthesis indicating the number of people who gave a similar response).

- In all three ways, depending on the person and the situation (8).

- They work it out (16).
- Some have escaped by leaving the congregation (8)
- Some have complained to the wrong people (5).
- There's not a lot of tension or conflict (6).
- Most who were critical or attackers have left (2).
- I'm not aware of any conflict (3).
- Some people are like an ostrich, burying their heads in the sand and denying conflict.
- There are meetings in the parking lot.
- My Dad taught me to follow Matthew 5:23-24.
- There may be heated discussion; then, people move forward.

In order to move toward unity, there needs to be discussion. Denial or escape never resolves conflict, nor can unity exist when issues remain hidden. Attacking or criticizing only separates individuals and groups in a congregation, and can lead to factions. St. Paul writes, "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).

Although not every one may totally agree on directions of ministry, it does not seem that there is serious divisive conflict in the congregation. However, it's unfortunate that some have chosen to escape from the parish, rather than work things out. I tend to believe that there are probably factors other than conflict that have contributed to exodus from the parish. I will address these matters later in the report.

## **B. Youth**

A considerable number of you have deplored the absence of many youth in the parish, young people falling away from the congregation, as well as the lack of a clearly defined and effective youth program. The only evidence of a youth program is that of the Sunday morning Bible class which is attended by several students on a regular basis. Carl Kuehn has an excellent ministry with these young people! And, the good news is that in spite of the small number, they want the class to continue! That is a tremendous credit to these youth!

I would ask you why there is not more attention given to youth ministry in the parish? There are other high school age youth in the congregation. There are also junior high age youth in the confirmation class. Is there really no one in the membership of Gethsemane who could provide additional ministry to the youth? Is no one qualified? Or, is it a matter of unwillingness?

While that may have been in Pastor Jacoby's purview while he was serving the congregation, you realize, of course, that youth ministry does not have to be conducted by an ordained clergyman. The greatest thing needed by a youth leader is love for the youth! In all my years of ministry, the most successful youth program was conducted by a middle-age couple. The secret: They loved the kids! There are ample materials and resources available for anyone who is willing to serve in youth ministry. Love, care, and concern for youth are key ingredients for any youth ministry.

### **C. Caring for People**

I asked the question, "In your own words how is Gethsemane taking care of the sheep – the members and friends of Gethsemane?" Generally speaking, some of you felt good about the care being received; others of you felt that there needs to be improvement in this area. While many expressed that the quality of care (pastoral and elders) was good or excellent for shut-ins, sick, and elderly; others felt that it was weak. The Dorcas Guild received high commendations for being a caring group of people. The Ladies Social Ministry group, the calling tree, flower delivery and tape delivery were all mentioned as evidence of care being shown for people.

There was a general concern for the lack of care for those who are not active in the parish. People are often not missed when they have been absent from worship for an extended period of time; or if they are missed, little or no action is taken. One individual's comment to be heeded was: "If people are not in church for three or four consecutive Sundays, we need to call them." A more intentional ministry would help to prevent inactivity, as well as the resultant substantial releases from membership. For example, in 1997 and 2003, over 100 were removed from membership each year. A question that begs to be asked is "Was due diligence exerted in reclaiming these inactive members, or helping members who had moved away to become members of a congregation in their new location?" Other observations of yours, of a significantly diverse nature, include:

- Small group ministry could help the entire congregation.
- It seems that we care more about money than people.
- Teachers care not only for students, but for students' families.
- Friends take care of their friends in the congregation.
- We need leadership to learn how to help others.

Someone mentioned that the congregation could tremendously benefit from Stephen Ministry training. I agree that the implementation of such a program could be very helpful in expanding the ministry to people beyond that given by pastoral staff and elders.

#### **D. Bible Study**

By your own admission, participation in Bible study is not good. Small Group Bible studies which were once operating have mostly disappeared. The good news is that one small group is now meeting with the intended goal of re-developing Small Group ministry in the congregation. Although there are not a plethora of Bible study opportunities available, the few that are offered have low attendance for the size of Gethsemane.

Attention needs to be given to this area. Through the study of God's Word you grow in faith, in unity as a congregation, and find direction and purpose for your ministry. The study of God's Word should be the basis for all that you do. Sunday worship provides only a small portion of the need to be diligent in searching the Scriptures; it needs to be supplemented by the daily reading of Scripture, devotions, and corporate Bible study. I believe the lack of attention to God's Word is at the heart of any problem encountered by a congregation.

### **III. Stewardship**

Because of the magnitude of the subject and the need for a significant discussion of stewardship in the congregation, I have made it a separate major component of this report. Now, don't let that word close your ears or turn off your mind! Don't become upset, because for the Christian, stewardship encompasses all of life. By definition, Christian stewardship is the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God's family, the church, in managing all of life and life's resources for God's purposes. Everything you do - at home, at work, at school, at play, at church - is all a matter of stewardship. For discussion in this report, I am speaking of your stewardship at Gethsemane.

#### **A. Priesthood of All Believers**

One of the major areas of concern among you is that of lack of participation in the congregation by many members. That's a matter of stewardship.

The "priesthood of all believers" is distinguishable from clergy, and other professional church workers. So, what does this mean? That's a good Lutheran question. It means that every one of you has been gifted through the power of the Holy Spirit with abilities to serve God in His Kingdom whether it is in the home, the community, the church, or all three.

So, how is the priesthood of all believers working at Gethsemane? My perception is that it's not working very well! A few people are doing most of the work in the congregation. I understand that it's been that way for a long time. It's probably close to what is called the Pareto

Principle: 20% of the people do 80% of the work. 20% of the people give 80% of the time. The principle frequently applies to finances also: 20% of the people give 80% of the money. This model of stewardship leads to burnout of people in the 20% group.

The concept of the priesthood of all believers is that every person has an ability to be used to serve our Lord. St. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 12:7: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Then he proceeds to list some of these gifts. It seems, however, that the majority of the members of Gethsemane are not exercising their gifts, at least, not in the work of the congregation.

Consequently, a few members of the congregation are performing multiple tasks in order that things might get done. That is not good stewardship. It is not the principle of Scripture.

Those who are active in the parish, naturally, cannot just point fingers. You also bear responsibility in the utilization of the entire priesthood at Gethsemane. You need to be willing to let other people do some of these jobs. You might have to accept the fact that the tasks might not be done to your satisfaction. Things may not be done as they always have in the past.

You have to be willing to let others share the tasks. You have to be willing to teach and model. In other words, you have to be willing to let go, to lose control, to give others an opportunity to learn, and yes, even to fail at times! Good stewards develop others to become workers and leaders!

So, why are more people not involved in the congregation? It’s helpful to recognize that various reasons exist for people to be hesitant. Among the reasons are:

- Fear of not being accepted.
- Fear that their efforts will not be good enough.
- Apathy.
- Fear of having the job for life.
- People want to be asked personally.

One person very wisely indicated that if we do not involve people who are in the parish, eventually we will lose them. How true! If people are not asked to be involved, they very well may go to a parish where they will be utilized. At the same time, we recognize that some are content to be left alone! Then, we very patiently teach and encourage.

Your insightful comments with regard to the topic of the “priesthood of all believers” include:

- Don't just suggest new ideas, be willing to promote them by becoming involved with the idea.
- Don't stick people with a new job for life.
- Continue the spiritual gift emphasis which was begun by Pastor Jacoby.
- Stephen Ministry would help free pastors for other areas of ministry.
- Develop new lay leaders.
- Get inactive members back and involved.
- Give people who are "burned out" a chance to recover.
- Appreciate people for what they do in the parish (sometimes they work hard and don't feel appreciated).
- Reinstitute the use of time and talent sheets.
- Speak to people directly to enlist them in serving.

God has gifted individuals with abilities for a purpose. We are reminded by St. Peter (1 Pt. 4:10-11): "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace...whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."

I mentioned the role of clergy earlier in this section. At Gethsemane, whether by design or default, clergy have performed roles that could have been done by the priesthood of all believers, that is, lay people – each of you. This deprives lay people from serving, and it can lead to the attitude of people in the parish, let the pastor do it! One of you said that we need to learn that a pastor is to equip people (Eph. 4:11-12), not to do all the work himself. Amen! One of the roles of a pastor is to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. More than one person also, in that light, questioned whether we really needed two pastors at Gethsemane. The matter of congregational staffing will be addressed both in this report and by the Transition Team.

A factor that has created a challenge for the work of the pastor has to do with the fact that there is not a specific support person such as a secretary to help the pastor. Let me be quick to add, Erika Bathke, the church's business manager, has been a tremendous support. So, personally, I'm not complaining! The numerous volunteers in the office and the school secretary are also valuable assets for conducting office work. As you plan for the next settled pastor, you need to determine how you will provide support staffing for him, without overburdening the business manager.

A concluding thought with regard to the priesthood of all believers comes from Albert Schweitzer, a clergyman, philosopher, physician and music scholar, who said, "I don't know

what your destiny will be, but one thing I know. The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

## **B. Stewardship of the Gospel**

An aspect of stewardship in which Gethsemane has excelled is that of the stewardship of the gospel. The congregation has been the beneficiary of sound Biblical preaching and teaching. Many of you emphasized this to me during our times together.

A high percentage of you (66%) said that the school was a primary means of reaching out with the gospel as commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission. Some were concerned that you need to do better in seeing the school as a mission field. Others felt that you are not doing very well at going beyond the school. Specific comments from you with regard to the mission outreach through the school included:

- It's neat when a student is baptized, and then that student brings his parents for baptism.
- Several people mentioned the fact that the children witness.
- Teachers do a very good job.

A number of staff members indicated a tremendous appreciation for the opportunity to share the gospel with children through the School.

You are also known for a mission spirit in sharing the gospel in various ways. In your history you gave birth to a daughter congregation: Summit of Peace in Thornton. You supported Pastor Jacoby in the beginning of Family of Christ in Frederick. Until recently you have supported District and Synod, as well as Lutheran High School. Even now individual members have continued to provide support for these mission areas.

Through the Mission Board you have vigorously supported overseas missionaries directly, including one from your midst, Jenae Siebarth. You are to be commended for your mission spirit, a spirit that places you well above the average congregation. As one person said, “People here have a big heart in comparison to much larger churches with many more resources; hearts are in the right place.” While the recent financial challenges of the congregation have hindered your stewardship in this area, you have found other ways through the congregation and school to continue your outreach in this manner above and beyond your regular offerings.

The Mission Board is to be commended for its endeavor to reach out with the gospel to visitors in the worship services, and to a more limited extent un-churched school families and members of the community. Lillian Frey, deserves special recognition for her untiring faithful

efforts with regard to first time visitors. I dare to say, that a significant number of the members of Gethsemane are a result of the ambassadorship of Lillian. Yet, this strength of the congregation has perhaps become a weakness because you depend on her. Lillian's work needs to be multiplied through other people.

A major purpose of the congregation is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some comments from you with regard to reaching out were:

- We need to find new ways to reach out (2).
- We are not reaching out beyond the school.
- We are not reaching our own community.
- We are failing, we can't see beyond our own needs because of our financial crisis.
- Not many people make calls on un-churched or prospective members; only one person does it, and only if a blue (visitor) card is filled out.
- Bill and Barb Sonne and the Mission Board do a great job (2)
- We conduct VBS.
- People help one another and love one another.

Other outreach efforts receiving high acclamation from several individuals were the Christmas angel project, the feeding of the homeless by Terry and Mike McAlister; and food given to the Food Bank.

At this point I will address the stewardship of the gospel with respect to worship attendance. Ten of you said that we need to increase worship attendance. There is a desire among a number of you to have a full church at two services. I would hope that the motivation would be to reach the substantial numbers of un-churched near Gethsemane. I hope the motivation to fill the pews is not simply to alleviate the financial challenge. While it is true that more members can help with the financial burden, that should not be our motivation to increase attendance. It is also true that additional ministry and staffing would be needed as the congregation grew.

A number of you addressed the substantial drop in worship attendance over the past year. You've attributed it to several factors, including the fact that both pastors left in a very short period of time, the fact that there are no longer tuition breaks for church attendance, and the financial struggles that came after the completion of the 2004 school expansion. It's unfortunate that the timing of the completion of the school expansion caused a significant number of parents to lose confidence and enroll their children elsewhere.

### **C. Stewardship of Treasures**

Another aspect of stewardship has to do with all that God has given us, the stewardship of our material possessions, or our treasures. Yes, it's true that this topic turns some people off. Why? Perhaps because they are misinformed, they are uninstructed, or because their possessions have become their god. If you are upset when money is mentioned in a sermon, where is the problem? Is it a problem of the heart?

An important factor to remember with regard to financial stewardship is that nothing we have really belongs to us. It is God's, as the Psalmist says (24:1): "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Everything we have - house, car, TVs, bank accounts, savings, and whatever else - all belong to God. We are only the managers.

We would do well to note St. Paul's example in 2 Cor. 8:1-5 as he speaks about the Macedonians. They were in extreme poverty, yet they gave generously, in fact, St. Paul says that they gave beyond their means, of their own free will. They begged to participate in the offering for the saints in Jerusalem. The key? They first gave themselves to the Lord. It's a matter of the heart!

Financial stewardship should not be seen in the light of giving to a budget or a financial crisis. Rather, the Christian gives of the first-fruits of God's blessings. Gifts are given in thankfulness for what God first of all has done for us, that is, the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. This, and nothing else, is the godly motivation for the stewardship of our treasures.

Along with this comes a matter related to the school and tuition. Until recently, school tuition discounts were given to family's for church attendance. When the tuition discounts were discontinued, worship attendance plummeted. Why? One church family with a student in school wisely said, "Church attendance and school tuition discounts should have never been tied together in the first place. That's the wrong reason for attending church. We shouldn't attend church to have a financial advantage." I appreciate that type of Biblical thinking! We attend church not for financial gain, but, rather, for the opportunity to praise God who has given the wonderful gift of salvation. In worship we receive His spiritual blessings.

### **IV. Gethsemane Lutheran School**

Gethsemane has been blessed with many long term faculty members. The faculty, a committed group, gets along well together. They work hard and as a team.

I am impressed with the high quality of education the children receive in the pre-school. The fact that enrollment has grown indicates that parents feel the education their children are receiving is beneficial. These people are to be commended and encouraged.

There are more challenges in grades 1-8 because of the increased competition from charter schools in the area. I believe these children are receiving a good education. However, because of the choices that parents have in the education of their children, I believe it is paramount to strive for a standard of excellence.

I strongly recommend that the school (grades K-8) complete the accreditation process. I believe that it will be necessary for Gethsemane to do so in order to compete with the increased plethora of charter schools.

For the overall good of the school, I would also recommend the adoption of a plan which would quickly move toward a full-time principal. I do not feel that it is possible to be a school of excellence and continue with a teaching principal. A principal needs to be committed to excellence; available to faculty and students; be a leader and advocate for the faculty emotionally, academically, and spiritually; conduct evaluations of faculty; hold faculty accountable; maintain uniform discipline standards; retain the unique Lutheran heritage and teachings; maintain a close relationship with the church; and have a high profile in marketing and advertising the school.

Gethsemane has much to offer the community. A strong marketing program will help to get the message out. Many of you realize there is a critical need to increase enrollment to help meet expenses.

#### **V. Relationship of church and school**

You desire the church and school to be unified. However, a substantial number of you indicated that there could be a better working relationship between church and school. As one individual said, "There is a 'disconnect' between the two.

It's apparent that the relationship suffered significant damage with the 2004 building expansion of the school. In looking back, some of you feel the expansion was a mistake. However, approximately 75% of the congregation pledged money over a period of three years for this project. This indicates that a significant majority of the congregation thought the expansion was a good idea at the time. It should also be noted that the congregation benefited greatly from the expansion project. It might be more accurate to say that the relationship was damaged by other factors such as:

- the loss of enrollment in 2004, related to a tight construction schedule which caused parents to lose confidence in a firm school start date, and thus enroll their children elsewhere
- cost overruns which increased the debt
- the embezzlement of funds which put an increased stress on an already tight financial situation
- the fact that enrollment has still not rebounded to the 2004 projected levels
- the loss of families in school and/or worship after the discontinuance of tuition breaks for church attendance
- the fact that the stewardship of the congregation needs to improve.

One person said, “We should not see each other as enemies.” I’m afraid that, on occasion, some of you have seen each other as the enemy. Remember, the enemy is Satan - not one another. With that in mind you need to set aside attitudes and comments that lead to division. You need to stop blaming and pointing fingers. You need to respect and appreciate one another.

What is past is past. You cannot change it. You have to move on. Will it be with bitterness, or pointed fingers of blame? Or, will it be with a new resolve, to learn from the past, and to work toward the future? To hold onto bitterness and past mistakes will only hinder you from becoming unified as a church and school with your common mission as described in your mission statement.

I do have some concerns for the morale of the faculty. I realize that the financial situation is challenging, yet there are some factors that the congregation needs to consider. How do you keep good teachers and maintain high morale when there are no pay raises and when teachers are required to pay varying portions of benefits for themselves and family, and thus actually receive a pay cut? Although staff lay-offs were necessary in 2004 and 2007, morale was affected. Another contributor to a downward spiral of morale occurs when teachers are required to clean their own rooms. By the way they haven’t complained to me. I am amazed at how high the morale remains in spite of these challenges.

Faculty members are demoralized when they hear criticism from church members regarding their lack of participation in worship, church activities, etc. I’m quick to add that constructive criticism in some cases may not be out of place. In their defense, let me say that they are making significant contributions with their time and treasures, through cleaning their own classrooms and through reduced income.

Critical comments affect morale. They undermine unity between church and school. They harm our relationships with one another and the Lord. The season of Lent, a time of repentance and renewal, reminds us of what needs to take place. Where there is sin, there needs to be repentance, before God and to one another. When there is repentance, the healing balm of the gospel soothes broken spirits. It's a powerful thing when repentance and forgiveness take place between Christians.

With regard to rebuilding school enrollment, I appreciate the comment one person made: "The school will grow; we need to trust God through all of this." Indeed we do. However, it will also take intensive work by principal, staff, and the School Board. Supportive congregational members are crucial to the welfare and morale of faculty. The congregation needs to make every effort to pray for, support, and encourage the faculty.

Practically, there are numerous things that you can do to unify church and school. The first has to do with your own attitude. Without an attitude of appreciation and respect for the ministry of the other, there will never be unity. Continue the fellowship activities that bring church and school together. Provide education opportunities for church and school families with respect to parenting, finances, etc. Church members, take the initiative to get to know school families, develop relationships with them, and appreciate their contributions to the mission of both church and school. Faculty members, take the initiative to get to know church members, develop relationships with them, and appreciate their contributions to the mission of both church and school.

## **VI. Leadership and Accountability**

There is some confusion among staff members (church and school) regarding lines of authority and to whom they are accountable. Therefore, I am asking the Transition Team to review all handbooks, policies, and the personnel manual. The Team is also being asked to review all Job Descriptions for personnel, both church and school, as well as the constitution and by-laws. In all of these areas, the Transition Team's job is to review and make recommendations, not to make revisions.

In these reviews, along with any revisions at a later date, careful attention needs to be given to provide for the accountability of all staff, Boards, and organizations. Staff members also require care and support from their supervising staff or Board. All staff, including me, should be regularly evaluated with respect to performance of duties.

With regard to the matter of communication in the parish, there needs to be significant improvement. I asked the question if anything had been swept under the rug at Gethsemane.

Nothing seemed to be. The closest thing for some people was the embezzlement. While there was recognition of the need for restricted and cautious communication initially, many felt that once it was public knowledge, that the communication could have been better. While the Voters' may have been told, the whole congregation learned of the events slowly.

Until the re-establishment of the Gems (newsletter), people who were not in church regularly may not have known much about the happenings at Gethsemane. The suggestion to publish the Voters' action, as well as that of the Church Council, can go a long way to keep the congregation informed. Another good suggestion was to summarize the action at the Voters' Assembly and put the information in peoples' mailboxes in the narthex. The calling tree is a great idea; it has been, and can continue to be, very beneficial to improve communication. Positive comments were made about how well done and beneficial the Friends of the Family meetings were. It takes a great deal of effort to have good communication. When there is good communication, trust of one another increases.

## **VII. Other Matters**

### **A. The Loss of Your Pastors**

A significant number of people raised the issue of Pastor Jacoby leaving the parish to begin another church. Some of you couldn't understand why Gethsemane should help start another parish, especially when the congregation was hurting financially. A few of you were angry and blamed the Rocky Mountain District for taking Pastor Jacoby from you.

First of all, it's helpful to understand that pastors move from one congregation to another by the call process. It is their decision, as they pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit. Districts do not assign pastors, or take a pastor from one congregation to serve another.

It's true that the Rocky Mountain District authorized the start of the Family of Christ mission. However, it was Pastor Jacoby's decision to begin working as pastor of this new congregation in the Frederick, CO area. He is the only one who can fully and satisfactorily answer the question as to why he chose to leave Gethsemane and begin this new challenge in ministry.

Some of you were angered that people left Gethsemane to help him begin this mission. Again, you felt that Gethsemane could not afford to lose people who were involved in ministry here. The concept of this model of a church start is not that people leave a congregation permanently and become associated with the new parish. Rather, the model was designed with the intent that people from nearby parishes serve as missionaries in the new church start for a

period of time, for example a year or so, to help the congregation get started. Then they return to their home parish. Although some or all of the missionaries from Gethsemane may never return, that is not the intent of this model.

A significant number of you were also angry because Pastor Matzke announced his retirement as Pastor Jacoby was beginning the new mission. You felt that both of them had let you down. While many of you have speculated with regard to the timing of Pastor Matzke's retirement, he is the only one who can respond to that matter.

The anger precipitated by the departures of Pastor Matzke, Pastor Jacoby, and members who have become involved in the Frederick mission are normal responses to the losses you've experienced. Anger is one of the steps in the grieving of any loss. You will need to move through all the stages of grief in order to accept the next settled pastor at Gethsemane. I will have an article in the next Gems to help you understand the journey of grief.

### **B. Staffing for the Future**

One question, raised by a few people, deserves consideration, "Do we really need two pastors at Gethsemane?" Some of my earlier comments pertain to this discussion, that is, the role of clergy versus the role of the laity. Based on the size of the congregation and the potential for growth, you will need additional staff to serve the congregation and to grow. By that, I do not mean that additional staffing would have to be a second pastor. It may be that other church workers, part time or full time, may serve the congregation well. The strategic planning process will guide you with regard to the type of staffing. The first step will be to consider the needs in areas such as parish education, outreach, music, youth, and any other areas identified.

### **C. One service**

A number of you suggested the possibility of going from two worship services on Sunday morning to only one service. I understand the reasons for wanting one service – the opportunity to get to know others better, greater fellowship opportunities, the reduction of cost, etc.

I will play the devil's advocate in this matter. There are other factors to consider. One service does not guarantee the results that you are trying to gain. People can easily remain disconnected. Do you know all of the people in the service that you now attend? How are you connected to them?

The congregation would need to consider the disadvantages of going to only one service. To people on the outside of the congregation, as well as un-churched school families, it looks like you're dying. How do you reach consensus on what time you will worship, and what might

that do to the unity that you are trying to promote? What type of service would it be? What type of music will there be? How would those decisions affect the unity of the congregation?

You also need to understand a general principle of worship in a congregation: the more services a congregation has, the greater the total attendance will be. You would be struggling uphill regarding this general principle.

Along with that, a few families suggested the possibility of Sunday School taking place during the worship service. Again, there are pros and cons to such a concept. While it is not frequently practiced in Lutheran Churches, some are doing so. Again, this is a matter that would need to be given careful thought and planning.

#### **D. Expectations During the Interim**

I asked people who met with me, “What are your expectations that we might be able to accomplish together during the interim time.” Most of you spoke in terms of “we” rather than what I could do for you. You recognize that I am an interim, not here to bring all of your expectations to fruition, but that I am here to help you. You understand that you as members of the congregation, Boards, Church Council and Voters’ Assembly are the ones who will create greater opportunities for ministry at Gethsemane.

Significant numbers of you spoke of bringing unity to the parish. Other thoughts or expectations expressed were:

- Have congregational meetings in addition to Voters’ meetings to share information.
- Give guidance for Sunday School and youth programs.
- Determine why we keep declining.
- Bring church and school together.
- Open our eyes to what we could be doing, how we treat one another.
- Reach out to new members.
- Get inactive members back.
- Bring stability.
- Have less frequent Voters’ meetings.
- Can we be a little more flexible and less rigid.
- Conduct Intergenerational Sunday School during the summer.
- Have a ministry for young couples.
- Offer more practical type Bible studies.
- Establish a prayer chain.
- Reach ethnic groups in our neighborhood

- Inform the parish of how desperate the financial situation is.
- Review the communion procedure of everyone drinking the wine simultaneously.
- Have more fellowship functions.
- Have school children sing in both services, and more frequently.

### VIII. Congregational Morale

Quite a number of people have complained about apathy in the congregation. Evidences of apathy are exhibited in the fact that many members are not involved in any service to the Lord, and a significant percentage of members are not active in the worship life of the congregation. I believe the apathy at Gethsemane, at least in recent years, has deeper roots than may appear on the surface.

Dr. John Savage, author of The Apathetic and Bored Church Member, makes the following statements regarding apathy:

- “Helplessness precipitates apathy.”
- “The antithesis of helplessness is hopelessness. Hopelessness is the feeling there is no resource inside of the self to solve a problem.”
- “Apathy is a form of survival when everything else seems lost. It is the feeling of ‘having given-up.’ Apathy can be described as a survival activity when the individual is under too much stress, anxiety, anger or conflict. It allows a condition through which survival can take place, even if it means isolation.”
- “One of the key issues suspected in the actions of a church member’s moving away from deep involvement with the local church is the considerable amount of grief and loss.”

I believe that Savage’s writing applies to you with regard to the grief you have experienced. My goodness have you had your share of losses over the past few years! I would call it compound and complicated grief. Grief depletes your energy. It makes you want to give up.

Some of these factors have contributed to your inability to meet your obligations. Not only is there anxiety, but a feeling of helplessness. Beyond a substantial increase in enrollment, induction of many new families into the parish, a sizeable shift from inactive to active members, or a significant increase in offerings; you are powerless to change your situation.

Another factor deserves consideration. When people are heavily involved in church life and experience intense stress, there can be “burnout” and also a movement away from the church. It’s not uncommon to note that people who were once very involved in the life of a parish are now inactive.

But what about the large numbers of people who became inactive in the past, or have dropped out? Why were there such large releases of members twice in the last decade? Was it for similar reasons, or were there other factors? Were they not interested in becoming involved in the life of the parish, or were there only feeble attempts on the part of Gethsemane to involve them? Consideration should be given to this matter so that the “back door” is closed to membership losses.

## **IX. Looking ahead**

So, is there hope for Gethsemane? Let me say emphatically, yes, I believe there is hope! The gospel continues to be proclaimed through Word and sacrament ministry. People are caring for one another. People love one another. There is exciting and vibrant ministry taking place in the classrooms of the pre-school and school. Children who came to Gethsemane Lutheran School not knowing about Jesus now believe that He is their Lord and Savior. That’s exciting!

The Rocky Mountain District believes there is hope because of the ministry that is taking place in church and school. They will continue to work with you.

It will not be an easy road. There will be challenges for some time to come. Does God have a purpose for what has happened? Can He bring good out of the “mess?” Of course He can, and He will. As one of you said, “The crisis that we are experiencing is for a reason, just as individuals who experience crisis are strengthened through trials.” Another of you said, “We will come out from this stronger.” It will take hard work. It will require planning, and even dreaming.

Robert Dale, author of To Dream Again, speaks of the life cycle of congregations. Most congregations follow a path of growth, plateau, and then decline. Gethsemane fits the pattern. The congregation grew rapidly during the early years of its history, reached a plateau in the mid-80s, and has since declined in membership. The average life of a congregation is approximately 80 years before it dies.

My observation is that the congregation borders between nostalgia and questioning. By that I mean some of you are looking back to the “good old days” and wishing that you could return. Others, are wondering if you will survive, or asking how much longer you can continue?

As Dale says, this is the time when you have to dream again, and instead of looking to the past, you look to the future and you determine a vision for the future. Goals and possibly even organizational change will flow out of the vision.

When congregations dream and commit to a new vision, they survive. If they do not, they die. Unity results, no matter how diverse the membership, when people rally around the vision. This unity becomes an extension of the unity you already share as brothers and sisters in Christ, who is the Head of the body, His Church.

With regard to dreaming and setting a vision for the future, I will ask the Transition Team to take into consideration the size of the congregation. This has to do with not only the average worship attendance, but how a congregation is structured, as well as how members relate to the pastor. Gethsemane has been on the border of a pastoral size church versus a program size church for many years. It's a challenging transition to move from one size to another. It is an area that needs to be studied since I believe it has had a significant effect in the past on the growth of the congregation, and will certainly have an effect if you are to grow in the future.

As we look to the future there are three items of a scheduling nature that I should mention:

- A. I will ask the elders to consider conducting a "Service of Prayer, Repentance and Renewal." This service, to be scheduled in a few months, would be designed to help God's people heal through the cleansing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We would gather in the sanctuary for a special service of word, sacrament, and prayer to bring us closer to our Lord and one another. Through confession and forgiveness, the people of God are comforted, healed, refreshed, and encouraged to move forward united in Christ.
- B. I propose that the search for the next settled pastor begin in July. The timing would be dependent upon the completion of the Transition Team's work in assisting the congregation to develop a plan for the future.
- C. The capital campaign which had been planned long before I was on the scene as your Intentional Interim Pastor, has been re-scheduled to begin in August. The delay will allow us together, as pastor and people, to develop a vision and plan for the future of Gethsemane.

## **X. Concluding Thoughts**

When you lost both pastors in a short period of time, many of you became quite anxious. You had never been without a pastor before. Yet, you have survived. As God kept you through the past months, He will continue with you in the future.

While your financial situation has been a grave concern, my prayer is that you will not be so focused on financial issues and survival that you cannot dream and plan for the future.

I pray that this report will not bring division, but that it would help to lay groundwork for visioning in the future. May you be drawn together through a common vision and goals which flow out of the Great Commission given by our Lord Jesus.

I've probably overwhelmed you with everything that I've said. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time! So it will be here. I do not recommend that you try to start on everything at once; rather that we begin to rebuild methodically and thoughtfully, with careful planning.

We take heart in the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Those words inspire confidence. There is hope and a future for Gethsemane Lutheran Church and School.

With that hope in mind, we work while it is still day, while we still have the opportunity to bring the hope of Jesus Christ to a world dying in sin.

God is faithful. He calls us to be faithful in His work. He has, and He will continue to give His Holy Spirit to guide and direct you. The Lord Jesus Himself will empower you with his presence.

The words of benediction from the writer to the Hebrews (13:20-21) help us to keep things in perspective as we work: "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Respectfully submitted,

Pastor Roger E. Schlechte  
Intentional Interim Pastor