

The 2020 Proposed Plan for the Common Ground Church.

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Timeline:

Nov - Jan 2018: conception of new church as “a common ground” proposed to mission partners through stewardship campaign. A working missional understanding of First Lutheran Church was the norm since 2005. Dissolving First Lutheran Church as a necessary step to start a new congregation was novel.

Feb 2019: Council Retreat to discern possibility of new church start or continue improving existing congregation and making its building more accessible.

Mar 2019 - Feb 2020: Multiple mission partner cottage gatherings for dialogue, prayer and discernment.

May 2019/Oct 2019/Nov 2019: Input and advice invited from synod clergy, staff and lay church leadership at Synod Gathering and Bishop’s Convocation. Conversations with key external partners continue to present. Pastor Lee attends spiritual discernment retreat and confirms personal call.

Jan 2020: First draft of the Common Ground Church proposal completed, first of several mission partner meetings.

Feb 2020: First edition of draft proposal shared widely with internal and external input invited.

Mar 2020: Congregational vote to dissolve, dispose and establish was postponed indefinitely due to pandemic shelter in home recommendations.

Feb - June 2020: Behind the scenes working through emotional sense of loss, misdirected grief, and equally, excitement around future possibilities of a new start. Additionally, coalition-building with synodical staff and council for their partnership including endorsement and support.

July - early Aug 2020: Revision to proposal because of amended timeline and new information about the process. Scheduled congregational vote for proposed amendments, coordinated with Synod Council for August 29 synod assembly agenda and legal counsel. Synod council approved the amendments on August 15 contingent on the Aug 16-17 congregational meeting vote results.

Aug 16-17, 2020: Congregational Meeting with positive vote to dissolve parent congregation, First Lutheran Church, dissolve its assets, and establish the Common Ground Church as a new mission start.

Aug 29, 2020: South-Central Synod Assembly voted to accept the Common Ground Church as a new congregation of the South-Central Synod of WI.

Sep - Dec 2020: Federal Tax ID issued (late Sep), weekly worship and mission partner briefings online, continued spiritual care for members including nine funerals since April 2020, listed church building for sale, November Digital Ministry campaign 155% of goal (included mission partner donations, an ELCA grant, and an outside angel investor donation), assigned congregational id from ELCA late December, and building tech equipment and services for digital ministry space.

Currently, muddling plus development of coalition for short and long-term sustainability.

Executive Summary

The Proposal & Action Plan outlines a concrete course of action for the work of adaptive change in response to the changing surrounding cultural context. (see page 7)

Proposed Plan Outcome: FLC Mission Partners will re-establish themselves as a new, missionally minded ELCA congregation that connects religiously unaffiliated people with God through practicing Christian community.

Theological Frame. The theological frame used to define church is both missional and confessional. The *missional* descriptor defines the meaning of church from a biblical perspective emphasizing the purpose and intent of the church coming from God's mission/reign in the world for sake of the world (Matthew 28:19-20 and John 20:21). Without such biblical rootedness, church can easily mean anything under the sun and orient itself toward the strongest emotional energy.

“God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20, The Message

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” Jesus to his disciples, John 20:21

Theologians who have summarized missional in relationship to God and church:

“It's not the Church of God that has a mission but the God of mission who has a Church.”
Rowen Williams, Former Archbishop of Canterbury

“Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.” David J Bosch, *Sent to Flourish* (p. 7). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

The confessions remind us that the true church is essentially a gathering around the Word and Sacraments, never prioritizing any one location and facility, or style of music, etc. Confessionally, as an ELCA congregation, we prioritize the Gospel and administration of the sacraments and are free to reform our ministry platform for each new generation and changing context.

ARTICLE VII: OF THE CHURCH. Augsburg Confession (Latin Text) of 1530. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: “One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...” (*Book of Concord*, Kolb and Wengert, 2000, p. 43)

What will be Different about the New Congregation?

In Common:

1. The Presence, Love and Mission of the Triune-God and our Gospel Vocation.
2. Denominational Affiliation: ELCA and South-Central Synod of WI.
3. People: Mission Partners committed to Practicing Christian Community who love God, Love Neighbor and Make Disciples.
4. Geographical Location - The Lodi Area School District/Lake Wisconsin.
5. Lutheran Confessional and Missional Theology.
6. Weekly Worship Gatherings around Word & Sacrament.
7. A commitment to Personal, Cross-Generational Spiritual Development (Discipleship): e.g., *Sugar Creek Bible Camp, Affirmation of Baptism*.
8. A commitment to Partnership for Justice and the Greater Good: e.g., *Reach Out Lodi, School District, Ecumenical Prayer & Ministry, and South-Central Synod of WI*.
9. A commitment to Emotionally Healthy Spirituality & Prayer.
10. Pastoral and Council Leadership.
11. Personal and Family Spiritual Care including funerals and baptisms.
12. High Accountability and Transparent Financial Stewardship with Thousand Accounting, Finance Team, Audit, Treasurer, 2-person counting teams, WI River State Bank and Church Community Builder.
13. Story Continuity between Founding Congregation and New Congregation.

New

1. A more robust strategic commitment to Evangelical Witness with expanded effort through face to-face relationship building and digital media.
2. An intentional effort to listen and make connections with religiously unaffiliated people in our region.
3. New Location for Weekly Worship and Spiritual Development.
4. New Name: “Common Ground Church” is the conceptual grist and starting point for a name.
5. Explicit expectations for mission partnership rooted in grace, respect, hope and health.
6. An opportunity for a fresh start, prioritizing mission over maintenance, and freedom to try new methods of ministry.
7. Deeper spiritual reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Proposed Plan Outcome: FLC Mission Partners will re-establish themselves as a new, missionally minded ELCA congregation that connects religiously unaffiliated people with God through practicing Christian community.

To achieve this outcome, First Lutheran Church will start fresh by organizing a new, missional ELCA worshipping community using the ELCA model constitution to serve the geographical region of the Lodi Area School District by spring of 2020. The proposed name of the new church is Common Ground Church based on the hope to create “common ground” in a world marked by polarization, complex problems and growing diversity. Common ground signals to the community our intent to join with others in public space where Gospel informs our identity, hope for the future, partnership and practice for the flourishing (shalom) of the whole creation.

The establishment of a new ELCA congregation is the continuation of the story of God’s people in mission locally. The story began in 1845 through two congregations who would dissolve in 1878 to start fresh as one new congregation with the current name, First Lutheran Church, to indicate that they were the first Lutherans in Lodi, WI. Furthermore, historic precedent in our local story stacks up with the Lutheran confessions.

Preview summary of the action plan steps:

- Engaging mission partners in wide-spread prayer through tools provided by the prayer team starting with the eight week Prayer Course, Lectio365 app, the Reservoir Daily Devotional, Peer Ministry Leadership, and FAITH5 home resource for families with children/youth.
- Prepare the congregation through a series of listening sessions, along with written communication to engage in dialogue and learning regarding the proposed course of action and review of the proposed Constitution for the new congregation.
- Prayerfully engage and listen to the Holy Spirit through members of our surrounding community with the intent to discern, *What is the ache in God’s heart uniquely needed in this community?* (the Rev. Rick Barger)
- Connect with Synodical staff including Bishop Peter Rogness and Synod Council, along with others who can provide needed insight and guidance for the proposal.
- Call a congregation meeting to authorize filing the new entity with Columbia County Register of Deeds and commissioning a task force who will attend to the various tasks and information gathering for the new mission start.
- Call a congregation meeting for the eventual dissolution of First Lutheran Church, disposition of its assets to resource its newly formed worshipping community, and submit the constitution for recognition by the ELCA and South-Central Synod of WI. The new congregation will be constituted under the authority of the ELCA and share in its vision, values, and broader concerns for mission in the world.

Conceptual Design/Vision

Background: What distinguishes us from other groups and organizations doing vision work? The Holy Spirit is the active agent with us in the process. It follows that our practice of visioning would integrate Christian spiritual practice in order that we are attuning ourselves to the Holy Spirit and attending to the Spirit's concerns for ourselves, our human and creaturely neighbors.

Common Ground Lutheran Church (CGC) is a rural practicing Christian community committed to soul work/good work for the common good!

First thing: Jesus is Lord. As practicing Christian community, Jesus Christ is our common ground. What was Jesus concerned with as we read into his life? What do we discern from the Gospels and the sweep of scriptures about God's concern for the world? Jesus held equal concern for the person's soul and justice for the Creation. By grace, Jesus invites us into soul work and good work. Therefore, **CGC will exist to proclaim Christ and curate a Christian spirituality that forms the basis or ground of a life marked by Christlike joy and justice.**

CGC will be a hybrid of platform (to interface with people with God, divine life) and locally grounded in face to face community. Ours will not be a product or even service organization as much a platform for soul work/good work. We are committed to a rural/small town flavor, helping reframe and live into the rural/small town context from a theological perspective and Christian practice. Motivated by the vision of God's reign/Shalom and the Gospel, Common Ground ministry will entail a more wholistic perspective to include the Earth (our common home) in its diversity and justice for the least of these locally and globally.

Founding a new community is a matter of seeking common ground internally with mission partners and to optimally equip them for dialogue with our neighbors. Taking a path forward as church during an age of polarization/disestablishment is hoped to signal to the world that we seek common ground with our neighbors toward a future with hope.

Vision and Values Grist for Dialogue

- An ELCA faith community rooted in Gospel practice, creating common ground for a flourishing rural, small town life for all people.
- Assurance of loving, spiritual care throughout congregational transition and future. - Fostering joy, hope, equal regard amongst friend and "foe."
- Creating common ground for soul work and good work.
- Transforming polarization into constructive partnership.
- Providing methods for anytime Christian spirituality.
- Embodying the vision and values of the ELCA. (p. 6)

Our mission

Together in Jesus Christ we are freed by grace to live faithfully, witness boldly and serve joyfully.

Our vision

A world experiencing the difference God's grace and love in Christ makes for all people and creation.

Our values

Our values are grounded in faith, in our biblical and Lutheran confessional sources and our love of God and neighbor. They speak to the way this church lives and practices our faith, and they will guide how we journey forward in Christ as church together.

Forgiveness and reconciliation – We are reconciled to God by God's forgiving mercy. Forgiveness and reconciliation flow from what God has made us to be in Jesus Christ and what God is doing with us in the world. As a people of God, we embody forgiveness in speech, action and relationships, and our ministry in reconciliation is foundational.

Dignity, compassion and justice – Each person is created in God's image. We respect this God-given right to dignity and, inspired by the life of Jesus, show love and compassion for all people. Through proclamation of the gospel, through worship and as servants of God working for healing and justice in the world, we uphold and seek to protect the dignity and human rights of all people.

Inclusion and diversity – As Christ's church, we value the richness of God's creation and offer a radical welcome to all people, appreciating our common humanity and our differences. We are a church that does not view diversity as a barrier to unity. We recognize and will challenge dynamics of power and privilege that create barriers to participation and equity in this church and society – for women, people of color, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, people who are marginalized or living in poverty, and the LGBTQ community.

Courage and openness to change – Because we trust in God's promise and understand faith to be a living, daring confidence in God's grace, we are emboldened to embrace learning and change in our spiritual and institutional journey as church. This means we are open to new ways and willing to take risks to discover God's plan for this church.

Faithful stewardship of God's creation and gifts – As church together, faithful stewardship is about holding to God's purpose and ensuring the responsibilities and resources that God has entrusted to us are used with great care and with accountability to God, to each other and those served by this church.

BACKGROUND RATIONALE

Four Motivations:

- 1. Gospel Mandate: “to love God, love neighbor as self” and “go, make disciples...”**
- 2. Future Facilities Task Force Report** (see addendum 2).
- 3. Changing Context: a challenge and opportunity for Gospel.**
- 4. Hope: the difference a fresh start can make.**

1. The Gospel Mandate.

“In this sense the church does not have a mission; rather, it participates in God’s Mission in the redemption of humanity and the restoration of all creation.” Letty Russel, “Church in the Round,” p. 88

After 18 or so months of prayerful discernment, the congregation council concluded that establishing a new, missional ELCA congregation would most faithfully advance the great commission today and into the future for the Lodi-Lake Wisconsin region.

Our congregation’s purpose is rooted in our relationship with the triune-God and Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor as self, and to “Go, make disciples.” The reason we can state with hopeful expectation and firm, faithful conviction to start fresh is the unwavering promises of God for a resurrected new life and the vision of the Kingdom of God. We as the church council understand this time and place as the work of the Holy Spirit resurrecting us as a local body of Christ. The Holy Spirit has been building in us greater agility and faithful adaptive capacity through the last fourteen years of missional experimentation and ministry innovation. The proposal is the council’s invitation to join this unfolding story of new life for us.

Gordon Cosby, co-founding pastor of Church of the Savior, Washington, D.C., summed up the Gospel mandate well in one of his later sermons (Aug 20, 2006):

“There is absolutely nothing new about a new form of church. The church, the Body of Christ, is always changing. We take our form in the local and global environment of our particular period of history. We bring our society, the total global community, to God’s vision of newness, and we ask what Jesus would want his community to look like now, against this global backdrop.

Embodying and talking about Jesus will be our primary work. If we do a number of good works but never learn to introduce someone to a genuine relationship with Jesus and ways to nurture and deepen that relationship, we have failed to witness to the Source of Life itself. Witnessing to the Source is not one of the many things we do while passing through life; it is the main thing.”

The church...is always changing. What doesn’t change is the main thing. As a church in this rural, small town context, we seek a fresh, faithful expression of God’s hopes for the world.

2. The Future Facilities Task Force Report (2016) highlights the importance of location and to make wherever we gather accessible to all people. *See Addendum 2.*

3 The Changing Context. A changing surrounding culture has had profound effects on historic, local congregations like ours. Helping people digest the seriousness of the changing culture’s role in our

congregation's stress can be itself very stressful. Who wants to be the bearer of bad or painful news? Business and organizational management thinker, Peter Drucker, stated that "if you can't measure it, you can't improve it." Another organizational thinker, Jim Collins, states even more pointedly, "You must confront the brutal facts" in moving from good to great. More importantly, as people of faith, we draw our wisdom from a tradition that faces the reality of the cross, Good Friday, and death as integral to the hope we have in resurrection, new life and joy. So, ok. Let's work through the context of our story.

Basic Information on the Changing Context.

First Lutheran Church (FLC), Lodi, WI is a local congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Both the congregation and denomination are undergoing deep institutional and structural transition due to shifts in the US and global context. The myriad of causes cannot be fully developed in this short introduction but include decreasing religious affiliation in every successive generational cohort, digital social media, aging membership, lower birth rates, political polarization, pervasive societal fear about the world's circumstances, and so on. The transition is measurable and highlights the source of the institutional and structural change (and stress)!

Since the ELCA's inception in 1987 through 2018, baptized membership decreased from 5,288,471 to 3,363,281 (-36%) and weekly worship attendance declined from 1,653,967 to 864,105 (-48%). These trend data were used by The Rev. Dwight Zschweile, a Luther Seminary professor for church leadership, as an introduction to a recent blog entry:

"According to projections from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Office of Research and Evaluation, the whole denomination will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 in worship on an average Sunday by 2041." (<https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/decline/>)

Congregations like ours experience the above institutional decline as increasing stress around congregational sustainability, e.g., "show me the money!" Talk usually turns to familiar quick fixes like trimming, cutting back, etc., combined with more and more effort at doing what we've always done but with even more intensity by fewer of the remnant. The quick-fix, problem-solving impulse is ever present because problem-solving worked when we knew the solutions to the problems. There was once an aberrant time when historic, mainline congregations thrived and grew due to the surrounding culture. The culture was aberrant because it was not the norm for congregations prior to WWII and since 1965. Gil Rendle, a well-seasoned church consultant with four decades of working with Jewish and Christian congregations and denominations writes, *"Quiet courage is needed when there is no going back because the 'back' that is remembered doesn't exist anymore."* He continues:

"Our current reality is that we are not in a turnaround situation. Leaders cannot take us back to a more comfortable time when the church (especially the mainline church) was established at the heart of the culture as a bedrock, trusted institution. We have steadily lost members and participants since 1965—for more than fifty years. Our members have steadily gotten older, not being replaced by younger generations in numbers sufficient to keep us as young as our communities. As demographics and geography change, a large number of our long-established congregations are now located away from easy access to the people they wish to attract. We hold an immense investment in property that is often dramatically underused and poorly maintained but serves as an albatrossian anchor, restricting movement. Organized religion attracts a continuously shrinking percentage of each successive generation since World War II. Ours is not a turnaround situation, and we have little that we can return to." Rendle, Gil. Quietly Courageous:

Leading the Church in a Changing World (p. 26). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.

The phrase, “restricting movement” is especially challenging to our Christian call. Jesus said, “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you*” and *Go, and make disciples...*” Truth is that most of us were conditioned to go “to church” rather than be sent as the church (the people of God) into the world. The aberrant time when congregations like ours thrived may have been desirable but it also shifted our focus from being a public witness in the larger community to ministry with and for each other not for the stranger and guest, let alone the world.

The church could get away with an internal focus on member satisfaction during this time. Most people assumed the local church was a public good, even those with marginal or no affiliation during the aberrant time. That sentiment regarding institutional church as a public, common good has shifted in the last 20 or so years in the upper midwest and only intensified each successive year since 2001. For example, many in our congregation are aware of the Freedom from Religion Foundation’s legal complaints regarding tax-exempt status and other perceived societal perks afforded organized religion but their voice and sentiment are shared by a growing population less impressed to assume the church as a public good. As local churches have become preoccupied with survival, less energy is devoted for the world God so loved. What incentive is there to join an institution mostly devoted to its own self preservation and established, historic membership? With that question, we are being called to check our motivation as church and discern our purpose and calling in this new environment. Peter Drucker is again helpful when he posed the question, *What business are we in?* We would add, *What’s our motivation underlying our sense of call as a congregation - self-preservation or the Gospel mandate for others?*

This level of direct conversation about the above institutional facts can be difficult to comprehend and accept. It may be even harder to connect the dots from what can be happening on a larger denominational scale directly to our local congregation. The problem, however, is that the world we live in today is not conducive to the kind of church we’ve been and continue to adhere to. We would need to fix the surrounding culture first before the kind of church that thrived in the past could once again thrive. That will not happen. Even if we could, when does a congregation prayerfully consider what God hopes for us during these challenging but also exciting times? Hope does not point us nor the world to some past form of being church, location, denomination, etc., but to Jesus Christ. Our home, our trajectory of hope and our ultimate spiritual promised land is God, not that which collects dust and rust, prone to decay and consumed by moths. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Even with all that said, moving from a religious life conditioned by predictability and control to one that more closely resembles the Israelites in the wilderness can lead to disorientation for members and pastors alike. Rendle states that “*at times of disorientation people need to go back to identity, purpose, and context.*” Rendle is right but we will root that work on identity, purpose and context in our prayer life with God. We need to go back to God, turn back to God, root ourselves in God, form daily patterns of quiet and listening to be still and know God, be surprised by God’s grace, go to the edges of society with God, etc. We can extend the Wilderness experience a bit more on this point. Every time Moses was confronted by challenges, threats, and demands, he turned back to God in intercessory prayer and dialogue.

Lastly, the reality of a changing environment affecting one’s local congregation’s vitality and viability comes as unwanted news — news that can cause sadness. Our experience of sadness is real and needs honest, vulnerable acknowledgement. The question for us is not whether we will feel sad in the face of

change and loss, but will it lead us to be more Christlike and loving toward one another? Will it lead us to a desire for deeper connection with God and justice in the world? As the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians, we grieve in the face of death but not as others who have no hope. (1 Thess 4:13).

4. Hope: The Difference Starting Fresh Can Make. This proposal is a document grown from the ground of hope. In fact, it is hope in action by engaging mission partners in prayerful, imaginative dialogue with God about our future as God's people. As one pastor put it, *What does God hope for you, your church?* (Rev. Rob Carlson). Clearly, the scripture is replete with warnings and even threats especially in the prophets and even Jesus. However, the overarching tenor of God's revelation to human beings and the whole creation is one of hope, a future with hope, where all will be made new! That being said, the future can only be lived toward, which is unlike the past that some attempt to nostalgically recapture and even perfect in the present. Allowing our congregation a future orientation demands of us a different kind of trust that the institutional church cannot provide. Referring back to the people of Israel in the wilderness, they relied on God for their daily bread (manna), for water in the desert, for preservation from danger and direction for living as a newly formed people of God. Our journey during this time is captured well in a poem by Antonio Machado:

*Traveler, there is no path.
The path is made by walking.*

*Traveller, the path is your tracks
And nothing more.
Traveller, there is no path
The path is made by walking.
By walking you make a path
And turning, you look back
At a way you will never tread again.*

The point is that we will practice Christian community orienting ourselves and our soul work, our good work with others in our region toward a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Recalling the past nostalgically happens and can actually be helpful at times. At the same time, our future remains the purview of God and is fulfilled in our relationship with God, especially during times when heaven and earth touch such as in Holy Communion.

Lastly, on this point of the difference starting fresh can make, it might help to at least imagine what might be different going forward. Is this document a proposal for a new and improved First Lutheran Church, or a resurrected, new creation from the ground of the historic First Lutheran Church? This proposal does not seek to be overly prescriptive. The council would rather have that conversation in prayerful, imaginative dialogue as mission partners and as we gather insights from members of the Lodi community. Let's allow the Holy Spirit room in us to imagine a future with hope and start the important conversations of the future God is making through us.

2 Corinthians 5:17

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (ESV)

Isaiah 43:19

"Behold, I am doing a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.” (ESV)

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Revelation 21:5

“And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ Also he said,
“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (ESV)

Isaiah 65:17

“For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.” (ESV)

All this to say, we have important work to do - hard work to be sure - but important, God honoring work during this time of transition. Mission partners will engage in prayerful, respectful conversation about the changing context and how we are discerning God’s call to move forward. The proposal and plan that follows is a faithful offering in that direction. We seek God’s wisdom and guidance together as mission partners bonded by the power of the Holy Spirit. We hope that the proposal and plan provides a first step toward new life as a congregation in an ever-changing world. Soli Deo Gloria!

Addendum 1: FAQs about 2020 Proposal/Plan for New Church Start

Prepared by First Lutheran Church Council

Why start a new church?

Reason 1: The Gospel Mandate. After many months of prayerful discernment, the congregation council concluded that establishing a new, missional ELCA congregation would most faithfully advance the great commission today and into the future for the Lodi-Lake Wisconsin region.

Our congregation's purpose is rooted in our relationship with the triune-God and Jesus' command to love God and neighbor as self, and to "Go, make disciples." The reason we can state with hopeful expectation and firm, faithful conviction to start fresh is the unwavering promises of God for a resurrected new life and the vision of the Kingdom of God. The church council understands this time of transition as the work of the Holy Spirit resurrecting us as a local body of Christ. The Holy Spirit has been building in us greater agility and faithful adaptive capacity through the last fourteen years of missional experimentation and ministry innovation. The proposal is the council's invitation to mission partners to join this unfolding story of new life for us.

Reason 2: The Future Facilities Task Force Report (2016) highlights the importance of location and to make wherever we gather accessible to all people. *See addendum 2.*

Reason 3: The Changing Context. A changing surrounding culture has had profound effects on historic, local congregations like ours. Since the ELCA's inception in 1987 through 2018, baptized membership decreased from 5,288,471 to 3,363,281 (-36%) and weekly worship attendance declined from 1,653,967 to 864,105 (-48%). These trend data were used by The Rev. Dwight Zschweile, a Luther Seminary professor for church leadership, as an introduction to a recent blog entry:

"According to projections from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Office of Research and Evaluation, the whole denomination will have fewer than 67,000 members in 2050, with fewer than 16,000 in worship on an average Sunday by 2041." (<https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/decline/>)

Doing what we've always done will not change the culture back to a time when it was conducive to having a thriving mid-twentieth century, USAmerican congregation. We need to signal to God that we are ready to let go and trust the Holy Spirit's prompting to move and adapt to the new world around us. We have been attempting to become more of a "missional" church for some time. This has not changed, but our past attempts have been to make small tweaks while holding tightly to the historic institution of FLC. We have discerned that the best way to most faithfully build a "missional" church is to start fresh.

Reason 4: Hope for a Fresh Start. We have important work to do - hard work to be sure - but important, God-honoring work during this time of transition. Mission partners will engage in prayerful, respectful conversation about the changing context and how we are discerning God's call to move forward. We seek God's wisdom and guidance together as mission partners bonded by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What does the synod think about starting a new church? The synod staff and Bishop have affirmed our proposed direction.

What about Pastor Mike's role in the new start? Pastor Mike has consistently focused our congregation's vision and spiritual focus on God and what God hopes for us. The synod and this church council have confidence in his leadership for this present time and future ministry.

What's the "glue" that holds us together? The Holy Spirit is the glue! We are bonded by God's love. As we practice worship and life together, Christ is present no matter where we meet.

Why would people worship at a school versus a church building? Jesus promises us, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Mt 18:20) Whatever space we gather in, our goal is to provide safe, common ground where all can encounter God through Word and Sacrament. Whether a person gathers in Jesus' name in a school, storefront, a home, around a campfire, on a beach or a building with a steeple has in large part to do with the work of the Holy Spirit in him or her, and to the degree those providing and preparing the space care about those who gather through loving hospitality. God is present wherever and whenever the faithful gather in Jesus' name.

Have you done research for the models being used around the country? Has the council done its homework for this proposal? The church council has done much to research and learn how to best move our congregation forward. Here's one example:

"Our current reality is that we are not in a turnaround situation. Leaders cannot take us back to a more comfortable time when the church (especially the mainline church) was established at the heart of the culture as a bedrock, trusted institution. We have steadily lost members and participants since 1965—for more than fifty years. Our members have steadily gotten older, not being replaced by younger generations in numbers sufficient to keep us as young as our communities." Gil Rendle, Quietly Courageous

How are we going to reach younger generations? What would appeal to the "unchurched" in our community? We need to be genuine in our faith. Trying to appear "holy" or "hip" but not authentic, will

not cut it. We must be genuinely non-judgemental and accepting of all. Genuine care and Christ-like love for others is the greatest gift we have to offer to a world in need of it.

Most people that remain members in an historic congregation to some degree (the remnant) are conditioned by their experience and memories of being and doing church. That being said, the real challenge is for the remnant to discover (possibly re-discover) the God-given, biblical reason for their existence and what is essential about being self-identified Christians in a changing culture. A big part of that requires vulnerability and hard work because the God-given, biblical (Missional) purpose and essential practices of self-identifying Christians are buried under so much that needs to be unlearned.

We know a lot of what doesn't appeal to the unchurched: a nostalgic and institutionally preoccupied group of religious insiders trying to attract folks who do not sense God's presence in transitory structures and forms of Christian religious practice. It might just be somewhat appealing if there's a group of Christians so committed and attuned with the Holy Spirit already present in the "unchurched" that connections will be made that conventional churchy programs built on an attractional mindset just cannot do in a post-christian era.

Are there enough people to start a new church? Jesus started with 12 people in the 1st century. The movement Jesus started with that rag-tag group in Galilee, 30 AD, is the same movement in Lodi, WI in the 21st century. Who will be the rag-tag group following Jesus on this journey of congregational death and resurrection? We have confidence that each mission partner will discern the Holy Spirit's work in their life and respond to the call God has prepared for them. The church council is confident that God will work through all who will take this first step of faith forward.

What happens to membership status during this time of transition? Members of FLC will automatically become members of the new church and have the opportunity to covenant for membership when the new congregation is constituted with the ELCA.

Do we have the financial resources to do this work? Will this plan ease financial burden? The proposal is not a fix for finances in the short-term. The proposal offers us a path toward greater engagement of our local community in the work we are called by God to do. Cultivating generosity and robust financial stewardship for God's mission locally is a high priority. Funding sources besides general offering are being researched to help with the new mission start.

Building & Location Questions.

What do we do with the building? Our goal is to sell the current building and use the funds for the future mission start.

Where are we going? We have been reviewing potential local sites including schools.

What can we do to increase the use of this building by other people? (For increasing our income.) Can we rent a portion of the building to raise money? We are not convinced that this would significantly help our financial situation. Plus, our mission is not to be a property management entity.

Where would weddings and other celebrations be held? Three local congregations and the funeral home have offered use of their buildings for funerals. The same congregations have offered their spaces for weddings.

Could we just remove the building except for the main church building(sanctuary)? Modifying the current building would be a costly endeavor. While it would help in some ways, it would not address several of our basic issues especially accessibility. The FLC Future Facility Task Force Report from Jan. 2016 covers these issues in more detail. (Addendum 2)

If we can take care of the needs (new membership, increased revenue, repairs to building, etc.), would we remain in this building? It is the judgement of the church council that our congregation has tried a number of new ministry innovations and improvements in the past. Most have worked very well and continue, e.g., Summer Lunch Program and Reach Out Lodi. While ministry innovations might offer some short-term relief, they are not long-term solutions in today's changing cultural landscape.

Merger, Process/Timeline, and Miscellaneous Questions.

What about merging with a like-minded congregation? We had discussions with the Presbyterian Church, but they did not move beyond the initial discussion phase. We never reached the point of merging in any of our discussions with any other local congregations. We are open to having those conversations throughout this process.

What is a Religious Society? Religious Society is a term used by Wisconsin statutes to describe any church or society of any religious sect. Under WI State Statutes, FLC is currently a religious society.

Is there going to be some kind of vote? To dissolve FLC? Yes, there would be a vote to make final decisions on dissolution and disposal of assets of the current congregation coupled with a vote to submit

the new congregation's constitution and by-laws with the ELCA.

Can we come to a solution by April 2020? The current proposal and plan is to complete the process of transition to a new church start in April 2020. So, yes, we can come to a solution by April 2020.

Note: *Solution date amended July 2020 due to pandemic to August 2020.*

Will this new church be affiliated with the ELCA? Yes!

Why has there been so much negativity from some of our membership even as we strive to be a loving church? We are at a difficult crossroad in the life of our church. There can be a great sense of loss and the grieving process is difficult during this time of transition. It is easy to become anxious when the future is unclear. Sometimes this anxiety causes people to strike out at their Pastor, leaders or people that think differently from them. Again, we ground our experience in the hope we have in the promise that all things will be made new.

Addendum 2: First Lutheran Church Future Facility Task Force Report

By Scott Pertzborn, Taskforce Chair

January, 2016

We began meeting in January, 2015 and have met about once a month.

The charge for the Task Force:

1. Facility evangelism. How can our facility be more welcoming and guest friendly – leading more people to Christ.
2. Create spaces that make our worship events and gatherings more meaningful.
3. In all of this... Always remember our mission statement ... Love God, Love Neighbor and make Disciples.

We studied our current facility –its advantages and disadvantages. We reviewed the history of our current building, its current use, and the current condition of the building.

We reviewed the land use potential for our property and the area around First Lutheran Church.

We have met with Jeff Spann, a consultant from the ELCA, Pastor Rob Carlson of New Life Church in Cottage Grove and Chaplain Dan Pulsfus to try to gain from their experiences and wisdom.

We have looked at population projections, we have spoken to a Lodi School District Representative. We made a visit with Chaplain Dan to Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Portage. We made a visit to Messiah Lutheran Church on Cottage Grove Road.

We are doing this while considering not just the next 10 years but also 20, 30 and 40 years out. What kind of facility will we need to be a vibrant church in the future?

We have done this while being grounded in prayer and asking for God's guidance.

Some of our Findings:

FLC is landlocked with little ability to expand.

We are not visible from a major thoroughfare.

Parking is poor and limited. The School District of Lodi property across the street has a questionable and at this time undetermined future.

We are located on a fairly steep hill making the church difficult to approach. Especially in the winter.

The layout of our building can be confusing. It is a maze of stairs and levels.

Projections are for a slow growing, aging population in the Lodi area.

We are not handicap accessible or handicap friendly.

We have wasted space in the form of many small rooms.

HVAC systems are nearing the end of life.

The church exterior is looking worn and the interior needs updating.

Our Vision for the Future:

Facility evangelism – making our church more welcoming and guest friendly leading more people to experience Christ.

Creating spaces that make our worship events and inter-generational gatherings more meaningful.

Incorporate outdoor/natural areas.

Better option for pews – spacing, location, comfort.

Integration of technology.

Versatile spaces.

Adult and youth fellowship areas.

Retain special features/sense of history.

Our Recommendation: We prayerfully concluded that we should look into the availability and possible purchase of land for a new church.