

A VENTURE OF FAITH

The History of the School Building Project
of
Faith Ev. Lutheran Church, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

by

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At 3:00 p.m. on October 16, 1983, a group of Christians gathered in a building on the outskirts of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The building in which they assembled was no ordinary building. It was a building for which these people had worked, and planned and prayed. It was a building in which a most God-pleasing responsibility would be carried out, namely, the Christian education of children. It was a building which five years previously had been appropriately labelled "The Venture of Faith." It was this building which Faith Ev. Lutheran Church, on that festive day in 1983, dedicated to God.

Two years after that dedication service, I walked through the halls of Faith Lutheran School for the first time. I was impressed by the beauty and design of the building. By speaking to the pastor, I learned that a large amount of the interior work had been done by the members of the congregation. I also learned that the building was now valued at over \$1,000,000. The more I learned of the building, the more questions I had. "How does a congregation go about erecting a building of this magnitude? Who does the planning? How is it financed? Is there a right way and a wrong way to carry out such a building project? In an effort to answer these questions and others, I began to research the Faith Lutheran School Building Project. This paper is the fruit of my efforts. In it I plan to document the various events which occurred prior to and including the construction of their school

building. I especially intend to include information and insights which I feel will prove helpful in the planning of future building projects. As a future parish pastor, I may some day face the joy and challenge of initiating a building program of some kind or another. This paper is an attempt to draw a road map of how one congregation, with the help of God, reached their goal.

Faith Ev. Lutheran Church was formally organized in February, 1947. In late 1947 the congregation built a basement chapel located at 400 E. Johnson Street. Four years after voting to become a self-supporting congregation (1956), the members elected to build the superstructure of the church. At the same time, a two room school was added. At the dedication of the building in August 1961, the congregation numbered 231 communicants. The school itself opened with 67 students and two teachers.

In the years that followed, the congregation and its school continued to experience growth. The fellowship hall was converted into one, and then two classrooms. Further growth forced the congregation to convert the pastor's office into the kindergarten room. By 1977, it had become quite apparent that an expansion of the facilities was necessary.

In light of this growing need for room, the voters of the congregation, in their January 1978 meeting, adopted the following motion:

That Faith Congregation build a new school when time is feasible, and that a seven member building committee and a five member finance committee be appointed by the Church Council.

At the first meeting of the Joint Building and Building Finance Committee, held in April 1978, it was determined that the Building Committee would direct its efforts toward "planning for a building of suitable size and within the financial means of the congregation." The purpose of the Finance Committee, on the otherhand, was two-fold: "To formulate plans for canvassing the congregation for pledges and donations; to propose ways and means of financing the new building."

It was further decided that there was a need to determine and establish a "master plan" which would consider, first of all, the needs of the congregation, and secondly, alternate plans and their respective costs. At this time, the main question was whether to expand facilities on the present location (400 E. Johnson) or plan to build on the congregation's vacant property on Mariearl Lane.

In order to make that decision, some basic facts were needed. Both properties were appraised. Cost comparisons were made regarding the advantages and disadvantages of annexation vs. sanitary district. A re-designed sketch of the existing building was made. Tests were taken to determine the energy costs and possible energy-saving improvements. Finally, adjacent properties were investigated for the possibility of expansion at the present location.

As one might well imagine, this information was neither compiled nor evaluated overnight. Many different factors had to be taken into account, not the least of which was the emotional attachment what many had with the old building. Many had grown up with the building on East Johnson. Many lived within walking

distance of it. And most had grown quite fond of it.

Yet, in early 1979, it was becoming obvious to the Building Committee that the congregation's only viable option for expansion was to relocate on their new property. The reasons cited included: the prohibitive cost of the adjacent properties (a number of which held doctor's residences); the inferior construction of the present church and school (which necessitated costly maintenance and allowed tremendous heat loss); the inconvenience and hazard of crossing Highway 23 for parking; and the relatively low financial investment in the present property.

By May 1978, the Building Committee had weighed all the facts and had made their decision to move. Also by this time, the Finance Committee was prepared to initiate a one-day canvass and subsequent commitment drive. Both committees were ready to put the whole matter to congregational vote. Fortunately, they didn't.

In the May 16th meeting, Chairman Harold Hillmer reminded the Committees that they had been authorized to simply study the options. This they had done faithfully and zealously. But as is often the case with such work, the committee itself was much better informed than the congregation as a whole. For the committees to put such a momentous proposal to congregational vote, without fully informing the individual members of the long-range advantages and disadvantages of such a move, would leave the committee open to the charge of manipulation, or "railroading." Chairman Hillmer stressed that this had to be a congregational decision. The Committees were asking the

congregation to embark on a long journey that would involve financial sacrifices on the part of the individual members. To make such a consequential decision, they would need more information.

In response to the suggestion of Hillmer and others, the congregation was not asked to vote on the actual move. Rather, in the June 1979 meeting, they approved a series of cottage meetings, which were to take place in the fall of 1979. The purpose of these meetings was to update all the members concerning the findings and recommendations of the two committees. Also at that voter's meeting, authorization was given for an every member canvass, designed to gather pledges over a two year period.

It was only after the cottage meetings that the congregation was asked to vote on the building project. On October 28, 1979, the congregation approved a resolution containing the following points:

1. That Faith Church be relocated on the new property;
2. That a construction goal be initiated for a school and gymnasium;
3. That at least 35% of the total cost of whatever phase is approved, be on hand in contributions, before any construction begins.

In December 1979, Rev. Martin Janke accepted a call to David's Star, Jackson, Wisconsin. Undaunted by what would prove to be an eighteen month vacancy, the congregation strode on toward its goal of a new school building. At the 1980 annual meeting, the congregation approved the Building Committee's basic design plan for the church-school-gymnasium complex. The Building Committee was also given authorization to hire Thern and

Associates as the architect firm for the project. With this approval, the Committee was well on its way to seeing (at least on paper) the building about which they had previously only dreamed.

The Finance Committee, however, was faced with a more immediate challenge. The Building Committee and congregation had decided on the size and design of the facility which they felt was necessary to meet the needs of the present and near-future school enrollments. The estimated price tag of such a building was \$645,000. The obvious question posed among the Finance Committee was, "How can a congregation with 650 members raise such a substantial sum?" It was the opinion of the men involved that God could, and would, open the hearts of the members to support such an endeavor. It would not be easy for the people to pledge themselves to something yet unseen. It would take a commitment of faith. For this reason, the building project of Faith Lutheran was appropriately labelled, "The Venture of Faith."

The Venture of Faith program entailed a number of different phases. First, an advance gifts program was initiated. This gave the families who were participating in the leadership and execution of the Venture of Faith an opportunity to set an example for the congregation and provide "qualified" leadership. In this case "qualified" meant "committed." No leader was to ask something which he had not previously done himself.

Secondly, a congregational canvass was undertaken. A booklet describing the entire Venture of Faith program was delivered to each member. The member was subsequently given the

chance to make a pledge which was to be fulfilled over the following two years. Percentage giving was stressed; the figure 4% was suggested. By the time the initial canvass was completed, \$107,000 had been pledged by 198 members of the congregation.

In addition to pledging to give money for the Lord's work, each member could pledge to lend money for the same purpose. Members could set their own interest rates (up to 8%) on money lent to the church. It was hoped that such member loans would substantially reduce the amount of money borrowed from area financial institutions (whose current borrowing rates were over 14%).

During 1980 and early 1981 the committees continued their work. Plans were drawn, rejected, revised and finally, accepted (with the assurance of future modification). A tentative budget was established. The site was surveyed and tentative building orientation established. Artist's sketches and floor plans were displayed from time to time and on-going input was received from interested friends and neighbors.

This planning culminated with the "Facilities Improvement Report" presented to the Joint Building Committees on July 1, 1981. In attendance was the newly installed pastor, Rev. Mark Schroeder. It was Pastor Schroeder who would be shepherd to this flock as they continued on their Venture of Faith.

The Facilities Improvement Report was compiled in an effort to disseminate among all the committees the information gathered by the Building Committee. The report included a number of key points. First, the report proposed that the building

construction sequence be divided into four phases (six classrooms; the gym and cafeteria; the sanctuary; and four additional classrooms). Because a larger building would result in cheaper "per foot" costs, the committee suggested that it was most important to proceed with as much of the building program as possible at one time. A ten year wait would likely double the building costs. It was imperative that the supporting committees determine exactly how far they could go immediately.

Secondly, the report pointed out the opportunity which the depressed economy was currently affording the congregation. Increased competition and lower material costs had lowered construction costs approximately 5-10%. Interest rates were high but were beginning to edge downward.

Thirdly, it was noted that no building could be constructed overnight. If the committee were to receive congregational approval that same night, it would be eighteen months before the building would be completed. This underscored the fact that their building project was a slow and orderly process. Yet the process could be accelerated if all the committees moved forward together.

The importance of committee inter-action provided the closing argument of the report. It was noted that any building program that does not provide for and encourage the liberal exchange of information is a program doomed to failure. Each committee must be made aware of where the other is at. Games of "cat and mouse" are only counter-productive. Also, the committee should be aware that it is common for the contributors to a building fund drive to hold back until they see that the drive is

"for real." Historically, this has caused committees to over-economize and delete essentials which are difficult or expensive to reinstate.

Therefore, the Faith committees would be expected to look past such temporary slowdowns and plan for the long-range benefit of the congregation. They would be asked to select the proper program, timetable, financing and public relations--all in an effort to assure the congregation of the finest facility for the lowest possible cost. It was certainly an effort which would continue to demand their time, energy and prayer.

The committees did not have to wait long to reap some preliminary fruits from their labors. At the Quarterly Voters' Meeting of August 9, 1981, the congregation adopted August 1, 1982 as the target date for the start of construction on the new building project, which would consist of, at the minimum, Phases I and II (the classrooms and gym area). The congregation also approved four other recommendations which pertained to the annexation of their property and the extension and installation of sewer and water mains necessary for the proposed construction.

With these recommendations in place, the Finance Committee began to direct its efforts toward soliciting loans from the members. In the Fall of 1981, an informational letter, along with a loan agreement was sent to all members. In that letter, suggestions were given as to where members could obtain money to lend (life insurance policies, savings accounts, certificates of deposit, etc.). Also, a motivational sermon and post-service pep-talk were delivered on September 20. Originally, the

committee had set a goal of \$200,000 in member loans. This was later revised to \$100,000. Unfortunately, the final figure for member loans only totalled \$65,700. The committee surmised that interest rates of 8-12% had discouraged members from lending their savings at a rate considerably less than that.

It was also in late 1981 that the official Venture of Faith Progress Reports began to be published. These letters, mailed directly, or inserted in the weekly bulletin, kept the members abreast of current developments in the building project. The October edition reported that \$143,000 had been received toward the building project. This amounted to 59% of the \$245,000 groundbreaking goal (35% of \$700,000).

Through early 1982, the congregation continued to evidence a zeal to meet its commitment to Christian education. The grade school children designed posters promoting the new school building. A scale model was displayed in the narthex of the church. And gradually, the Venture of Faith crept nearer its goal.

While the Finance Committee was actively soliciting funds, the Building Committee was busy soliciting bids. On April 5, a special Voter's Meeting authorized the Building Committee to advertise for construction bids on the final plans of Phases I and II. They also voted to hire a member of Faith, W. G. Feuerpfeil, as their official construction representative.

May was the month for receiving the construction bids. Unfortunately, along with the bids, came a real disappointment. The building which had been designed to meet the needs of Faith Lutheran School was going to cost over \$850,000! This came as a

real shock to the committees and congregation alike. Would this mean that their dream would never become reality? Mr. Feuerpfeil and the various committees involved insisted, "No! Rather, we must adjust our plans."

It was decided that all the bids be rejected and that the bidding process be repeated. The second time, however, a number of changes were made. The new plans specified less expensive building materials. Only bids from sub-contractors were accepted. And bids were advertised in such a way as to create a genuine atmosphere of competition. This revised format resulted in bids totally approximately \$753,000. It was further determined that approximately \$49,000 could be saved if certain finish work were done by volunteers from the congregation. This left a total cost figure of \$704,000. This figure was considered by the Finance Committee to be well within the financial means of the congregation.

Therefore, upon the unanimous recommendation of the Building Committee, Building Finance Committee and the Church Council, the Voter's Assembly, on August 17, 1982, approved a resolution recommending that construction of a new school building be commenced as soon as possible, that the total borrowed money for Phases I and II not exceed \$400,000, and that a Groundbreaking ceremony be scheduled for August 29, 1982. The widespread support for this project became quite evident in the final vote: 54 in favor, 8 opposed.

On August 29, the congregation assembled at church for a service of thanksgiving and praise. After the service, the

members gathered on the new property for the Groundbreaking ceremony. Although rain soaked the ground, it did not dampen the spirits of those present. Their love for the Lord and His work prompted them to share gifts totaling over \$15,000 for a special groundbreaking offering. Soon their gifts of silver and gold would be turned into a building of concrete and steel.

Through the fall and winter of 1982, the congregation watched as their new school building took shape. In the spring of 1983, they were given the opportunity to do more than watch. Every member in the congregation was surveyed for individual skills and abilities. This information was used to coordinate a volunteer work force. The response to this plea for help was outstanding. It was estimated that between 60-80% of the members donated their time and talent at least once during the construction period. Many spent much more time at the building site. Some were there from morning until late at night. Through it all, a spirit of fellowship was nurtured. Friendships were made or renewed. Certainly, the Faith School was a "people's project." Even when continued disagreements with the architect forced the congregation to terminate his contract, the morale of the people remained high. Without a doubt, those spring and summer months of 1983 hold fond memories for most members of Faith Lutheran.

But fondest of them all is the memory of October 16, 1983. For on that day Faith congregation gathered to dedicate the impressive building now known as Faith Evangelical Lutheran School. The school stands as a memorial to a group of Christians willing to work for what they believed in. It stands as a

memorial to countless hours, and talents, and dollars offered by these servants of the Lord. But most importantly, it stands as a memorial to the grace of God, without which nothing would have been possible.

Even as a casual observer of this slice of Lutheran history, one cannot help but thank and praise our Lord. For how vividly the Psalmist's words are here fulfilled, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its workers labor in vain." How thankful we can be that in the case of Faith Lutheran School, the Lord did build the house! To our God alone be glory!

N.B. The information contained in this paper was compiled from various letters, minutes, and personal interviews gathered by the author while serving at Faith Lutheran Church, Fond du Lac.