

SAYING GOOD-BYE

Pastoral Care to Those Whose Congregation is Closing

Click on a link to go to one of the following documents:

1. *Reflections from Internship*, January, 1995. This gives a feeling for the *spirit* of Vang Lutheran Church.
2. A letter sent out in March, 1995, from pastor Erik Johnson explaining the need for a final decision meeting
3. A copy of the resolution that was voted on and the ballot
4. A *Reflections* column dealing with the decision to close
5. A news release to the local papers inviting all to the closing service. The church was full - over 121 people.
6. A letter I wrote with pastor Erik giving final details to the congregation.
7. The bulletin for our final service
8. A letter written by one of our youngest members at the first vote to close in September.
9. A piece written by Kerri and read by her at the closing service to help the adults get through the day
10. The memories I shared with the congregation during the final service
11. A *Reflections* column about that service
12. A *Reflections* column about a time this summer when Vang met its past

“SAYING GOOD-BYE”

From my Fairdale Journal - September 2, 1994. Thoughts while walking through the cemetery at Vang Lutheran Church.

“What were their dreams for their church? Did they see it surviving into the 21st century or were they just concerned that it be here in their own time and place?”

When I came to do my Internship in the Fairdale Lutheran Parish in August of 1994, the possible closing of Vang Lutheran Church - the country church in the Parish, was the first challenge I faced.

On Sunday, September 4, the congregation met after worship and, to the surprise of everyone, did NOT have the required 2/3 majority vote to close. And so - we left that day committed to continuing operation - at least for the immediate future.

My supervising Pastor was disappointed. "*They'll just have to face this all again*", he told me. And he was right.

At the Annual Meeting in February of this year, after a long hard look at the financial facts, the decision was made to again call for a vote to close.

This vote took place by mail, and was later affirmed, based on legal advice, by another meeting of the congregation. This time the majority needed to close was reached and the date for the closing service was set. May 28, 1995.

And so began a new dimension of Pastoral care - and a realization that it was the work of the Holy Spirit that kept this beloved congregation from closing its doors last September. For I *never* could have served these people in the way that only God knew they needed to be served after having just met them, as would have been the case last fall.

As a novice Pastor, I was very grateful for Pastor Erik's presence and guidance. I learned from him the importance of not getting carried away by my own feelings when addressing the feelings of others. It is a lesson I'm sure I will use often in the years ahead.

And so it happened. And the Pastoral care has continued. I had hoped to see them all find a new congregation to join before I left, but that's not going to happen. Some have made the leap. Most still hesitate. I

have learned from other Pastors in the area who have been through this that this is very common. In fact, sometimes the decision is never made.

My prayer is that this won't happen for the members of Vang Lutheran Church. In his sermon at the closing service, Bishop Rick Foss said the greatest honor they can give to the memory of their congregation is to take what it has given them over the years and share it with another congregation. Advice that was listened to and favorably commented on at the time and to which I have referred in conversation once in a while. Hopefully it will be recalled from time to time.

I have learned a lot from living through this time with the people of Vang Lutheran Church. It is my hope that what I have learned will serve others who face the same decision.

At the request of Bishop Rick Foss of the Eastern North Dakota Synod, this project is being sent in its entirety to the END Resource Center. This request is another sign to me of how the Spirit works. (Even through Internship requirements - like writing up a project!)

In closing, I give thanks to God for calling me to Fairdale at this time in the life of Vang Lutheran Church. And I give thanks to the people of Vang Lutheran Church for welcoming me as their Pastor and trusting me to lead them through this time.

We used verses 1 and 2 from Psalm 90 as the cover scripture for our closing service.

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.”

Through the closing of Vang Lutheran Church, I have learned a new truth behind that ancient scripture.

Just as God was the dwelling place for those early settlers who came to

the prairie of North Dakota and established a congregation, God remains the dwelling place for their descendants and will lead them to new congregations.

Congregations change. They are established, they are merged, they grow, they shrink, they are closed. But one thing remains the same. *“From everlasting to everlasting, you are God.”*

For that we can surely say ‘Thanks be to God. AMEN

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