

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3-1-2021



Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, March 2 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, let our prayers be words of praise and gratitude for the sixty-fifth anniversary of St. Andrew Lutheran Church. Thank God for specific ways in which you have been ministered to through our congregation. Ask the Spirit to show you how you can more fully become part of God's mission through St. Andrew.

On Wednesday, March 3, St. Andrew Lutheran Church marks its 64th anniversary as a congregation. The first church I served was Lyster Lutheran Church in rural Wisconsin. While I was there, Lyster celebrated its 120th anniversary, and that was more than thirty years ago. I also served Trinity Lutheran Church in Long Beach when they reached their 100th anniversary. So, I have had wonderful opportunities to consider what, for a congregation, are the keys to a long life. Here are three traits that contribute to congregational longevity.

- 1) Outward vs. Inward looking. Congregations easily slip into the focus of "take care our own." Of course, care for members is an important role for congregational ministry, but when it becomes only about "us," the congregation has lost an important concentration. Churches need to recognize that their primary purpose is to spread the Kingdom of God. That means making sure that seeking to share the good news of Jesus Christ brings others outside the congregation under their influence. Sharing that good news is about letting people know about God's love for everyone, and there are many ways to do this. The early Christian church made one of their first

areas of attention the needs of the widows in their community. Often, when a woman lost her husband and had no son to care for her, she would turn to begging or prostitution as the only available means to earn income to survive. The early Christians saw their need and began distributing food to widows. The results of this effort included the intake of these women who were again having their needs met, a decrease in the number of beggars and prostitutes in the community, and a more positive identity among their fellow citizens for addressing this social need.

2) Resilient vs. Robust. Our nature is to seek first and foremost to go bigger and better. When churches grow, they build bigger buildings and develop more programs. There is nothing wrong with this and it is often beneficial to the congregation. But if the church has not also developed the ability to adapt and alter their ministry, they may find themselves at risk. Resilience has to do with begin able to change when new challenges arise. A good example has been dealing with the pandemic. Our ability to find ways to worship that keep those who attend safe is evidence of that adaptability. Churches that have remained fixated on worship only as we've done it before—in the building and only in the same ways that they've known—have found it difficult to meet the worship needs of their community. Resilience even allows congregations to admit that perhaps its time to let certain ministries die or fade away so that they can better meet the needs of their folks and the folks around them.

3) A Clear Sense of Mission. Congregations need to recognize that their reason for existence comes from the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28. Before Jesus ascended back to the Father, He told His followers what they needed to do next and, I think, always: “Go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all I have commanded.” That is the purpose that can and will keep congregations active and alive. Churches that regularly examine how they are doing in their outreach and how they might improve that effort will find that this mission is life-blood that enlivens and energizes a congregation's existence.

Sixty-four years is a milestone that not many congregations reach. Though, because of the pandemic, we will note this accomplishment quietly, we also do so in gratitude and awe of what God has been doing here for more than half-a-century. Nor will we rest on our laurels. This is a time for us to give praise to God for what God is doing here, and then begin yet another chapter in asking ourselves, “What is God leading us to do next?”

In Christ's love,

Pastor Jeffrey