

# Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Many may be wondering what the Transition Team has been doing and why we have not begun the call process for a settled pastor.

When a pastorate ends in what seems an abrupt manner, the congregation has to spend time determining what went wrong. In our efforts to glean this information from the congregation, we provided opportunities for everyone to tell their story, ask questions of Bethlehem's Council, the Northwest Ohio Synod and fellow Bethlehem members:

- Reveal Survey, (Bethlehem's REVEAL team), finishing in 2017
- Listening Posts, (conducted by NW Ohio Synod), 2021
- Heritage, Mission, Connection Events (conducted by Transition Team), 2021
- A retreat with Dr. Ken Quick from Blessing Point Ministries, titled "Healing the Heart of Your Church", 2022

We thank everyone who participated in any of the opportunities. If you didn't participate, we missed your input.

The NWO Synod Listening Post assessment identified 5 areas needing attention from Bethlehem's leadership and recommendations to move forward:

- Observation 1: Lack of clarity regarding Pastor Matt's departure
  - Recommendation 1: Address what happened
- Observation 2: Significant breakdowns in communication and trust
  - Recommendation 2 - Practice open communication
- Observation 3: Inability to foster connection/community
  - Recommendation 3: Discernment about priorities in pastoral leadership
- Observation 4: Lack of belonging, fellowship, and relationship
  - Recommendation 4: Create intentional times for fellowship and engage in a process of congregational healing
- Observation 5: A sense of "stuckness"
  - Recommendation 5: Lead with hope

The REVEAL Survey identified many opportunities for improvement. These opportunities were similar to the observations from the Listening Posts. The unabridged version of the Listening Post report and the REVEAL Survey are available in the office.

*Transformed by the crucified and risen Jesus  
we are a loving community of disciples making disciples.*

The Heritage and History events looked at the good and challenging times Bethlehem has experienced since 1861. The retreat provided a similar opportunity as the Heritage event. Blessing Point Ministries organization helps churches find behaviors that are damaging and repetitive. During this retreat we found many blessings and identified crises and challenges.

From these events we can summarize our major issues in two words - CONFLICT and TRUST.

## CONFLICT

What is conflict? It is not much more than a disagreement between two parties. We see conflict everywhere in our world. It can be viewed as evil and destructive. Generally, churches try to avoid conflict at all costs, but conflict is inevitable. Conflict was even present in the early Christian Church, which is documented in Acts 15. When we do not work diligently to resolve conflict, the devil steps in. He sees our pain and tempts us to react in unchristian ways such as gossiping, divisiveness, and triangulation to get our own way. All these destructive behaviors allow the devil to separate us from God and from one another, but Jesus gives us a solution to conflict in Matthew 18:15-20. We can choose to view conflict as an opportunity for growth, where we practice open communication and work together to reach a solution and/or compromise.

We have experienced conflict and lack of resolution at Bethlehem over the years. Some recent examples of Bethlehem conflicts are:

- Constitutional changes to Council organization
- Worship during Covid
- Transition to a one pastor church
- Expectations of the pastor
- Changes to the worship space
- Praise team/contemporary service

This unhealthy conflict resolution manifested itself in

- Problems not being addressed openly - being swept under the rug.
- Selfish attitudes surfacing - it is about what I want, when it should be about what Christ wants.
- Numerous resignations of Council members
- Members leaving the church

Trust is broken.

## TRUST

In recent history, trust in Bethlehem's leadership was lost because of unhealthy communication between the pastor, Council and the congregation.

So, how did you respond to the Conflict and broken Trust:

- Did you just listen?
- Did you provide counsel?

- Did you pray about it?
- Did you cover your ears and say 'I don't want to know'?
- Did you throw up your hands and leave?
- Did you reflect on how you could have reacted differently?
- How did you treat those who disagreed with you?

### **What do we do now?**

We have to acknowledge mistakes happened. If you think you were wronged by somebody. Tell them. If you think you wronged someone, ask for their forgiveness. Repentance and forgiveness are essential to Christianity.

Scripture teaches us:

- Love your neighbor as yourself - Matthew 7:12
- Care for others more than yourself - Romans 15:1-3
- Do not become a stumbling block - Romans 14:13-23
- Everyone has spiritual gifts - 1st Corinthians 12:1-11
- The body has many members - 1st Corinthians 12:12-26
- Speak the truth in love - Ephesians 4:15

The leadership of Bethlehem, both pastoral and lay need to:

- Create opportunities to build relationships within the church.
- Recognize and resolve conflict as it arises. Training in conflict management is necessary.
- Review and follow the Covenant of Conduct from the NWO Synod that provides guidelines of how to deal effectively with issues of the parish.
- Implement the Listening Post Recommendations Report 2021.

We ask Bethlehem membership to:

- Commit to individual spiritual practices in your daily lives and respond boldly to what God is saying.
- Build relationships by connecting with each other beyond worship.
- Pray that God will guide Bethlehem to become a thriving congregation.
- Participate in opportunities provided to live the Mission of Bethlehem.

For any members who are not currently attending Bethlehem, we hope your spiritual needs are being met. If you have not connected with another church community, we invite you back to Bethlehem. We would love to worship with you and share our mission of being a loving community of disciples making disciples.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

The Transition Team: Travis Ford, Matt Oestrich, Teri Hansen, Nancy Rife, Luann Snyder, Scott Schuerman, Vic Schuerman, Lisa Kohlenberg, Pastor Tim Philabaum