

Spiritual Needs

Sharon Krafft

German immigrants to Stuttgart, Kansas, settled near a creek, claimed the land to farm and built homes for shelter, but they sought more than this for survival in a new land. So, in 1881, they established Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church to meet their spiritual needs. For 122 years, Emmanuel's key characteristics have remained the same. Despite many natural, structural and pastoral changes it continues to look ahead to fulfill the spiritual needs of the community.

One such structural change was the result of a devastating fire in 2001. The fire destroyed the 50-year-old parsonage. Despite tough economic times throughout the rural areas, the congregation, community and friends from across the nation, along with the insurance settlement, provided the financial assistance necessary to rebuild. The recently completed parsonage, a 4,000-square-foot ranch style home, including a finished basement, greatly contrasts with Emmanuel's 1885 parsonage—a 10 by 22-foot area in the church building. “With the replacement cost insurance settlement, we were fortunate to be able to build a good quality home. We wanted to make improvements in some areas, keeping in mind that this would be a house suitable to meet the needs of future pastors and their families,” former council president Dwight Ehm said.

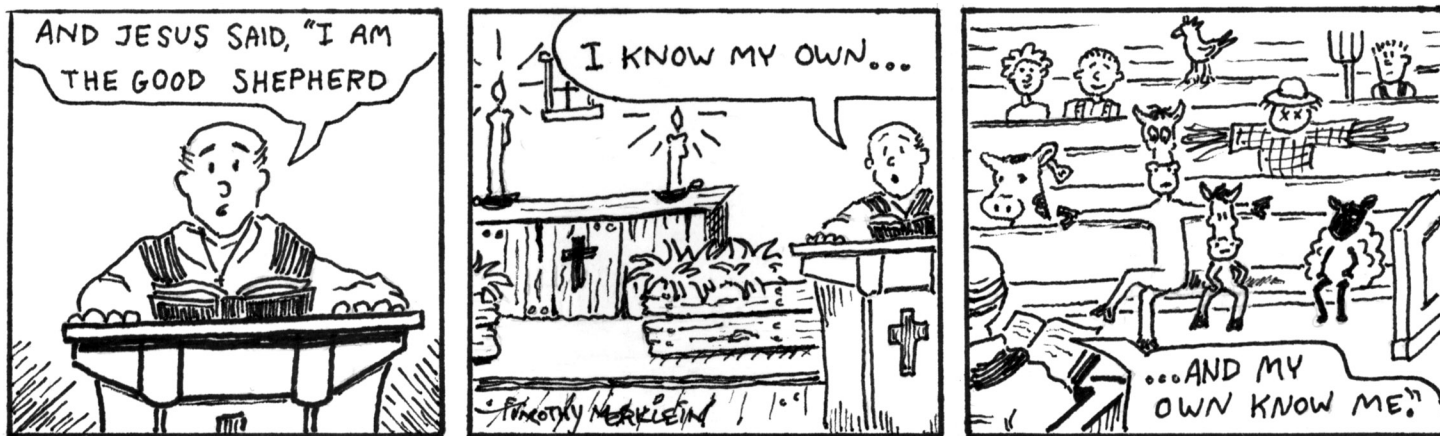
Other changes have taken place over the years, but the most significant one has nothing to do with physical structures. It is the absence of a spiritual leader and shepherd since August 2001. Following the call process as outlined by the Central States Synod (Kansas and Missouri), Emmanuel appointed a call committee, surveyed congregational members, summarized the results, and then submitted the congregational profile. However, to date, the call committee has received only three candidates' names. None have progressed to the interview stage. Emmanuel's members are quite aware of the shortage of ministers throughout the synod. Statistically the greatest percentage of open calls is found in rural ministry, which only adds to our frustration of not being able to fill the vacancy in our own pulpit.



“This past fall we were told by our call process minister to be more proactive,” call committee member John Beim said. So they planned, wrote and conducted a special prayer service. Through corporate prayer, congregation members boldly asked God to send a pastor. “At the close of the service, all members were encouraged to continue in concentrated prayer each morning at 9 o'clock,” Beim said. The call committee also submitted an article to *The Lutheran* magazine which reported the recent rebuilding of their parsonage and made it known that they were actively looking and praying for a candidate, and anticipating the day a pastor would make the parsonage a home again.

What is the main reason very few clergy consider the possibility of becoming Emmanuel's pastor? Arliss Weinman, labeled by some members as Emmanuel's matriarch of Lutheran theology, commented, “Present day clergy seem to be attracted by the amenities usually associated with urban ministry. For example, money, social status, career opportunities and having all the extras.” In Weinman's mind, it boils down to one main factor: “A pastor or graduate needs to be called by the Holy Spirit to a specific congregation. If they don't feel that leading, it doesn't matter where the church is located.”

Emmanuel Lutheran was the first call for seminary graduate and former Pastor Leonard Rudolph. “My wife, Freida, and I often talked about the love



and support shown us and how grateful we were to get our start in the ministry at Emmanuel. Serving there was a confirmation of my call into the ministry and enabled me to proceed," said Rudolph. When asked about the distinction between rural and urban ministry, he commented, "I always considered it a plus to be in rural ministry. It offers a beautiful opportunity to be in ministry with the people and enjoy the closeness of family and community." With a chuckle in his voice, he went on to say, "One time I was asked where my first call was. I proudly told them Stuttgart, Kansas—the hub of Phillips County."

Family, community—God's people working together for ministry and for survival—that's what rural ministry is all about. Emmanuel is active in ecumenical outreach through the support of various organizations locally, nationally and internationally. The Phillips County Ministerial Alliance is one such local organization. It supplies and distributes food for the needy, provides radio and newspaper devotions, and ministers to the needs of the people at the local hospital, nursing homes, and retirement center on a weekly basis. These services are provided without charge or regard to denomination. "We realize we can do more ministry in our community by working together than by working separately," said ministerial alliance member and pastor of the United Methodist Church, Ron Lowry. "From my perspective and work, God calls people to ministry anywhere they are needed. I do, however, think pastors need a special calling to serve the rural areas. The Stuttgart congregation has three things that should help attract a pastor with a rural calling: 1) the new home is very attractive, 2) the church building is well kept and also very attractive, and 3) the people are wonderful and very dedicated to God. What more could a pastor want?"

The ELCA has set up a Web site for pastors to answer the question as to why they choose to serve in rural America. Tom O. Miller, a pastor in Bloomfield, Nebraska, writes, "I love the pace of life, the cycles of the seasons which connect so deeply to our faith and how we live. The people I serve are connected to the land, know where their food comes from, and know in a very real way the hand of God in their lives—what they can control and what they can't, what they have to pray for and what is simply God's grace. They know family, and how important God is in life and in faith." For more quotes, go to www.elca.org/do/iservebecause.html

These excerpts from Psalm 100 express Emmanuel Lutheran's identity in ministry:

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands!
Worship the Lord with gladness.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Members of Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church continue in ministry, trusting God, standing firm on who they are. "The people of today's congregation are grounded in the same faith as our forefathers. We have survived many difficulties over the years, and by the grace of God continue to be a vibrant and active congregation," lifelong member Jane Kirchhoff said.

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Cartoon by Timothy Merklein, a youth member of Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church.