

Lutheran Church of the Ascension

OUR VISION: To Worship the Lord, Live by His Example, and
Reach out Through His Love

OUR MISSION: To Know and Share the Good News of Jesus Christ



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One of the questions folks often ask is: "so, are we growing?" There are all sorts of truthful responses one could make to that question.

First of all, like all mainline churches, we are growing **OLDER!** It is often referred to as the "graying of the church" ... but it is true. Now that my Boomer generation has started to retire, the balance is changing all over the place. The ads on television are more directed to senior citizens (which means, those of us over 50). More people are living past 100. Churches packed with infants and toddlers on Christmas Eve are now packed with four generations of families ... and in most cases, the younger generations are probably not churched and quite likely interfaith (Christian and Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or whatever). Yes, we're growing older!

Secondly, a lot of folks are growing **DEEPER!** This refers to our faith journey ... this refers to growth through the study of Scripture, daily prayer, Spiritual Disciplines, tithing, Christian Service (like working at Habitat or Good News Community Kitchen or Katrina Relief). The numbers of folks in congregations like ours who are finding new opportunities for ministry in these areas continue to grow because, yes, we are growing deeper!

I realize that most people have only one number in mind when they ask that ... and that number is in either congregational membership or average worship attendance. In terms of membership, about all we can say is that in the last year eighteen new members transferred in and nine members transferred out. At any given moment there are folks from other congregations or unchurched who are thinking about joining us ... and ... at any given moment there are folks within our congregation who may be thinking about joining another congregation. That has always been the ebb and flow of church life. On any given Sunday morning, someone comes down the aisle and says "this is my/our first time here ... we're from the church in that community, and we're looking." And then they either go into the fellowship hall or out the door, and hopefully on the way one of you steps up to meet them and picks up the conversation and helps them decide to come back again.

The biggest problem we deal with is "absence." I'm currently doing a study on the worship pattern of a small group within our congregation. In looking at the worship patterns over a four-year period of the Church Council (which now includes the staff), it is interesting to note that the sixteen of us on the Council represent fifty of the baptized membership (or about 1/13 of the congregation). Within this group there are about thirteen youth in high school or college (most of whom are seldom, if ever, in worship here or anywhere) and eleven youth in grade school or middle school (also most of whom are seldom, if ever, in worship here or anywhere). At the present time, there are no babies or infants or toddlers among this test sample of the congregation.

By the way, speaking broadly, these middle school, high school, college age, and young adults are the generations of most concern for the whole Church today because current statistics indicate that the youngest generations just aren't yet finding their way into worship centers anywhere ... their parents no

longer bring them to worship, traveling sports schedules no longer honor Sunday mornings, youth employment is often on weekends, and many youth seeing the regular absence of their parents from worship simply don't see why they should be any different. And what is even worse is that most congregations, probably including our own, are doing little or nothing to attract them.

And then using this small sample of the congregation, what I have found with the remaining adults is the causes for absence. Probably the top five are

travel for work

weekends away at the cabin, time-share, or resort

care for aging parents out of state or elsewhere in the state

illness

frequent travel for pleasure

Now I don't know about you, but I can't complain about any of these reasons. Those whose jobs require them to travel simply must travel ... there is no reason to feel guilty about that! Those of us who have aging parents know what Alzheimer's and cancer and loneliness mean ... we certainly can't feel guilty about caring for loved ones. None of us wants to be ill ... but none of us is exempt! I've certainly had my share of colds in the last four months ... like some of you, I just got done with one and came down with another. When I talked with my doctor, he simply said "So?" Travel? Again, that goes with the territory ... I suppose especially this territory ... it simply indicates that many, but not all of us, in this congregation have enough wealth to be able to afford more than one place to live and have the luxury of boarding cruise ships and airplanes to enjoy God's world. (I just hope we took that into consideration when we filled out our pledge card!)

I do know that, based on this small sample group and assuming that it could be multiplied by thirteen within the entire congregation, worship attendance of this congregation would be significantly increased if everyone simply decided to be absent from worship ten to twenty Sundays less every year. If everyone made a commitment to be in worship 66% of the time, the changes would be astounding!

Linnea Nilsen Capshaw said it best during our visioning process three and a half years ago: the only way Ascension will grow in numbers is if each member will personally invite another and bring them by the arm into worship. Worship attendance would double each week if we took that fact seriously! ***So, before you ask that question again, let me ask this one: "Whom have you invited and brought by the arm? Whom will you bring with you to church next Sunday?"*** I have occasionally thought that an appropriate response to the question might be "if you haven't brought anyone with you to worship, you really ought not ask the question!"

And, by the way, if you don't know how to invite ... please read the book that Claudia and I are providing for you this month and join us in the "Just Walk Across the Room" series. It could be one of the most important things you'll do in your lifetime!

Pastor Curt



Focus on Health

Throughout the month of February we will be reminded that this is American Heart month. We will have many opportunities to become better informed about heart disease.

Coronary artery disease, also known as heart disease, is the result of progressive narrowing of the arteries that provide oxygen-rich blood to the heart. This narrowing occurs when waxy deposits, called plaque, form on the walls of the coronary arteries. Too much plaque buildup can close off a portion of, or completely obstruct, an artery, causing a heart attack.

Thirty percent of all deaths can be traced to heart disease. There are often no symptoms in the early stages, and too often, sudden death is the first sign. People with heart disease in their family should talk to their doctor about having diagnostic tests.

God created us with bodies that let us know when something is wrong. With heart disease, responding quickly to problems can be a matter of life and death. Learn to listen to what your body is telling you and don't be afraid to take action!

When we have lost a loved one, walking through the time of grief that follows can be enriched by sharing experiences with others. ENH Hospice and Rainbow Hospice invite you to take part in the grief support groups they offer to all in the community. Complete information including registration and locations is posted on *the Focus on Health* bulletin board in Fellowship Hall. I welcome the opportunity to speak with you about any of them.

Soul Mates	<i>death of a spouse</i>	<i>8 Thursday afternoons beginning February 1</i>
Legacy	<i>death of a parent</i>	<i>8 Tuesday evenings beginning February 6</i>
Men's Breakfast Club		
<i>The Story of a Life</i> workshop		Monday evening, February 26

God, help me to listen to my body for signs of trouble and to get the care I need to stay well. Amen

May you know peace and good health!

Gail Price



Save the date and, when they call you, please tell LifeSource telemarketers that you plan to donate blood at Ascension on Sunday, March 18.

Reach Out Through God's Love



Sunday Coffee Hour

Fellowship is at the heart of Christian community, and Lutherans have a reputation for loving their coffee! Ascension's Sunday coffee hour is made possible only by the volunteer efforts of many people. Won't you join in supporting this time of fellowship by offering to assist in setting the table? You may do this anytime before 9:15 a.m. any Sunday. The process is so simple; the rewards are great! Choose the date that suits you, then sign up on the bulletin board or at the coffee table or call the church office. Thanks for your help!

Souper Bowl of Caring

Souper Bowl Sunday, February 4, 2007, is when we collect non-perishable food such as cans of soup and money to feed the hungry. Soup pots and youth will be at the exit doors where donations can be left. The donations will be taken to a local food pantry where they will be used to feed needy people in our area. Please see the poster on the bulletin board.

Souper Bowl Sunday was started seventeen years ago when a prayer on game day inspired a group of youth to do something more than to celebrate a football game. They created the Souper Bowl of Caring, a youth-led grassroots movement that is now an international event. Since going nationwide in 1990, more than \$33 million has been raised.



Relief for Victims of Hurricane Katrina



Due to the continuing needs of people and communities in the Gulf Coast region in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina nearly 18 months ago, a significant portion of Ascension's Christmas offering was directed to hurricane relief efforts. Bethel Lutheran Church in Biloxi, MS and the ELCA Domestic Disaster Response benefitted from your generosity. Thank you!

Ascension's Service Ministries Team recognizes the ongoing nature of recovery and rebuilding needs and continues to encourage you, when possible, to become involved in hands-on ministry in the region. It will change your life!

How to do that? Here are some suggestions.

- Contact Bethel Lutheran Church, Biloxi, MS directly at 228-267-0008 and arrange to travel at your convenience and join their work efforts on your schedule.
- Contact Lutheran Disaster Response at www.ldr.org and click on "Getting Involved" to learn about volunteer opportunities throughout the region.
- Indicate your interest in taking a trip with Ascension friends in the upcoming months. Speak with Gail Price or sign up on the Service Ministries bulletin board in Fellowship Hall.
- Join high school youth and adults from St. James the Less Episcopal Church, our neighbor to the north on Sunset Ridge Road, in New Orleans over Spring Break, March 24 - 29. They have accommodations and plenty of work to share, and they extend an invitation to Ascension people to arrange to travel at the same time.

Interested? Please contact Gail Price.

Spiritual Growth

Life Together: Coming Soon to a Home Near You!

Ash Wednesday is coming on February 21st this year, and with the season of Lent, we will begin a new ministry at Ascension that we hope will help you grow closer to Christ and to each other.

We will be launching a new small group ministry, offering places where people from our church can gather in an intimate setting for prayer, study, fellowship, and mutual support. These groups will meet in people's homes and will be led by members of our church who have been trained in leading such a community.

The small groups will begin with an eight-week study, and we encourage all of you to consider taking the time to join a group for at least this eight-week period. After the initial study is complete, groups will decide collectively about how to continue. I am convinced that you will be enriched by your small group experience and desire to keep the groups going—hopefully it will become a part of your spiritual life that you will wonder how you ever did without.

Stay tuned for more details, including the times and places that the groups will meet and the subject matter of the initial eight-week study!

Claudia Williams



This past month has been a busy one with Christmas and the Holiday season. My hope and *prayer* is that you had a blessed Holiday season with friends and family and that all were able to enjoy a slight break from the "real world." I know that I, personally, enjoyed my time away from work. In fact, I don't think I really answered my cell phone for about four or five days!

Right now the children are in the middle of a rotation unit titled: "The First and Last in the Vineyard." This is the fourth parable they have learned so far this year in their study of Jesus and His parables. The key verse for this unit is: "So those who are last now will be first then, and those who are first will be last." (Matthew 20:16) The next rotation unit will be beginning in February and is the parable of "One Coin and Two Sons." Take-home pages are sent home every week and correspond with what the children are learning in Sunday School. Please take the time to go over these with your children. I believe that by reviewing these pages with your child that it enforces what they are learning at church and it also allows others to be a part of the child's growth.

A few reminders:

1. The children have chosen to give their money to Holy Family Ministries. They are trying to help provide furniture and textbooks to the Holy Family School, which serves Chicago's low-income minority population. The children have set their goal at \$500. Please encourage the children and remind them of this project. Help them see that what they do, and give, can have an eternal impact in the lives of others.
2. Please remind the children to bring their Bibles. It helps so much when they have their Bibles on Sundays and on Tuesdays. This way, they are all reading the same version. Also, on Tuesday nights, the curriculum that is used directly corresponds to their Bibles.
3. If you are interested in volunteering to teach Sunday School in any upcoming rotation units, we are in need of some teachers in the months of March and April, and we would love to have you! Any Questions? Just ask!

Have a wonderful February!!!

Jeanne Schambach

Walk with *Jesus*

Since November we've been on a "Walk With Jesus," our financial stewardship program. I want to thank all our members and friends of the Lutheran Church of the Ascension who have responded so faithfully.

It has been a privilege to play a role in this stewardship effort. I heard many wonderful and inspiring stories over the past couple of months. One family related that they have decided that this is the year they'll move to a tithe, something that I shared has helped us grow significantly in our walk with Jesus. Another member said their goal has been to move to giving 20% of their income. As they have achieved that giving level they've noticed that God continues to bless them such that 20% feels like very little sacrifice. And I know many people have made major increases in proportional giving. Thank you all for your prayerful response.

Through mid-January we've received almost 150 commitments, a level consistent with last year. And the total level of commitment has increased by almost 13%. That represents an absolute increase of at least \$60,000.

While we've focused on the component of stewardship over the past couple of months, in 2006 we also began to explore our spiritual gifts through "Ascension Connections." In the first quarter of 2007, we'll begin to explore more fully other aspects of stewardship. You will see more on this effort soon, and your ideas will be sought. Thanks once more for your generosity.

In Response to His Blessing and Grace,

Bruce Carlson, Stewardship Leader

Service Ministry

By sharing our God-given gifts, we will bring comfort, joy and justice to those in need in our church, our community and the world.

During 2006, people from Ascension Church have been involved in many dimensions of Service Ministry, service to our Lord and his people, both locally and at a distance. You have served face to face when possible and served from a distance when that was the best option. Our congregation is richly blessed by you!

Many of you have had the opportunity to serve in hands-on, high impact ministries. As an example, 47 people, children, youth and adults, shopped for and/or served at the **Good News Community Kitchen** during one of our twelve evenings there. Others sustained this ministry with your financial support. Thanks to Irm Claiborne and her dedicated volunteers! Ascension has committed to being at the kitchen on the third Tuesday of every month as well as becoming active in advocacy efforts on behalf of the hungry people they serve. There is always a place for you!

Under the leadership of Builder Bob Reid, Ascension sent six work crews, 22 of you, men, women and high school students, to **Habitat for Humanity Lake County** in summer and fall. Others in the congregation contributed over \$4,000 to make the work possible, and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans offered significant financial support to Habitat. On many occasions, the "lunch ladies," Elaine Chester and Jill Reid, made certain that people on the work crew were well fed at noontime. Thanks to all!

Judy Mills led the congregation in identifying a response to post-**Hurricane Katrina** needs in Biloxi, MS. Twelve of you, again an intergenerational representation, traveled to Biloxi in spring and summer to join people from all around the country for a week of rebuilding, repairing, re-energizing. Lives were changed and each volunteer plans to return. Information on joining a work crew is elsewhere in this issue of *The Witness*.

We have been blessed with significant opportunities to "welcome the stranger" during the year, beginning with assisting Hurricane Katrina evacuees to resettle in Chicago. Clarence Merritt came from New Orleans; Lena Murphy, Jerry Watson and daughter Danielle arrived from Long Beach, MS. They all fled unimaginable destruction of the lives they knew. Scores of you helped them to rebuild, whether through furnishing an apartment or stocking a pantry or helping to fund their needs or praying for them or welcoming them with a smile, a handshake, a hug. Late in the year you offered the same welcome to the Jia family from China. Interfaith Refugee and Immigration Ministries (IRIM) in Chicago counts Ascension Church as a valued partner in **refugee resettlement**. Pam Carlson and the Service Team anticipate resettling two families annually.

Many of our congregations's other hands-on, high impact ministries take place much closer to home and often without much public attention. I'm thinking particularly of Ascension's Health Ministry, of our Stephen Ministry, Home Communion, Prayer Chain and Support Team Ministries. Over 30 of you were trained last winter to work in teams to serve people in the Ascension family, in their hospital rooms and homes and at funerals and memorial services. Fifteen of you actively serve as Stephen Ministers, providing a one-to-one caring Christian presence to people who are experiencing transitions in life. Ten or more of you take the sacrament to people who are unable to be present in worship. At least 15 of you pray daily for

the needs expressed by people to the Prayer Chain. A significant group of people who understand the possibilities for whole person health, some of whom are health professionals, others who are not, educate and encourage us to care for our bodies, minds and spirits. Please see one of these leaders to learn how to serve in a hands-on ministry:

Health Ministry	Linda Clinton
Stephen Ministry	Caryl Scott, Joan West, John West
Support Teams	Pam Carlson, Eileen Gerald, Marion Guyton, Marilyn Johnson, Marion Young
Home Communion	Sylvia Peterson
Prayer Chain	Dawn Brekke, Lynly Jarvis, Charles Young, Marion Young

Ascension Youth have had hands-on experiences also. Those who attended the **ELCA Youth Gathering** in the summer took part in a day of service. Some served at the Good News Community Kitchen; Jonathan hopes to see many more there during summer of 2007. Ascension's confirmation ministry, **FINK**, has been engaged in service throughout the year; in late 2006 the assembly of Midwife Kits for shipment to Global Health Ministries in Minnesota and ultimately to distant sites in Africa and South America. Thanks to Kathy Weinstein for teaching and modeling young people to serve others.

We support hungry people throughout the year through multiple ministries: four food pantries (**Elijah's** in Logan Square, **Esperanza de Santa Maria** on Chicago's west side, **Lakeview** on the north side and **Northfield Township** which serves local residents through its base in Glenview. The Service Ministry Team invites your contributions of food and funds throughout the year and encourages you to step forward on special occasions also: Souper Bowl Sunday (February 4), Greater Chicago Food Depository Hunger Walk in June, fall clothing drive, CROP Walk in October, Thanksgiving Food Gathering in November. We also ask you to remember that the ELCA serves hungry people throughout the world through its World Hunger Appeal. Your support will be joyfully received at any time!

Ascension people have made a significant difference in the work of the larger church this past year. At Christmas, Kristin Merrill coordinated and you "adopted" 55 families and 7 senior citizens who are served by Bethel New Life in Chicago and exhibited Jesus' love by making their Christmas celebration more joyful. You also provided toys and mittens and scarves and gift cards for Lutheran Social Service of Illinois clients. Many of you serve year round giving leadership to the greater church's social ministries: Advocate Health Care, Holy Family Ministries, Holy Family Lutheran School, IRIM, LSSI including the Women's Network and Cornerstone Society among others.

Some of you are advocates: you have been to Lutheran Day in Springfield to speak out for justice for people who have no voice. Some are becoming ever more aware of the place fair trade plays in our economy, are educating us, and we are learning. Still others are considering stewardship of the earth and embracing recycling, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture.

So I say thank you to each of you for the role you play in *Reaching Out Through God's Love* through the ministries of our congregation and beyond. In the year to come, it is my prayer that each of you will identify the gifts which God has placed in your care and discern how to use those gifts in ministry. I welcome the opportunity to be in ministry with you.

Peace,

Gail Price



**Habitat for Humanity Lake County
invites past and future volunteers and supporters
to attend the
Annual Celebration and recognition dinner**

**Friday, February 9,
6:00 pm – 9:00pm
Libertyville Presbyterian Church**

**Celebrate accomplishments of 2006
Hear exciting plans for 2007**

**Please bring a dish to pass.
Call Gail or Charlie Price to carpool.**