

Eight N.W. Side Lutheran churches to join forces as new congregation

BY ERNEST TUCKER
STAFF REPORTER

Like candles in sanctuaries darkened for Good Friday, eight established Northwest Side Lutheran churches will be snuffed out today.

Then, in a touch of symbolism, they will blaze forth on Easter morning as one new congregation, the United in Faith Lutheran Church. The service, at a neutral site at Taft High School with Bishop Kenneth R. Olsen preaching, will mark the first time the expected 500 or so new members will come together in worship.

The action comes after the churches suffered decades of declining attendance as older populations of Scandinavians and Germans moved to the suburbs and other groups came in.

Church leaders say the planned sale of properties will allow them to revitalize their mission in Chicago, with an eye toward creating a new church-based campus with a high-rise facility for the elderly.

"We are committed to Chicago," said Olsen, head of the 240-church Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which covers Cook, Lake, Kane and DuPage counties.

"It has been both painful and exhilarating," said Dorothy Goos, president of the parish council and a longtime member of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, 5447 W. Addison. "Painful because some people have spent their entire lives in a church—from baptism through marriages and funerals.

But most people are ready to move on."

The affected churches are St. Andrew's; Holy Communion, 3010 N. Laverge; Nebo, 3914 N. Menard; Our Saviour's, 4159 N. Laramie; Medill Avenue, 4917 W. Medill; Gladstone Park, 6200 W. Foster; Peace Lutheran Church, 5944 W. Cullom, and Our Lord's, 6224 W. Gunnison.

Many of the churches already have held "closing" ceremonies in recent weeks, which included inviting former members back for a last visit.

The process—similar to ones going on across the city in most mainline churches—started in 1995 when members of the congregations began looking at the costs of running churches, including one more than a century old. Some had as few as 30 or 40 attendees on a Sunday. Money was going into duplicate programs, some of them serving only a handful of people in each congregation.

"It was very poor stewardship of resources," Goos said. After paying the bills, "there was nothing left over to do ministry in the community."

That is the core of the issue. As Olsen explained, "We can no longer be congregations just taking care of ourselves. This is an attempt to bring the resources of several congregations together so we can become a major outreach. The sale of those properties [will] enable us to be a much stronger witness."

For the foreseeable future, church services will be held in the

former St. Andrew's while ongoing programs—such as senior citizens' gatherings or self-help groups—will continue to meet in the churches. An independent elementary school at the Medill location also will stay open.

Olsen said this is not unique to this area or the ELCA, which earlier this year closed other churches on the Far Northwest Side and one in Roscoe Village. New churches periodically open in the suburbs.

Already in discussion with the city to find a suitable site for the campus, Olsen said it is possible that ground could be broken as soon as this fall. Both he and Goos said the facilities would be open to all denominations, but there will also be an evangelical outreach to bring in new members to the Lutheran faith.

"We have to be ready for the 21st century," Goos said.



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Dorothy Goos is the president of the parish council at St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, 5447 W. Addison. Her congregation and seven others will merge Sunday into one, the United in Faith Lutheran Church.