

Eight Lutheran churches consolidate

by MICHAEL FIELDING

When Dorothy Goos attends this Sunday's Easter worship service — the first one for the newly formed congregation of the United in Faith Lutheran Church — she expects to see quite a few new faces. And she expects to see a lot more than usual.

On Sunday, nine congregations from Northwest Side Lutheran churches will officially come together as one new church under the Metropolitan Chicago Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The service, to be held in the auditorium of Taft High School, 6545 W. Hurlbut St., will mark a first in the history of the Lutheran Church in America, Goos said. Never before have so many congregations consolidated into a new one, she said.

So instead of seeing just a few dozen familiar faces in the congregation, Goos will worship with an expected 600 people — the total number of members of the new church, whose site has not yet been chosen.

Goos, the president of the church's executive board, said the consolidation is essential. She cited declining memberships and changing neighborhoods as two reasons for the move. "Nowhere in the U.S. has this been done before," she said.

With eight churches (the ninth congregation is a group of people from two other churches in the synod which chose not to consolidate) located in a 5-mile radius of each other, the declining memberships and changes to traditional ministry were too taxing on the churches for them to survive, said Karen Thompson, who also serves on the board.

Saint Andrew's Lutheran Church, 5447 W. Addison St., for example, was designed to seat 250 people. But Goos, a member of the 74-year-old congregation, said attendance of Sunday service may reach barely 50 people.

BISHOP KENNETH OLSEN, of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, said that the ethnic traditions on which many area churches were

founded have changed dramatically over the last half of the century. Immigrants of German, Swedish and Norwegian descent all settled in ethnic enclaves where the churches had their own distinctive cultural markings, but with so many area residents moving to the suburbs in recent years and non-Lutherans moving in, the neighborhoods have changed. So the consolidated church will steer its ministry to reach out to non-Lutherans, a break from the traditional Lutheran church, where the needs of the congregation were addressed as priorities.

The primary mission of this new church will be serving rather than being served," Olsen said. "We will look at people outside the community."

In doing so, United in Faith Lutheran Church will seek to serve the needs of non-Lutherans and, as Olsen called, "the un-churched."

Part of that vision of outreach is a community campus, a dream that has far to go but has been taken very seriously by members of the new congregation. "We want to see our doors open more to the community," Thompson said. "There are people out there who need the word."

Many of those people, according to Thompson, are seniors who make up about 60 percent of the congregation. Facilities that have been mentioned as part of this potential campus will include a senior health care center, a music academy and possibly an elementary school. "It won't be just a church that you go to on Sunday,

but a place that's filled during the week," Thompson added.

Thompson said that many of the existing churches that have consolidated are not wheelchair accessible and have limited parking. As part of the consolidation, those buildings will be sold, she said.

MANY OF THE churches that are consolidating are between 50 and 100 years old, Olsen said, and the cost of maintenance cannot be met with memberships on the decline. "A church needs to be financially able to meet the needs of the community," he said. "You can't do that when you're struggling to survive," he said.

The other churches which are joining the new congregation are Gladstone Park Lutheran Church, 6200 W. Foster Ave., Holy Communion Lutheran Church, 3010 N. Lavergne Ave., Medill Lutheran Church, 4917 W. Medill Ave., Nebo Lutheran Church, 3914 N. Menard Ave., Peace Lutheran Church, 5944 W. Cullom Ave., Our Savior's Lutheran Church, 4159 N. Laramie Ave., and Our Lord's Lutheran Church, 6224 W. Gunnison St.

The new church will serve an area roughly bounded by the Kennedy Expressway on the north, Belmont Avenue on the south, Harlem Avenue on the west and Kostner Avenue on the east.

The new congregation, which after Sunday will meet temporarily at Saint Andrew's until a site has been secured, will resemble the different faces of traditional Lutheranism — Germans, Swedes, the elderly and younger families.