

**A Pastoral Challenge
for
Bethel Lutheran Church and School**

From: The Reverend Doctor Randal J. Pabst

August 2010

A Brief Historical Perspective: Bethel Lutheran Church and School was born in the midst of a time of significant immigration from other parts of the United States (but especially the upper Midwest) to the South Bay in the mid to late 1950s. That immigration was based on the significant growth in aerospace, military defense, and the growing number of high tech jobs that was to become Silicon Valley as well as the support services the population growth required. These immigrants brought with them their own cultural identity which included a deeply rooted religious heritage most of whom were Protestant (with a significant number of Lutherans). In the 1950s and 60s churches sprang up at an almost unprecedented rate. Bethel was born in the midst of these “boom years” (it is instructive to note that seven ELCA congregations in this area celebrated 50th anniversaries within a 4 year period in the mid 2000s).

Almost overnight the orchards and farms that made up the “Valley of the Heart’s Delight” disappeared and were replaced by large office complexes and high tech manufacturing buildings, housing, shopping centers, and eateries. As the orchards disappeared and the area became more and more built up, housing prices soared. This increase was met by higher salaries focused on well educated/trained professionals.

Beginning in the mid to late 1990s, a significant change began to take place in immigration to the area. Immigrants from other parts of the United States were rapidly replaced with a growing number of Asian (mostly Chinese), and Indian (from India) high tech workers. These immigrants often brought with them extended family. As a result the make-up of the area changed rapidly. (At present, the Cupertino School District reports that the ethnic make up of the students in the district is about 60% Asian with Indian households now the fastest growing demographic.) These immigrants also brought with them their own cultural identity and practices, as well as very different and diverse spiritual and religious beliefs.

The once thriving Christian (Lutheran) churches, whose roots were mostly Midwestern (and originally European), began to decline and in some cases, cease to exist altogether. Christian outreach to these new immigrants became problematic as churches struggled with understanding very different cultural and religious identities and practices. At the same time, first generation immigrants who were already Christian formed into their own segregated groups often worshipping in the language of their origins (not unlike early Lutherans who worshipped in German, Norwegian, and Swedish in the late 19th and early 20th centuries). For many, the church has become a kind of ethnic “ghetto” where people of similar background, culture, and beliefs can gather in the midst of a very complex and “foreign” multi-cultural environment.

Today, the South Bay and particularly Silicon Valley is a very diverse multi-cultural community. The Christian churches, and Lutherans in particular, face several significant challenges. How the church responds under God’s guidance, will determine the future of the church (and Bethel) in this region for coming generations.

4 Key Challenges for the Church in Silicon Valley:

- **Cultural and Spiritual/Religious Diversity:** Someone once said when visiting the area from another part of the country, “This is like a foreign County!” This area is faced with a very complicated ethnic and cultural diversity that is quite literally “foreign” to most Americans whose ethnic roots are European. *The challenge is learning to understand these different and diverse cultural identities and practices in a way that helps bring greater knowledge and acceptance toward more productive and meaningful relationships.*
Paul wrote, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12 NRSV)
- **Polarization of the Culture:** Closely related is the growing “polarization” of American culture as a whole. Conservative / Liberal; racial and ethnic identities; religious affiliations; where individuals and groups stand on this issue or that; all contribute toward a diversity that tends to push people

further and further apart. *The challenge is to provide an environment where diversity can be seen as an opportunity for growth and new understanding toward the discovery of those things we all hold in common as valuable and meaningful.* Christian oneness is not based on everyone being or even believing the exact same things. It is based above all things in a relationship to God through Jesus. **“Jesus said to him (Peter), ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life.’ (John 14:6a NRSV) “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” (John 17:22)**

- **High Pressure Demanding Work Environment:** What began in the tech world as an open environment where creativity and flexibility reigned, has evolved into a very high pressure, high productivity, high expectation work atmosphere that makes significant demands on employees in a very insecure work place as jobs can end or change without warning. The recent economic “downturn” has only added to the stress of this region. People find they have less and less time for other pursuits to say nothing of participation in a faith community. *The challenge is to provide an environment that helps people sort out their priorities in ways that bring health and a better sense of spiritual wholeness in the midst of high stress and growing anxiety.* **Paul wrote. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2 NRSV)**
- **Changing Identity of the Christian Church:** Once seen as an important and valued part of every community, the Christian Church today is often viewed with skepticism and mistrust. At times, the church has been its own worst enemy often bogged down in institutional ineptitude adverse to change, plagued with pastoral/priest misconduct, too often politically extreme, often struggling in negative ways as to who truly has the corner on divine truth, and in general, out of touch with reality. Too many people who are seeking spiritual help and direction, support, and renewal do not find it in the church. At the same time, the Christian movement toward religion as “self-help” and “self-affirming” too often has confused the Gospel of Jesus with “seven steps to a better life.” Add to this the growth of “neo-evangelicalism” (that is the Christian movement toward converting others into one particular way of interpreting and understanding Christianity), and much of the culture is confused or uninterested about Christian identity. At the same time, religions other than Christianity have grown significantly (i.e. Islam, Buddhism, other eastern religious expressions). *The Challenge is to again become the Church of Jesus which shows radical hospitality, meaningful worship, a willingness to risk for mission and service, focused of faith development, and is extravagantly generous (from “5 Practices of fruitful Congregations”).* **“After this the Lord appointed 70 others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he intended to go. And he said to them, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of harvest to send out laborers into the harvest.’” (Luke 10:1-2 NRSV)**

At Bethel’s 50th Anniversary celebration of the past, founding Pastor Silas Torvend was asked about those early days of when Bethel grew so quickly. Without hesitation he responded, **“Those were different times.”** Bethel has a rich and strong legacy of faith and ministry which, under the able leadership of Pastors, staff, and lay-people alike has help Bethel Lutheran Church and School faithfully thrive over the past 50 years. However, as Pastor Torvend indicated, **THESE ARE PROFOUNDLY DIFFERENT TIMES!**

If Bethel is to thrive in the future it cannot be a respite for like minded people of northern European descent. Bethel cannot continue to effectively serve this community in the name of Jesus with methods and approaches that worked when immigration was from the mid-west and most of the community was assumed to be Christian. Everything has changed and Bethel needs to change as well if it is to remain a vital community of faith that continues to make a difference in the name of Jesus Christ in this community.