

“There’s always so much more to learn!”

“I still regularly have to check myself. Will it ever get any easier?”

“How do we keep moving?”

“Sometimes I just sit in awe at the wonder of God’s diverse people gathered at this table!”

Living as one body, with many members brings new joy and richness with each new day. Sitting in places I never dreamed of sitting, talking with people I never would have thought I could talk with, seeing life from perspectives very different from those with which I grew up – God blesses the cross-cultural journey in amazing ways.

As you listen to Pastor Bob Fritch share his feelings of sitting at a Hindu wedding, or members of Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, talking about “the land of diversity” in their small town, or people at Augustana Lutheran in Portland, Oregon, who celebrate the gifts of diverse worship services within a diverse congregation – in all these voices you will hear the joy and excitement of living in new ways within a new vision.

The stories in this section provide a vision of hope. None of these congregations or communities would say they have things all figured out or that the journey is over. Each of these stories reflects a piece of the journey that will continue on for each of them, with new challenges and new opportunities. The hope in each story is the central hope of God’s vision. The people in each place made an intentional choice to live – to live with new vision, new hope, and with expanded openness to learn and grow along with those who became a part of their body. Each of the stories reflects the challenges, but also the greater wholeness and richness of living within the diversity of many members.

The journey is an ongoing spiral. As an original vision becomes realized, it is time to listen again in new ways to hear where God is leading next. The questions and exercises can be revisited as the congregation again changes. Sharing stories and listening deeply to one another need to be an ongoing part of the life of the congregation. The journey is one best reflected in “The Cycle of Gospel Living.” It is the continuing challenge of assessing where we are in relationship to the cross and resurrection. Where and to what do we need to die? Where and how are we being called to empowerment and new life?

Listen to the stories from three places. Use the questions to reflect on your own journey. Know that your journey will be unique to your place. Trust that God will be actively leading and guiding in your congregation, just as God was leading and guiding in Portland, Oregon; Pelican Rapids, Minnesota; and Jamaica, Queens, New York.

Continue to Reflection: Crossing Cultures—Food for Thought



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**We see the world through the lens of our culture.** We try to make sense of things we see and the people we talk with through the lens of our culture. We build our churches and develop our ministries and partnerships through the lens of our culture. We make decisions for our own lives – and for the lives of others when we can – through the lens of our culture. A Haitian proverb captures the challenge: “We see from where we stand.”

The challenge for people seeking to live in authentic multicultural community is to experience the transformation of standing in other places. When I see from where I stand, I will interpret the world through my lens of values and ways of doing things.

When I see my life and liberation intricately connected with the life and liberation of another, I can begin to experience the transformation of seeing from where another person stands. When I invest time and effort in listening and being with other people in their place, I can begin to see the world from the perspective of the other. I can never fully stand in that person’s place, but I can stand close enough to see in a new way.

The challenge of living as one body with many members is the challenge of stepping outside myself to see that there are multiple ways of doing things. What would it mean to step outside of our cultural lens and build our ministries from the place where others stand – and the places and experiences they have come from?

**What if** – you learned that in many countries there is **no worship on Christmas Eve, only on Christmas Day** – how would that change your worship schedule?

**What if** you learned that in many countries **Good Friday is a day of obligation** to attend worship in your home church, especially at noon – how would that change your thinking about joint worship services or not having worship at all?

**What if** you learned that in many cultures it is **important to be on your knees in prayer** at the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve – how would that affect your worship planning for New Year’s?

**What if** you learned that many cultures have different and varied **expectations at a time of death** – how would that affect your pastoral care and the questions you might ask?

**What if** you learned that the most important thing you could learn about ministry to those in a diverse setting – **is to ask questions** – questions about their expectations and their needs, both personally and ritually – how would that affect and bless your ministry ?

**What if . . .**

--*“What ifs” from Pastor Bob Fritch, Our Saviour Lutheran, Jamaica, Queens, New York*

Continue to Story and Discussion: Diversity? Yes!—Augustana, Portland



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**Augustana Lutheran Church, Portland, Oregon,** began on Pentecost Sunday in May of 1906. With Swedish Lutheran beginnings, after several years the congregation began offering worship in English in order to reach out to the broader community.

In the early 1990s, the congregation considered the possibility of closing, but members decided that God wasn't finished with them yet and they decided to enjoy and celebrate who they were as the body of Christ and to be open to discerning where God was leading.

In 1998, they set out on a five-year journey as a congregation, a journey which honored their past, assessed their current state, and presented opportunities to dream for the future as they continued in mission as a servant church on the corner of NE 15th and Knott, near downtown Portland. Since 1996, close to 400 people have joined the congregation. The voices of 35 different members of Augustana, along with the voice of Pastor Mark Knutson, are part of the telling of the story.

If you walk into any of the four worship services at Augustana on any given Sunday—or any meeting or gathering of the congregation—you will hear the mission boldly proclaimed, “Welcome to Augustana Lutheran Church, a growing multicultural congregation of justice-seekers and peacemakers in the heart of Portland.” As you walk through the building and move among the people, you will see, hear, and feel the life of that mission.

The journey for Augustana, as for any congregation, was not always easy and not without late night council meetings. Like many congregations, Augustana went through troubling times for a series of years. Members were tired of struggling financially, of not feeling energy, and of not seeing possibilities as a congregation. The discussions to close were serious. “We had to decide to take a step. We made a recommitment and individual lives started to change and people talked about Christ in their lives.”

How did the congregation take on new life?

**Relationships:** As various members of the congregation tell the story, the congregation went into the pit and found strength and support from community. They focused on rediscovering the place of God in their lives and the joy of working together. They talked together, engaged in scripture, formed a bookclub, went on trips. They developed relationships. They developed a culture among the leadership as people who loved each other and enjoyed being together. The internal culture created a posture of invitation.

**Vision:** The congregation had visionary leaders who found new life and strength as they called Mark Knutson as pastor. Members regularly lift up the scriptural vision of church as that is preached and taught. They see and capture Pastor Mark's sense of expectation of what God will do in this place. In his first six months in the congregation, Mark worked with the leadership to give a Bible to every member. He led studies in which members underlined passages that addressed the question, “Why be multicultural?” In verbal declarations of mission, in pictures and symbols in the sanctuary, in the work of council, committees, and servant mission teams, and in preaching – the

vision of God's diverse church is continually lifted up. The congregation expanded its vision in calling Pastor Ramona Soto Rank, Klamath nation, as a pastor to the entire congregation.

**Leadership:** The attitude that is spoken openly and often is, "Everyone is a leader." Any person that visits the congregation a couple of times will be invited into being actively engaged in some area of ministry. With "Yes" being the answer to "Can we do this?" people are engaged in numerous ministries both within the congregation and the community. Seeing themselves as leaders, congregation members don't rely on the pastor to initiate and implement ministries. Ministry is a partnership. Pastor Mark equips council members for pastoral leading on tough issues. Lay leaders are equipped to talk with people, to listen, and to share. Members celebrate that they have "theologically sophisticated lay leaders."

At the heart of the congregation's leadership is intentionality for diversity. Council membership is determined with the help of a grid that maintains diverse leadership of racial/cultural background, age, gender, sexual orientation, primary service attendance, and other important diversity needs. No person can serve more than two terms, and the role of president is rotated by diversity.

**Building on the Past:** In looking at who they are and where they are going, the congregation has also looked back to embrace and draw strength from its history. Members see the richness in their history as a congregation and lift up the best of that history. They recognize that Augustana was actively engaged in reaching out in its early days and that they can reinterpret that attitude and action for today. A congregation that began in order to serve those who lived on the east side of the Willamette River and who offered English worship services in order to reach out to the broader community, can also be a congregation of outreach today. Members of the now diverse congregation affirm that having Swedish roots is not negative, but that they can look at history from a multicultural view.

**Embracing Diversity:** In Pastor Mark's words, "Being a diverse congregation is not negotiable." He is intentional in all he says and does that the congregation remains a place in which all voices are heard, where all people see themselves represented in the art, music, worship, and ministries, and where all gifts are engaged in leadership. He is intentional about bringing diversity into the church and offers Augustana as a site to host guest speakers and special events in Portland. Through those events, the congregation can see itself as a place of diversity as the sanctuary and gathering places are filled with people of many backgrounds.

**Relating to the Community:** "If we don't look like our neighborhood, we're not loving our neighbor." Members of the congregation recognize that Augustana and the neighborhood are one community. At the core of the congregation is an understanding of mission as living the Gospel. Outreach within the neighborhood is not to bring people in to grow, but to be a part of the community, to give pastoral care, to be engaged together in the work of justice.

Augustana is an active member of the larger community. The congregation serves as an incubator for nonprofits that work within the community, connecting the work of the congregation with the work of the community. The congregation is community oriented throughout the week in providing building space for offices, support group meetings, community gatherings, after school program, preschool, and much more. Active use of the building breaks down barriers between congregation and community, but involvement goes beyond the building as congregation members serve on boards of nonprofits within the building and the larger community.

Relationships are nurtured and sustained as congregational leaders meet periodically

*(continued)*

during the year with leaders of all programs that use the building. A spirit of energy and strong connections fills the building as people know one another's names. As people meet together, they share ministry hopes and directions and build community across organizations and between organizations and congregation members. It is a point of pride for the congregation that it is a seven day a week ministry with its doors unlocked most every day. People acknowledge, "Once that's part of your identity, community groups become part of who you are."

How does the congregation continue to live and grow as a diverse people of God?

**Invitation and Welcome:** Beginning with the phone book ad that states, "Everyone is welcome," to a building that is visible and looks inviting, to art and worship styles that speak to different groups of people, the congregation lives out its words. People who came because of the phone book ad felt the welcome and stayed. People who have come into the building to hear the jazz at the 6:00 p.m. Sunday service have stayed and attended other worship services. The welcome is real. As one newer member stated, "It's a feeling, an attitude you can sense. It's not phony. You're not seen as a giving unit. When that happens, you become a dying congregation with a focus more on self, become insulated, and implode." Pastor Mark's recurring comment, "When you're here, you're home," speaks to the intentionality of creating a place where people of all ages feel at home.

**Learning and Living Diversity:** Members acknowledge that while people have always been welcome at Augustana, diversity didn't happen without vision and intentionality. The racial and cultural mix is continually lifted up. As the pastors talk about being a global village, people broaden their focus. Members note that "Multicultural reality works when it's genuine, with leadership steeped in the attitude of justice. For example, Black history month celebration is all month, but it is also lifted up all through the year."

Living in diversity has grown as cultures have interacted and learned together. "There was a time when the church fit the mold. Someone shook the mold and broke it and people came out of it, and now we're a salad and we can't go back."

**Celebrating Diversity in Worship:** Stepping into the church sanctuary is a step into a place that says, "Welcome." Artwork is intentional to make sure that everyone who enters sees their face represented. Worship styles speak to different groups – contemporary, traditional, Open Circle, and Jazz/Gospel. The Open Circle worship seeks to express the unique gifts of Native peoples and uses piano, flute and drums. The Jazz service brings in people from all walks of life and has on occasion captured media attention, with some reactions and fascination, "You're singing jazz in church?! I've got to see this!" The jazz service has helped to diversify and enliven the congregation as it brought secular music into a sacred place to speak to people in new ways. Worship is a place where people use and share their gifts, and several times a year worship services bring people together to share the gifts of worship. As people join the congregation, they are encouraged to attend each of the different services. People come to know one another across the worship services and to celebrate different ways of worshipping God. "You have to go beyond the question, 'Is this Lutheran?!' – the jazz service, youth in performance dance – gift giving means whatever the gift, use it to the glory of God. We go away with a brighter sense of who we are and who we are called to be by God."

Are there still challenges to grow?

The journey is not always smooth and congregational leaders continue to see new areas for growth. Current challenges include working more intentionally on outreach and welcoming. It is too easy to become complacent and rely on an informal process of outreach.

Some feelings of “us” and “them” creep in, but intentionality in diversity of leadership and social connections among those in leadership help to bridge those separations.

The congregation has changed dramatically through the years with past incidents giving glimpses into acts of exclusion. The congregation has grown and changed. It has embraced diversity, but people acknowledge that they don't have all the answers. People continue to learn how to interact across cultures. The congregation continues to ask and to seek to discover, “Who is God calling us to be?” They are poised to re-enter a process of asking, “What will the church be in ten years?” The only certainty is that it will be different – and that God will lead the way.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. What would it mean to bring diversity and dreams into your congregation space?
2. How do you see the importance of vision, intentionality, and leadership in lifting up and working for diversity?
3. How could your congregation build and strengthen its connections with the community?
4. What does it mean to welcome and embrace diversity within all aspects of congregation life?
5. What next step can you take to be intentional in living as God's diverse people in your place?

Continue to Story and Discussion: Story and Discussion: How Pelican Rapids, MN, said Welcome



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## How Pelican Rapids Said Welcome

In your mind, does diversity mostly relate to big city life? Here's the story of how a small town, rural American community decided to embrace diversity... and how diversity embraced them right back. The townspeople intentionally went beyond the "food and entertainment" aspects of being multicultural. They have since become an extraordinary model of how people of diverse backgrounds can shape their lives together, and what they can achieve.

Pelican Rapids, Minnesota is a town with one long main street bookended by stop-lights. It also has 40 language or dialects spoken in the school system...and grocery stores specializing in Latin and Muslim foods...and houses of worship that include Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches and a mosque.

Diversity has come to Pelican Rapids, a town of 2,300 residents. In fact, diversity was invited. In 1958, the town was almost entirely Norwegian. Some local business leaders invested in a turkey processing plant to create more jobs in the area. That's how Mexican people first came to live there in the 1960s, so that the town's population includes several hundred Spanish-speaking residents today.

After the Vietnam War, the town welcomed Vietnamese refugees. They came in smaller numbers than the Mexican population, but were as distinctly present. In the mid 1990s, about 100 Bosnian refugees arrived. And by 1998, about 50 African refugees came from the Sudan, and a number from Somalia as well. About 200 Somalians live in Pelican Rapids now.

Five hundred new residents from various lands in a town this size? That's major change. Currently, 23% of the students live in homes where languages other than English are primary. What did the town do to meet their neighbors across culture, race and class? And how did they do it?

### Starting Point: Articulating a Vision

For starters, globally-minded townspeople formed a multicultural committee. They brought their various abilities and faith backgrounds: ELCA, Roman Catholic, and United Church of Christ. They came up with a mission statement:

To support the full development and contribution of each person by affirming our diversity: We seek to promote cultural awareness and foster respect, appreciation and understanding that crosses cultural barriers. We strive to do this by providing opportunities for dialogue, learning, sharing and socializing. We believe that our community can be enriched by diversity, not only in age, skills, education and religious affiliations, but also in cultural heritage.

### Vision into Action: An Enthralling Event

"Good things happen for a number of reasons," says Gerry Langseth, a member of the multicultural committee. A native of Pelican Rapids, she lived in many parts of the world with her husband in the military, until they came back to retire in the town.

“Someone has a good idea, other people give of their time to help that idea grow, and still other people and organizations donate money to cover the expenses of bringing that good idea to life,” she tells.

In their case, the idea of an “International Friendship Festival” emerged. It was a new, first-ever event, with “no funding mechanism in place.” Yet their tiny ripple became a mighty river. The Chamber of Commerce, Blandin alumni, the Multicultural Committee, the City of Pelican Rapids, and local townspeople all worked together and made it happen. Johanna Christianson, a native of the Netherlands, served as a prime mover.

- Their community-wide, day-long festival on June 20, 1998 was a joyful intermingling of cultures through music, dance, foods, and ethnic traditions.
- They got acquainted with each other, by coming out to meet and greet their neighbors anywhere up and down Main Street at “the Longest Coffee Break,” which evolved into “the International Coffee Break.”
- They set up a display of flags from more than 20 nations along the suspension bridge crossing the Pelican River.
- They shared Bosnian bread and coffee, Vietnamese egg rolls, Mexican foods, Norwegian lefsa and Swedish pancakes.
- They enjoyed the musical talents of an “old time” music group, a Mariachi band, Vietnamese dragon dancers, young American Indian drummers and hoop dancers, a disk jockey, and others.
- Local artists showed their gifts in such areas as Tae Kwon Do, rosemaling, wood carving, hardanger, quilting, and library storytelling.

#### Beyond Song and Dance, toward True Community

Initial adventures into “the land of diversity” often include the joys of sharing food, music and dance. The Pelican Rapids story is highly significant because the townspeople were intentional about crossing barriers and affirming diversity. Neither did this mean white persons working alone on the efforts, nor people of color working alone. They worked together. The festival was a purposeful beginning for the building of community, which took many forms after the initial event. (In AZ order—)

- **Awareness, dialogue, hope.** “We are working with Fetzer Institute, an organization started by the Detroit Tigers to help people realize their potential in eliminating racism and gender discrimination...to come together and talk about mutual concerns and differences. Efforts like this [festival] offer hope that people desperately need. It is a refreshing reminder of what we are capable of.” – Paul Schultz, Native American Ojibway and ombudsman for the White Earth Reservation
- **Financial education.** “There are 28 to 30 immigrants from Bosnia, Mexico and Vietnam who are buying houses. We started homebuyer classes to invite them to learn about financing. It’s fun working with them. Translators take part too.” – Craig Nelson, realtor
- **Fundraising.** “I work with child protection, with developmentally disabled children. I met some committed and innovative people, and got \$325,000 for children’s mental health. This program is for children living on or near the reservation.” – Donna Richgels, a festival planner and children’s services specialist at White Earth Reservation
- **Governance, empowerment, political action.** “We are starting a Chicano-Latino Affairs Council out of the governor’s office to help Latinos in the state to improve their lot. Hispanics have lived here for 20 years but were not politically active until

(continued)

- 1998. Now they realize they have more options. They are working on immigration issues to learn how they can advocate. They are also exploring rent control Title 8 housing built by the city for immigrants. If you teach one person, they teach their friends.” – John Tunseth
- **Growth in faith and self-awareness.** “I was a foreigner from the Netherlands when I came here. I have blond hair and blue eyes, but I know what it feels like to be greeted as a stranger. My faith mandates that I reach out with love. It is as easy but as hard as that. It is our greatest challenge. But we can use our life experiences to turn around and help someone else. People motivated by friendship and love get equipped with wisdom to carry something like this [festival] off.” – Johanna Christianson, chair of public relations for the multicultural committee
- **Immigration assistance and language learning.** “We have given help with the paperwork for immigration. I learned how to speak Bosnian and I am learning Spanish. We had to learn how to communicate. There is a crying need for English-as-a-Second-Language classes for adults and kids. Kids who start school not speaking English, become victims. As they expand their English language capability, they expand their options.” – John Tunseth
- **Lessening of fears.** “Many Mexican people hesitate to come forward because they don’t speak English. I try to tell them, ‘Don’t be afraid; just talk.’ It would help too if English-speaking people could take the time to speak both languages.” – Margarita Reese Mexican-American community leader
- “We want to bring glory to God by doing this festival. Some people were afraid and still are. And I know it is easy for me because I have been part of the change. But we hope they will see that diversity is a gift. Don’t be scared to do anything visionary, because you will get help.” – Johanna Christianson, chair of public relations for the multicultural committee
- **Ongoing appreciation of diversity.** “I’d been all over the world, and now in this place the world came to me. Every culture has a way of looking at life and you learn from them.” – Herbert Chilstrom, former presiding bishop of the ELCA and a resident of Pelican Rapids in the 1950s and 1990s
- **Violence prevention.** “Lately we are facing gang-related issues. I am attending meetings to find ways to prevent violence. This is everybody’s problem. I don’t know whether this is a thing that happens when a town grows. We all should know each other better [cultures and languages].” – Eduardo Guzman

#### Questions for reflection

1. What stands out for you in the mission statement developed by the Pelican Rapids multicultural committee? What elements would you emphasize in a mission statement for your own community?
2. How can a mission statement (personal, organizational, institutional) advance a cause or purpose? In what way could you maximize its usefulness?
3. If you were planning a festival, what elements would be most important to lift up in your community? What groups? What one idea comes to mind for easing the crossing of boundaries at the event?
4. Revisit the “Beyond song and dance” section above. As you read through, what do you notice about the giving and receiving?

## Pelican Rapids Today: Hub of Inspiration and Resourcing

In essence, the people of Pelican Rapids set out together to greet diversity. They did it by organizing ways to get acquainted across cultures, and then to developing next steps as they grew. Diversity became an integral part of community life. Churches work hand-in-hand with community organizations and groups. Creativity and hospitality abound.

The town is now a hub for helping other towns in the vicinity to cross barriers of race, culture and class. The state of Minnesota has put money into multicultural collaboratives, so that the town can teach others what they've learned. And Pelican Rapids' International Friendship Festival is still going strong, every year!

**Johanna Christianson** is a recognized community leader who came to Pelican Rapids from the Netherlands many years ago. One day she delivered food to more recent newcomers in a trailer park, and knew in her heart it was time to welcome others with intention. She has since become a key leader in diversity outreach.

Read her story as "Notable Leader, Keeper of the Heart" at [www.blandinfoundation.org](http://www.blandinfoundation.org), Volume 4, Number 1, Winter 2006 issue. Click on the "Community Leader" tab on the home page. It may be archived later under "Blandin Community Leadership Program," and "Community Leader" (name of their newsletter).

**Pam Westby**, the town librarian, is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church. The library has become a kind of "diversity central," where multiculturalism is lifted up through displays and programs like ESL for Older Adults. In a few short years, their website has become a treasure trove of information on the town's outreach across race, culture and class. It's a must-see website; see for yourself! <http://pelicanrapids.lib.mn.us/>.

**David Eggebraten**, pastor of Faith Lutheran Church, moved to Pelican Rapids precisely because he wanted to be involved with different nationalities. He cites "delightful conversations" with his next door neighbor from Mexico, even though neither of them is fluent in each other's language. "I help him start his lawnmower, he helps me with yardwork, we communicate," he says. Faith Lutheran is involved in social service aspects of outreach, including local food pantry work. "We reach out individually across cultures," the pastor says, "but my hope is that we do even more as a church corporately to reach out to new neighbors."

**Diane McGregor**, a member of Faith Lutheran, manages volunteers at the local "Pass It On" Thrift Store ministry. A generous donor gave a building to Trinity Lutheran, whose parishioners painted, and decorated the space. It's a little house, open 20 hours a week to fill a need for clothing and household goods. Anyone can come in and stuff a bag for a few dollars. "Donations keep coming in," Diane says, "Financial too." What comes in financially they give away, for mission near and far.

**Diane Kimm** heads the Refugee Resettlement Program at Lutheran Social Services in the town. Years ago, she had heard that a newly arriving refugee family needed household furniture. "We had an extra bed," she recalls. "I took it over, met the family, and they were charming." Another time, she and her husband brought compost over to boost the family's gardening efforts. "With seeds the father had brought from Vietnam, they grew lettuce leaves that must have been six inches across!" she said. "Everyone who came to help got bagfuls of salad to take home."

She says that while most Minnesota towns have Hispanic or Hmong residents, Pelican Rapids has at least eight different nationalities of newcomers. Mindful of building toward the future, the town is helping children to build leadership skills. For example, Hispanic young people are invited to go to schools in other towns and speak to Spanish classes.

Other youth take part in focus groups, which gives them visibility.

She recommends a one-on-one mentoring program that matches townspeople with former refugees. “Better English skills put them into fast forward to living here,” Diane says. “Get a question answered, rather than make a serious mistake, and life is better. They come in with a level of frustration, upset about something. When questions are answered, perhaps a telephone call made, they go out relieved and thankful.”

**Questions for discussion:**

- Read the story of Johanna Christianson at [www.blandinfoundation.org](http://www.blandinfoundation.org). Though you have a story of your own, your journey into diversity may blossom from the same beginning: What is your heart telling you?
- Visit [www.pelicanrapids.lib.mn.us](http://www.pelicanrapids.lib.mn.us), including “Faces of Change,” a fascinating series of profiles on people of the town. Make note of what stands out for you in this virtual meeting of a “can do” community. What do you think God is calling you to do in your own community? What gift do you bring to a table of diversity?
- Pastor Eggebraten points out an important distinction between personal reaching out across culture and corporate outreach. What are some ways to foster greater outreach as one body of the church?
- The “Pass It on” ministry is an example of practical outreach to meet needs. What similar kind of effort can you support in your own neighborhood?
- How can you serve as a mentor, whether formally or informally?

Continue to [Leader Tips: Community Resources Enrich the Journey](#)



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### “Faces of Change” – Community Resources Enrich the Journey

Pamela Westby is the library director at Pelican Rapids Library in Minnesota. Here she tells how diversity outreach developed at the library. “For those who are only beginning to understand the beauty of diversity,” she says, “I recommend that you read about immigrants, both fiction and non-fiction, and listen to their stories. You will hear that we are different, yet the same.”

#### Integrating diversity into art

In addition to the literacy and foreign language resources, we celebrate the coming together of many cultures by integrating diversity into the art in the library. Some pieces were commissioned; others are donations.

Be sure to check out the “Tapestry of Friendship” tapestry on our website. Here you can learn about some of the struggles of immigrants to the United States. The tapestry is a quilt of fiber art that represents many of the cultures that have immigrated here. The border is composed of fabric that was block printed by elementary school students, using their patterns they designed themselves to express their ideas of friendship.

The “Faces of Change” traveling art exhibit is a set of essays and photos that convey the demographic and social transitions in Pelican Rapids during the last decade. The site was designed to complement our new identity.

#### Toward a new identity

The Pelican Rapids Public Library board and staff realized the need to find a new identity in the late 1990s when a large influx of immigrants had moved to the community. They had many needs. Among those needs were language skills. The library was a logical place to start. We began purchasing literacy materials, foreign language books, newspapers, videos. We went to the legislature for funding to build a facility that would make us not only a public library, but a multicultural learning center.

#### Empowering the people

In the new building we have room to offer the following: English-as-a-Second-Language classes (6 times a week); two small study rooms equipped with computers with English tutoring software, CDs, cassettes, books and videos that help with learning English. We have translated our library services list and our Internet policy, as well. The Internet allows people to read newspapers from Somalia, hear Arabic and Somali

newscasts, communicate with MSN messenger and send email to loved ones still in Africa. (The Somali men see photos of their babies being raised in refugee camps. These men work at the turkey processing plant and send money home overseas to their families.) Information empowers people; our goal is to contribute to the empowerment of the residents we serve.

Our community is different from many cities of similar-size; therefore our services are also different. As an example, the library has available a newspaper written in Spanish and one in Vietnamese. There's English-learning software on all of the computer stations in the Pelican Rapids Public Library. We have Rosetta Stone software, for two different levels of English-learning. The role of public libraries is to respond to the information needs of its community, by including foreign language and literacy materials; we are simply providing what the people need.

### 3-D learning tools

Check-out includes much more than just books, video, and other items. As an example, to learn more about the Somali culture, people can check out a trunk that includes a camel bell, Hajab (head dressing worn by Somali women), videos about the country of Somalia, books, music, map, flags, and even a jug used to store camel's milk. The culture kits serve as a three-dimensional learning tool for service groups, classrooms or families. They give people a chance to experience another way of life by seeing, hearing, touching and feeling the culture.

### Diverse staff

Perhaps the most valuable gift has been the addition of diverse staff. Currently, the library employs Khadijo Ismail, a high school junior from Somalia and Kenya, Africa. She assists with translations, circulation, secretarial duties and shelves books. In the summer the library has been fortunate to have Spanish speaking workers, as well. Our minority workers have helped to break the barriers between the cultures and have offered a level of comfort to immigrants and minorities using the public library for the first time

### Opening doors, entertaining strangers

I live in a small, but unique community, where immigrants from all over the world live and work. In fact, most of our patrons are minorities and refugees. I serve patrons from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Russia, Somalia, Kenya, Mexico, Croatia, Ukraine and Iraq. When I look into the eyes of our immigrant and refugee library patrons, I see the eyes of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, who came from Norway in the late 1800s. The new immigrants' motives in coming to America are no different than those who homesteaded here. They dream of a better life, not for themselves but for their children and their children's children.

As a Library Director, I try to open doors for everyone, regardless of race or religion or anything else. It is my goal to open the doors to knowledge and understanding and ultimately, love. We are a richer community because we have embraced our differences, yet we have recognized our commonalities.

I am reminded of the passage from Hebrews 13:2: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” In this short while, I have come to know many angels. They have been reminders to me of all that God has given me. Every day I am grateful for the people and things in my life, freedom to worship, to come and go as I please, to earn an honest living and to get an education. These are things we often take for granted here in the United States.

For more, see [www.pelicanrapids.lib.mn.us](http://www.pelicanrapids.lib.mn.us) and “How Pelican Rapids said Welcome.”

Continue to Story and Discussion: Saying Yes more than No—Our Saviour,  
Queens, NY



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

God's work. Our hands.

“Saying YES more than Saying NO”

*By Pastor Bob Fritch, Our Saviour Lutheran Church, Jamaica, Queens, NY*

Founded in 1923, Our Saviour Lutheran Church worshipped for thirty years in a house-church on the site of the present building, which was erected in 1953. Once a German-Lutheran congregation which served the needs of German immigrants, the congregation began to struggle in the 1960s with both a rapidly changing neighborhood and a loss of a large number of stalwart members.

In 1991, Our Saviour was a church faced with closure; however, since that time it has grown to be the largest of the 60 Lutheran churches in the Borough of Queens. In 1998, Our Saviour was named one of seven of the fastest growing churches in the ELCA. The church now has a pastoral staff of two full-time clergy, and a full-time staff of 16. On any given Sunday, people from more than twenty nations of origin gather for worship.

It was a Friday evening and over one hundred of us sat on bed sheets carefully placed on the floor of the finished basement. Colorful yellow and red garlands hung along the walls, while at one end there were shorter garlands forming a tent-like space where the maaro (Hindi for “Wedding place”) was. Natasha, a former graduate of one of my early confirmation classes, walked into the space, her skin dyed yellow with the ritual dye for a Hindu marriage. She was dressed in a yellow sari with gold chains hanging from her ear to her nose - a yellow teeka (Hindi for “cinder”) on her forehead.

The pandit welcomed her into the place where the wedding would take place and she sat facing the maaro, a small pot with bamboo shoots sprouting up. Ghee, ritual clarified butte, was burning in brass pots. Natasha looked nervous, covered from head to toe in yellow, as she waited for her husband-to-be.

As I sat on the floor surrounded by a host of people who all greeted me warmly as Father Bob, I thought about what I was going to say. Yes, the pandit had not only greeted me as a colleague, but also insisted that I say something at this ceremony. I tried to be polite by saying that today was his day and my day would be on Sunday, but he took me by surprise, saying, “They will be blessed by your words tonight.”

This was not the first time I had spoken at a Hindu religious function, but his words struck me deeply as I wondered what I would do if the pandit showed up at church on Sunday for the Christian wedding ceremony. Perhaps the deeper question was; what would happen in most Lutheran churches?

I flashed back to my final year in seminary where a Professor of Systematics sternly told us that “one of the most difficult situations you will have to deal with as a pastor is the marriage of a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic.”

But there in that basement, the old question of “in which tradition will the children be raised” faded to the background as the incense filled the room and the overwhelming joy of the people gathered spread throughout that basement. For that moment, there was nowhere I would rather have been. This was a part of what makes ministry in this context so exciting - feeling the overwhelming love of God and the unconditional love of a group of wonderfully diverse people.

As we at Our Saviour Lutheran Church work to welcome people from more than twenty countries of origin, there will always be things that we will be asked to do, rituals we will be asked to perform, events we will be asked to attend, that stand outside of what most would consider “typical” Lutheran tradition. And that’s OK.

It has been my long-held belief that there is no better way to share the Gospel of Christ than to meet folks where they are and with the understanding they have and as the church, to say YES more than we say NO.

How often though, do we close the door to mission by saying NO, not understanding that all of our lives are filled with things that not everyone will accept or understand? Yet if we truly profess that it is the grace of God, the unconditional, life giving, life freeing grace of God that is the cornerstone of our faith, then God demands our YES. Everything we do should be tempered with a dash of grace and not condemnation.

I smile every Sunday as I look out into the congregation and see one of our current confirmation students sitting with her mother, who happens to be Muslim, and who is in church every Sunday to make certain her daughter is brought up in the faith Ashley has chosen. I smile as I look out at Sookchrania, who recently turned 84 and still bears the tattoos of her Hindu upbringing. This is a true foretaste of the feast to come.

As I sat at the wedding house with those folks from various traditions, the coming Sunday’s Gospel swirled through my head; it was the story of the paralytic whose friends rip open the roof of the house to get their friend to Jesus. I looked around me and asked, “How much roof are we willing to rip open to share the Word of God with those who have not heard?” This night was a God-given opportunity to do that by my presence and by my willingness to respect their traditions, while not compromising my own.

I remembered the words of retired Assistant to the Bishop, Winston Bone who said to me, “Never turn down an opportunity to preach the Gospel.”

And I asked myself – What does ripping the roof off look like? Ripping the roof off might mean saying YES to things we see as foreign and different. Ripping the roof off might mean being asked to bless a car, a house, an engagement, or a birthday.

Ripping the roof off might mean learning what a maaro is; it might mean making worship accessible to those from other faiths and those from other cultures.

Ripping the roof off might mean that Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for ALL PEOPLE for the forgiveness of sin.” God does not need our help, but God has asked for our help. It is such a joy to work to make it so.

Questions for discussion:

1. What would it mean to say YES more than NO in your congregation? Where and how do hear NO being spoken? Where and how do you hear YES being spoken?
2. What “typical” Lutheran traditions may be holding you back from outreach within your community?
3. What would it mean within your congregation to step out of seeing and responding from the place of tradition and comfort, to seeing and responding at the place where people stand and where they can be met?
4. How much roof are you willing to rip open to share the Word of God with those who have not heard?
5. To what are you being called to respond with YES – with the help of God?

You have completed part 3: One Body Many Members



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