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Church Together

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH AN EMPTY PARSONAGE?

What can you do with a parsonage that will be unoccupied for several months, probably a full year? Paint it? Do minor repairs? Rent it out? Let it rest? Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in San Carlos, not a large congregation but abundantly blessed with imagination and open hearts, had a better idea: transitional housing for some homeless families.

For 10 years Holy Trinity has been a partner with [HOME & HOPE](#), a nonprofit interfaith collaborative that effectively supports homeless families in San Mateo County. By partnering with 34 congregations and over 1,400 volunteers, H&H is able to offer lots of love and support: shelter, meals, and a full-service Day Center where the families have access at no cost to laundry, showers, a living room area, computers, kitchenette, and case management from experienced, caring staff. Once each year Holy Trinity provides one week of overnight shelter and food for 4-6 homeless families. Families arrive about 6 p.m. and eat a dinner prepared and served

by a church member/family. Large tents are set up in the parish hall, one per family, for sleeping; one church member spends the night with the guests to provide help in case of illness or other emergency. After a (usually) light breakfast provided by the congregation, families leave for work or school or the Day Center about 7 a.m.; some have cars, while others are transported by the H&H van.

In the summer of 2015 when Pastor Christian Jennert announced he would be leaving, the Holy Spirit moved amongst this congregation to open their imaginations and hearts. The idea to house transitional families (those who had been successful in the H&H program and were nearly ready to leave and live independently) was presented to the Holy Trinity Church Council and the H&H Board. The Board was "excited and honored for the opportunity for our families." The Church Council was also pleased, but asked good questions. Who will supervise the families? (H&H case manager and a representative from Council.) How many people? (2 families at a time, maximum of 9 persons.) Is our insurance adequate? (A slight modification to our policy will be needed.) Will this affect our tax status? (No.) What will happen when we call a new pastor? (Once the Call Committee begins to interview, the program will phase out and the families will leave, allowing time to ready the parsonage for the new pastor.) Church members coordinated with the San Carlos Planning Division and Building Department, the Council gave its approval, and on Sunday, Nov. 22, 2015 two families moved into the parsonage supported by a Holy Trinity welcome team and gifts, staff from HOME & HOPE, and assistance from the San Francisco Basket Brigade which stocked the pantry and refrigerator with food. When one family moved on, the vacancy was quickly filled by another family.

There were two more imaginative and open-hearted details. Part of the case management was counseling the families to live together under agreed house rules and chores. Secondly, the congregation charged the families a small security deposit and a nominal rent. Each month, under a signed lease agreement, they paid rent, mostly to help them practice for their transition into their own apartment or house. When each family left, Holy Trinity surprised them by returning all the security deposit and rent they had paid, providing them with a start-up fund and cushion for their move to independent living.

What can you do with a parsonage that will be unoccupied for several months? Holy Trinity Lutheran Church asked, "What would Jesus have US do? How can we have this parsonage as truly GOD's HOUSE?" You have just read the story of their imaginative and open-hearted answer. As they introduced this ministry to the congregation in a newsletter article, the ministry leaders said, "God has provided this opportunity for us to widen our welcome, share God's gifts, care

for each other, and live our faith. For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26-28)"

When Holy Trinity's new pastor, Joshua Serrano, moved into the parsonage at the end of November 2016, he took up residence in a most blessed house, and he took up pastoral ministry with a most imaginative and open-hearted community of Christ-followers.

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.

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