Church Together

Expanding a Strong Legacy

by Carl Wilfrid

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Oakland, has a “goodly heritage.” The congregation was founded in 1929 by five sisters and their families who had moved from Louisiana to west Oakland. There were other nearby Lutheran churches, but the five sisters wanted to duplicate in Oakland the kind of black Lutheran church life they had experienced back at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Louisiana. Four generations descended from Shirley White, a Bethlehem member from those early days, still worship there. Pastor Will Herzfeld, Lutheran church leader and community activist, served as Bethlehem’s pastor from 1973 to 1992. For five of those years Pr. Herzfeld also served as Presiding Bishop of the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), an offshoot of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and one of the ELCA’s predecessor church bodies.

Times have changed. With 35-40 active members, Bethlehem now welcomes about 20 to worship each Sunday. These days Bethlehem members, like 70 year old Jennifer Teer, deeply want to preserve and pass along Bethlehem’s strong legacy, but the shrinking, aging congregation struggles to continue. When Jennifer, then a young adult, moved in 1975 from Chicago to Oakland, her mother sent a note to Pr. Herzfeld encouraging him to welcome her daughter. He did! Bethlehem Church welcomed Jennifer, and has remained an anchor and powerful force in her life ever since. She would like to pass the same gift on to others.

But don’t for a minute think that Jennifer and her sisters and brothers in Christ are sitting around worrying and moping! They are too busy living as followers of Jesus, building on and expanding Bethlehem’s legacy of faith and faithful living, serving where they are called, and inviting neighbors to “come to Bethlehem and see!”

Having noticed an increased population of homeless persons in their community, Bethlehem wondered what they could do. They heard that Pastor Megan Rohrer in San Francisco was serving homeless persons in that community, so a group from Bethlehem went to observe what they were doing...
and to help serve a free meal. Homeless guests were served at tables, and volunteers sat and ate with them. The Bethlehem folks were inspired by the love expressed by those who received the gift of food. And Jennifer Teer, who operates a part-time catering business to supplement her wages from a nonprofit, saw what Pr. Megan was doing and thought, “We could do this!” The Bethlehem core group planned their next steps.

At first they tried to copy Pr. Megan’s model, serving homeless guests at tables at their church, but only 5-10 people showed up for the generous feast they had prepared. They decided to bring the food to the homeless camp. Now, on the third Sunday of every month Bethlehem volunteers prepare 200 hot meals, pack them in individual biodegradable containers, and deliver them to the homeless camp. The menu varies: spaghetti with salad or green beans, chicken and rice with cornbread, corned beef and cabbage, and always bread, a cookie or cake, and water. This meal ministry has no budget; all food is donated by Bethlehem members. The cooks are mostly older women, but men and younger women help with other heavy-lifting tasks. “The joy,” says Jennifer Teer, “is connecting with our guests, sitting down and talking with them, respect flowing both ways.” Oh, and Jennifer reports that this ministry has developed more closeness among Bethlehem’s members.

Sometimes other volunteers help out. United Lutheran Church in Oakland, Bethlehem’s sister congregation, provides some helpers, and provided a grant to help purchase food. One month Bishop Mark, wearing his collar, came to help. Spotting him, and perhaps having heard of his kitchen prowess with “Chili with the Bishop,” several homeless guests announced, “I want to get mine from the pastor!” Over time the core group has become aware of other needs (socks, personal hygiene supplies), and additional donations and an expanded ministry soon followed.

Bethlehem congregation recently entered into an agreement with a Christian child care agency that will operate in a refurbished part of the church that long ago (1950s) was used for the same purpose. What will happen with the strong legacy of Bethlehem Lutheran, Oakland? Only God knows. But we do know that the “little flock” that now gathers for worship and service and growth is building on that legacy and expanding it. Praise God!

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