

The Vocation of First Call Congregations
Case Study Report
St. John Lutheran Church, San Juan, Texas
Site Visit: May, 2007
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INTRODUCTION

I had the address. I even had MapQuest directions in front of me. But the numbers on the buildings didn't seem to be going in numerical order. The building that should have been the number of Pastor Sylvia's house in San Juan, TX was an abandoned building. After turning around a few times and retracing my steps, I pulled into a pot-holed lot next to an animal clinic where I saw a police car parked. The policewoman was just exiting the clinic and I went to her with a desperate look in my eyes – I could tell by the way she sympathetically looked at me. She laughed when I told her the numbers on the buildings were very confusing. When she saw the address I was searching for, she said, "Oh, that's Pastor Sylvia's home. She's a relative of mine. It's just down the road on your right."

And so it was. I'd gone past it a couple times, not seeing a number since there was a fence around the property. The building you could see from the road looked like an unattached garage. It had two set of numbers on the door, one set in the 300 range and 405 which was the number I was looking for. Her house was to the right down a stone pathway, tucked into a number of trees. By this time I was wilting in the 90 degree weather and was grateful when Pastor Sylvia ushered me into her cool house, immediately offering me ice tea. A piece of cake followed next. When I told her about the help I received from the policewoman who said she was a relative, Pr. Sylvia was surprised since she didn't remember any such relative.

We talked for a few minutes before she excused herself to pick up her granddaughter from school. After my frustrated search for the right address, I appreciated the 20 minute rest in her air conditioned living room. On the wall directly across from the sofa was a beautifully stenciled Psalm verse: "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost part of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." (Ps. 139: 9-10)

PURPOSE OF VISIT

At different times during my visit, I clarified the purpose of my visit with the members at St. John.

- To understand how your congregation supported Pr. Sylvia in her first call to public ministry;
- To understand how your congregation has become a multicultural congregation; and
- To get a picture of how your congregation connects to the larger church and God's mission in the world.

The second objective seemed to connect with people; in fact, when I was introduced to the congregation or to other members by Pr. Sylvia or a lay leader, this was given as the reason for my visit. As I reflected on my conversations with members, the term "first call" didn't translate easily, perhaps because Pr. Sylvia wasn't a typical first call pastor, nor did she become one in the traditional ordination process.

In the three days I spent at St. John, I was able to talk to 38 members, including six youth, six Winter Texans (by phone), Pastor Sylvia and Lois Eichman on staff, and 24 lay members and leaders.

PASTORA SYLVIA DE LA GARZA

A Non-traditional Ministry Preparation

Sylvia De La Garza had been an elementary teacher all her adult life, and was nearing retirement age. At that time, several years ago, she began wondering what was next for her. She realizes now that her sense of call surfaced during her teaching career when a colleague got very ill. At her school, Sylvia started a prayer circle for this colleague – even meeting in a closet to be less obvious. Later they moved the prayer group to her home. Five women (not from her church) joined her regularly.

Sylvia's husband was a "typical Hispanic" man who put stringent restrictions on her going places alone – even with women and even to the grocery store. He didn't attend church and was a Catholic "in name only." According to Sylvia, he would swear a lot, have beer parties with his male friends in their back yard and consider church members to be hypocrites – until an experience at St. Johns one Sunday. When Sylvia's brother, Javier Alanis, was scheduled to preach at St. John (before he went to seminary), she invited her husband to come. He exclaimed, "That hypocrite!" and walked away. But when she was ready to leave, he came to her and said he was going and she should wait for him to get ready. She was shocked, but decided not to ask him what changed his mind. She just thanked God. Her husband had a conversion experience that Sunday. "God touched him that day and he changed dramatically." She continued, "After hearing how God had transformed Javier, my husband asked God to do the same for him." Sylvia remembered, "He took to praying for the sick." He and Sylvia went to nursing homes and became sponsors to young boys in a correctional school. Her husband became a mentor to them which "meant so much to these troubled boys." He was a "people's person" so this kind of relationship building came naturally to him.

Some of her husband's restrictions lessened "when he was transformed." They started a prayer service in their home, open to all, and many unchurched or lapsed Catholics came. As the numbers grew, the prayer service spilled out into their back yard. Her husband liked to attend a small evangelical church in Alamo, so Sylvia would first play the organ at St. John and then accompany him to that church every Sunday.

Sylvia began to realize that in order to be effective in this ministry, she needed to learn more. Her women prayer partners suggested they attend classes at a nearby Assembly of God Bible College. After attending a few classes with them, the friends decided it was too much for them to keep up, but Sylvia wanted to continue and graduate. She wondered how her husband would respond. When she told him that she desired to continue learning there, he said, "What's stopping you?" She knew that he knew how a request like this was treated in the past, but didn't say anything. She was grateful for his willingness to let her continue to learn.

Sylvia's husband died five years ago of cancer. While it was difficult, she now realizes it freed her to pursue her calling. Pastor David Carrillo sent a letter to the synod bishop about her interest in the alternative route to ordination called TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging

Ministries) which was offered by the ELCA. Three months after her husband's death, the Bishop came to interview her and asked if this was too soon after losing her husband. Sylvia said that she was planning on retiring from teaching and felt that God was opening a new door for her. She told me, "I knew it was God doing this. He opened the door and everything just fell into place."

It wasn't an easy decision since Sylvia knew she would be out of her comfort zone of being "a small town girl." She rarely had ventured out of the town where they lived. For the seminary courses, she went to The Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest in Austin where her brother, Javier Alanis, was teaching. He would meet her at the airport and she stayed with him during this time. When Dr. Alanis taught at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, she accompanied him and took courses there. Later when her brother was asked to teach a summer course at Drew University, she also went and took courses there which she remembers as especially hard courses.

While at Drew, Alanis didn't want anyone to know he was her brother because he was also her teacher. One time when he was going up to NYC, he told Sylvia that if she finished her paper, she could come with him, packing a small overnight bag. Sylvia didn't want to miss the chance to see the city so finished her work on time. On the train, they were in a car with other Drew students they knew. When the students saw them get off the train together to take the ferry – with their suitcases – Sylvia knew what they were thinking. Sylvia tried to convince her brother to tell them about their sibling relationship, but he just laughed, thinking this was a good joke to play on them. She remembered saying, "What about me!?" Later, back at Drew, the only student who knew about their sibling relationship spilled the beans one day before class, asking her where her brother was. With this revelation, she saw her fellow students' faces change. Later her brother formally told the class that Sylvia was his sister.

Sylvia did well in school, but felt intimidated by the synod staff and her candidacy committee that always asked tough questions. Lynn Schudy Ziese, Assistant to the Bishop in the Southwestern Texas Synod, especially intimidated her, even though Sylvia also admired her. Every time she went before the candidacy committee, she prayed, cried and searched scripture. Once when she was reading the Old Testament prophets, she read that God told one of the prophets, "I'm leading you; don't turn to the left or the right." This encouraged her. Another time she prayed for a sign as she waited to speak before a spiritual retreat group (Via de Cristo). As she looked out the window of the retreat center, she saw in the distance what she thought were sheep. When she mentioned this to Dr. Faye Schott, Systematic Theology professor who was on her candidacy committee, Dr. Schott told her that God was telling her to "feed my sheep," the directive told to the Apostle Peter by the resurrected Jesus.

When she was in the TEEM program, she experienced the Anglo community at St. John as especially supportive and welcoming. They seemed to be confirming her call. One time Mr. and Mrs. Allen invited her out to eat and said they wanted to be part of the ministry God was calling her to. The Allens told her, "We know God is using you." When they first offered financial help, Sylvia hesitated and told them that she would let them know if she needed help. Later she received their help to finish her last seminary year.

One time after Sylvia gave a Bible study presentation to the Women's Group, Mrs. Allen asked Pastor David Carrillo if Sylvia could preach during a Sunday service. This was well received

she remembered. When Pr. Carrillo's illness incapacitated him, Sylvia began preaching frequently. Pr. Sylvia told me with some hesitation that several times she was even applauded. Pr. Sylvia remembers that she felt the hand of God guiding her through this experience and that "God was using me to get the people ready for someone greater to move the church to new horizons."

When Pr. Carrillo was near death, she visited him in the hospital and prayed with him. She recalls feeling heat in her hands, telling Pr. Carrillo that he would be all right. He lived another year and a half and even married a woman from the congregation during this time.

She remembered Pr. Carrillo as a "gentle man" who wouldn't give her critiques about her preaching when she asked. He was a mentor for her, but also shared his sense of humor with her. He took her to meetings with the Rio Grande Valley pastors where she was the only female with older male pastors. She claimed she felt very comfortable with them. When one of the pastors at the meeting asked Carrillo, "Where did you find this woman?" Carrillo replied, "I didn't find her; she found us."

CONGREGATIONAL HISTORY

The history of St. John was a frequent topic of conversation. Several members I met had been in the church since they were young and told stories of previous pastorates, emphasizing the gifts each pastor brought to his ministry. There were also stories of conflict, especially when the decision was made to move the location of St. John out of a largely Hispanic neighborhood to encourage Anglos and Winter Texans to attend. The following are some snapshots from the stories I heard.

Some History Snapshots

Roots are deep: The Painting on the wall in the Fellowship Hall is of Mrs. L.C. Mellenbruch (1871-1949) with the inscription: "Mother of Mexican Missions of American Lutheran Church, begun at San Juan, TX, 1919." She began visiting Mexican immigrant families and shared the Bible with them. Her daughter continued the ministry and, being bilingual, expanded the mission work.

Roots are rich, but also painful: St. John was a growing church when it was located on 4th Street in San Juan. Rev. A. H. Koehler (1933-1948) and his wife "reached out to immigrants." Lay pastor Simon Camarillo helped also. The church was the center of life and a place for cultural integration for these families.

Another pastor, Halger Nielsen (1953-1958) at the 4th Street church, was remembered as being very good with Luther League, encouraging young people to use their talents and gifts.

Several pastors since Koehler were committed to blending Hispanic and Anglo members. Pastor Olivarez (1958-1962) encouraged "Winter Texans" to come to St. John. He also had a vision. He felt that if the church was to continue reaching out to Anglos, it needed a new location and larger building. This decision was painful for the Hispanic congregation that had deep roots in that church and was the center of their community. Also there was a fear that they wouldn't be able to afford building a new building and parsonage. Some families left, but the majority came over to the new church, dedicated in 1961.

When the ELCA was born in late 80's, the ALC (American Lutheran Church) needed to sell some of its property and sold the Lutheran seminary (next door) to the public school system and, they in turn, sold it to the Roman Catholic church for their school. In the process, St. John lost its parking lot which has been a challenge ever since. While they have arranged to share some school's parking space on Sundays, there is still a negative residue among some members about this loss.

Roots continue to grow: Rev. Salge (1968-1978) “pushed VBS and purchased a bus from his own pocket and picked up children in the community for VBS.” He started the appreciation dinners for Winter Texans that continues to this day. Also he was able to get members' children to go to Bible camp. Pr. Salge is remembered as doing a lot of home visits. During a particular period of time there were six women in the congregation who all were expecting. One Hispanic member asked him if there was a correlation between the home visits and the pregnancies. Rev. Salge “turned a bright red.” This story was shared in a group interview, accompanied by a lot of laughter.

Rev. Steege (1978-1985) and Rev. Naffier (1989-1991) continued the process of attracting Winter Texans to the congregation. These pastors went to the mobile home park where many of the Anglo community lived during the winter months and interacted with them.

Rev. David Carrillo, the pastor before Pr. Sylvia, was well respected and loved; however, his illness for several years prohibited him from some ministry efforts, especially in areas of evangelism and service projects. Sylvia remembers him as a good mentor when she was learning to be a pastor.

ST. JOHN CULTURE

St. John is located in an ideal setting for becoming a multicultural congregation. It is very close to the Mexican border and has over the years drawn members from immigrant families. It is also close to an exit on an interstate highway that connects to the city of McAllen and its airport as well as other Rio Grande towns such as Mission, Pharr, Alamo. Many of these towns have catered to Winter Texans, providing land for retirement parks, reasonably-priced restaurants and tourist attractions. There has been a history of St. John pastors spending time in the retirement parks, developing relationships with Winter Texans, many who have become “associate” members at St. John.

In my conversations with the Anglo members and Winter Texans as well as Hispanic members, I heard many comments about how they saw each other across cultures.

Crossing cultural divides - Hispanic members' perspectives:

“We treat Winter Texans as our own.”

“We've known many of them (Winter Texans) for years. They're open and have good ideas.”

Anglo Lutherans do everything in good order and in their own way. But when we say good-bye to them for several months, everybody cries.”

Bridges across the cultures is experienced in the Women's Prayer Group and the Men's Group, through fellowship activities together like the Rodeo, and through servant mission activities. "These inclusion events help."

"We show appreciation for all they do (Appreciation Dinner). They feel comfortable and come back to us. That's a good sign."

Anglo members' perspectives:

"We feel right at home with the order of service and the marvelous preaching."

"The fellowship times are fun and a challenge, but I have come to know Hispanic members that way."

"I walked into the church for the first time and it was home. I feel comfortable and accepted in a caring, loving environment. You can feel it! The people and the pastor and everyone working together."

"Winter Texans are the same – loving and peaceful. I think there's a maturity of the Spirit here perhaps."

Mini-case: "Prayer and Brunch"

It was already hot and muggy when I got to the church Saturday morning shortly after 9:15 am for the "Women's Prayer Group." I had left my hotel in a nearby town and driven the interstate as fast as was allowed since I was going to be a little late for the scheduled time of 9:00 am. In the parking lot another car had just pulled in and two women carried something into the church. As I walked into the Fellowship Hall there already were a few women busy in the kitchen or setting the tables for the breakfast to follow the prayer time.

I moved through the brightly lit room toward a dimly lit sanctuary which is immediately beyond the accordion divider in the Fellowship Hall. Some women were quietly sitting in the front pews while others were standing or kneeling at the altar rail, all in silent prayer. Pr. Silvia was kneeling in the center, facing the altar. I took a seat in one of the front pews, closed my eyes, tried to breathe deeply, and started to feel tension in my body melt away. The darkness and silence of the sanctuary contributed to my release.

After a time, Pr. Sylvia rose to her feet, still facing the altar, and read passages from the Bible, especially those with women as subjects. She paused after each passage and the women continued praying in silence.

Pr. Sylvia then turned around and invited all into a prayer circle. Everyone took a hand on the right and on the left, circling the baptismal font in its prominent place in front of the altar steps. I noticed that most of the women were Latina. Pr. Sylvia began with a prayer of thanks for the day, asking God's blessing and then invited others to pray. Several women prayed, some thanking God for an answer to a prayer and others offering petitions for themselves or loved ones. There were prayers for peace, for wisdom among decision-makers in the Texas legislature and for the upcoming Synod Assembly. From the easy flow of the prayers and their articulation, I sensed that these women were very comfortable with this form of spontaneous prayer.

When the prayers ceased, Pr. Sylvia asked a couple women to bring the newly knitted prayer shawls to the baptismal font. As a woman held a shawl, Pr. Sylvia offered a blessing over the shawl that it would "carry Jesus' love and healing to those who need it."

Someone with a camera asked to take some pictures with women behind the font stretching out their hands as if blessing the shawls. They invited me to join in the pose which I did.

With wonderful aromas of eggs, bacon, coffee and sweet breads floating in from the kitchen, we all made our way to the Fellowship Hall and lined up in the serving line, loading our plates with breakfast brunch. There were several egg, sausage and tortilla casseroles as well as fresh fruit, muffins and juice options. I joined women at one of the tables and learned that three sisters were among the group, one of them visiting from California. To my right was Mrs. Hildebrand, a woman who has been in the congregation many years. While we were still in the sanctuary after the prayer circle, she had given me one of her “prayer rocks” and told me she had knitted 15 shawls so far. Mrs. Hildebrand said that she was grateful that she can offer this gift to the congregation since she was old and getting weak.

Conversation was light while we enjoyed the tasty meal. I was told that when the Winter Texans are there, this group swells with their numbers, the Anglo women appreciating the connection with the Hispanic women. When I later talked to one of these Winter Texans on the phone and asked if she attends the monthly prayer group, she said that she comes for the brunch but not for the prayer group. A few Anglo women do attend the prayer session, but I gathered that many Winter Texans, coming from more traditional Lutheran congregations, were not comfortable with this form of group praying.

As the women finished their breakfast, one woman who leads the Hispanic Women’s Bible Study group invited anyone to give a testimonial. Pastor Carrillo’s widow read from Psalm 34 and spoke about the “double confirmation” that the Spirit gives when something is true. After the testimonial, Pr. Sylvia said she was amazed to hear her read from Psalm 34 since she had also chosen this psalm in the prayer group time.

Another woman who had gone on a mission trip to Mexico told about an old man who she tried to convince to receive a pair of glasses since he had poor eyesight. The man refused, saying that he really didn’t need them, suggesting that others needed them more. Seeing children hugging the used stuffed animals they were given, she realized how in the midst of their poverty, they were “so grateful for anything they are given.”

The brunch time ended with a litany for “St. John Lutheran Women of the ELCA.” It included unison responses to questions by the leader. The first question was “Why are we here?” All responded:

**As a community of women,
Created in the image of God,
Called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and
Empowered by the Holy Spirit.
We commit ourselves to
Grow in faith,
Affirm our gifts,
Support one another in our callings,
Engage in ministry and action, and
Promote healing and wholeness in the church,
the society, and the world.**

“What do we pray to accomplish?”

**To equip women to be active, bold servants accountable to God.
“So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who testified to the word of grace by granting signs and wonders to be done through them.” (Acts 14:3)**

“What is the source of our boldness?”

“For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

“What is our mission?”

To mobilize women to act boldly on their faith in Jesus Christ.

I lingered after the tables were cleared and had a conversation with an Anglo woman who had come to the church the summer before after leaving the Episcopal congregation where she was a member, primarily because of her disagreement with the ordination of a gay bishop. She was invited by an Anglo couple she had met when she moved to the area. After visiting several other churches in the area, she said, “I have never seen a group like this...They sang on my birthday and I looked into all their eyes and the love of God poured out.”

TRANSFORMATION OF SYLVIA DE LA GARZA

Because of the uniqueness of how Pr. Sylvia became their pastor, I raised many questions about how people have experienced her transition from being a congregational member to serving as their pastor.

Lay members concerns:

When Sylvia decided to enter the TEEM program, one friend asked her if she really heard this call from God since she was retiring from teaching and would be entering a whole new career at her age. Sylvia remembered responding with a resounding, “Yes!”

A few members who grew up with her remembered their concern at this time that she might not be able to pick up all the work and responsibilities, following in Pr. Carrillo’s footsteps.

Others who have been lifelong friends said they thought of her as being quiet and submissive and wondered how she would have the strength and discipline to be a strong leader. When I asked Pr. Sylvia about this, she agreed that she was submissive at home, having been raised that the father or husband was the head of the family. But as a teacher, she had experienced another side of herself. “It was ME in the classroom since I had control of the classroom.”

Ministerial Identity:

“Pastor?” “Oh, that’s me!” For some time after she was ordained, people would address her as pastor and it took awhile for her to recognize that they were addressing her.

When I asked if it was hard for her friends and family to see her and treat her as pastor, I heard “Yes and no.” Accepting her as their pastor wasn’t hard, but remembering to call her pastor was hard, admitted one of the long time members.

After hearing her preach, an older brother who is a member warned others about her power, that they “should wear helmets because she would throw rocks at them.” When I asked what this meant I was told it is an Hispanic saying about someone being direct in their communication.

Other comments I heard from members about how they see Sylvia as a pastor responded: “I respect her.” “I trust her because I have known her for years.” “I can go up to her and tell her something I don’t like, rather than writing a letter.” “She knows I am there for anything she needs.”

Winter Texans I interviewed by phone had only praise for Pr. Sylvia. “Pastor has organized so many events for us. I can’t say enough good things about her.” “I like Pastor. She does a good sermon and has a sense of humor.” “I just love Pr. Sylvia. She’s just as great as Pr. Carrillo.”

One Winter Texan man remarked that one of her strengths comes from the fact that she didn’t go the traditional seminary route and lived a life outside ministry. “She is able to see what other people are like. We’re all human; we have problems in everyday life. Pr. Sylvia does a good job getting right to people.” A Winter Texan woman said, “I was concerned during her internship year with us about her coming back to the church she grew up in – would they accept her? But there has been no problem with her being a ‘shepherd of the flock.’ She is doing a marvelous job.”

Rising to the Challenge:

A member on the Church Council said that Pr. Sylvia “gets strong with them” and “keeps pounding them to not think about ourselves, but to see a vision.” When she brought up the idea of doing a vision and mission statement, several older members didn’t think it was necessary. One person said, “Why do we need this? We have a constitution.” She shot back, “Yes, but are you going to read the eight pages and take action?” This led to the Council adopting a slogan for St. John: “Church in Action.”

When changes have been proposed by the Council, she has sent surveys out for people’s reactions and feelings. Several people commented that their ideas were taken seriously.

Pr. Sylvia and some council members began to advocate for starting a contemporary service once a month. It involved buying expensive electronic media equipment. Ramon, the Council President said, “We can do this,” suggesting they get pledges from members for the \$5000 cost. They received \$6100 in pledges, confirming that this was the right direction to go.

To take action on their new vision statement, “As a community of Christians, we commit ourselves to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Word and deed,” Pr. Sylvia connected St. John to other mission work being done in Mexico. Cristo Rey Luterana in Reynosa, started by Rev. Hernandez, a retired pastor, was growing and in need of repair and expansion. Work groups from St. John were organized to take this on. On these service trips, members noticed the poor health of many of the people, the need for eye glasses and for children’s school materials and toys.

About this time a new member, Lois Eichman, and her husband from Wisconsin joined the church. Having just retired from a high pressured academic job, Lois was reluctant to take on tasks immediately. However, when Pr. Sylvia and others talked to Lois about providing health

information and care to the Cristo Rey mission, Lois decided to get involved. Her background in nursing, along with gifts in writing grants, enabled them to sponsor a Health Fair, emphasizing holistic health and health screening as well as distributing eye glasses and over-the-counter medicines.

St. John's first attempt to get a grant from the synod for this mission work was turned down since they hadn't given any benevolence money to the synod that year. There had been a misunderstanding. A previous bishop had indicated to the Church Council that their giving to Cristo Rey was in lieu of giving benevolence. After this was cleared up, they were given support. They also received a grant from the WheatRidge Foundation for the Health Fair.

MOVING OUT OF COMFORT ZONES

Pr. Sylvia is an example of "moving out of your comfort zone," as Sylvia has named it. She was a small town girl who didn't travel beyond the local community. When she began pursuing her theological education, Sylvia had to travel to Austin, Chicago, the east coast as well as take seminary courses that were challenging. She also had to change from being a quiet, submissive person to one who speaks with authority and conviction – "all with the help of God's Holy Spirit."

While she was still in the TEEM program, Sylvia asked Pr. Carrillo if he was going to lead a study of the ELCA's study on homosexuality. When he declined, perhaps because he was ill and "more hesitant than usual to do something he knew was controversial," she offered to lead the study. She knew that the Synod Assembly and the ELCA Churchwide Assembly would be discussing it and that the congregation hadn't been exposed to the material. When she proposed doing the study during a Wednesday night adult Bible study time, many "put the brakes on." She remembers having to persuade them that this was an important thing to do. During the study when no one "opened up to the side of the homosexual," she played the devil's advocate in order for them "to consider all points of view."

Another comfort-zone challenge developed when she became their pastor. She felt that by and large traditional Lutherans in the congregation were reticent to be involved in evangelism or outreach to other cultures. In her sermons she talked directly about her visions for ministry and about "not getting stuck in one's comfort zone." She recalled that it was harder for Anglo, northern Scandinavian Lutherans to do this; however, once they experienced mission work in Mexico, they were "hooked." In one of my phone interviews, one Anglo man remarked that the Hispanic men in the congregation were trying to do more of what Jesus was doing than those in his home church in the north.

Pr. Sylvia explained that Hispanic Lutherans still have roots in Mexico and Latin America and remember their relatives and ancestors who struggled to make a living there and as migrant workers here. A sense of identification may have made it easier to get into mission work. But according to some, even these members had to be initially challenged to move in this direction.

CHALLENGES ON THE HORIZON

Confusion about Differences Between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism

St. John's membership is growing with many immigrants and other Latinos attending worship; however, many of these people have Roman Catholic backgrounds. They come to St. John for a variety of reasons and find the liturgy in the Lutheran church to be familiar. Some of these families are sending their children to Wednesday Sunday School but seem to connect this to the Roman Catholic school next door. According to one of the members who has taught these classes, these children have very little if any biblical knowledge and need basic Christian education.

Families from Roman Catholic backgrounds come to Pr. Sylvia to do baptisms. She has explained to them that the Lutheran church is somewhat similar, but also different from Roman Catholicism. She told them they need to attend worship at St. John's for six weeks and hear how the Gospel is preached and then decide if they want to have the baptisms and become members.

It is not clear that there is a consensus in the congregation about these standards for becoming members. The previous pastor, Rev. Carrillo, evidently didn't have such requirements. Pr. Hernandez who is a member as well as directing the Mexican Reynosa mission also feels differently about baptism. His wife who told me that she respects Pr. Sylvia, but wonders if the traditional ways of doing baptism needs to be revisited. "Baptism is for the child, not for the parents who aren't complying with by-laws." She added, "It's important to educate them about First Communion, but not deny baptism if the parents don't comply with the rules."

With growth, comes the need for more help. There is a fear that some very active and involved members in this church's ministry and mission will burn out. However, various task forces have been organized by the Council to spread the work around in evangelism, Christian education, youth, and worship. Empowering lay leaders to take on these responsibilities seems to be highly valued in this congregation. In a small group conversation on Sunday, one Latino member said, "Pastor doesn't have to do little details. We take care of this. She goes to see anyone who needs comfort, including non-members as well." The others around the table nodded in agreement.

Pr. Sylvia is talking with other area Lutheran pastors who are concerned about lay leadership needs and will be exploring the training of lay people to provide assistance in these areas. A program for training Synodically Authorized Ministers (SAMS) is available from the synod and the bishop has placed SAMS in a couple area churches.

Financial help is needed to continue running the Mexican mission and Health Fair. Letters have been written to other Lutheran churches in the Valley for financial help, but to date there hasn't been much response.

Conversations in the Council about how best to utilize the empty parsonage on the church property have been ongoing. Recently, Pr. Sylvia showed the house to a friend who is a non-member and "a good visualizer." Pr. Sylvia asked her what she saw. Her friend described bright paint on the outside walls, children's drawings on the foundation and a jungle gym in the yard. Later, Pr. Sylvia took a church leader to the house and talked about possibilities like a volleyball court with a high wall to keep the ball from bouncing into the street. They also talked about using the space inside the house for youth activities and updating the kitchen. In addition, it would be possible to house youth groups who come from other congregations to do servant events in the Mexican mission.

I mentioned to Pr. Sylvia that someone had commented about the need to eventually move the church to a new location because of growing membership and parking problems. She agreed but indicated that when this was discussed in the Council, people said it would be very hard for many to make such a move.

Some members, knowing that Pr. Sylvia is older, wonder what will happen when she retires. I asked Pr. Sylvia about this as well. She said that her brother, Dr. Alanis, told her one time that she was like John the Baptist, “preparing the way for someone ‘greater’ than her to come.” When she heard this, she told me, “It really clicked! That’s why I’m here!” She feels strongly that being known by the congregation has given her the impetus for “moving some things along and to get members to rethink some ideas of who they are – not only for themselves.” She added, “Someone else after me could really move the congregation into a new future.”

Worship Style Challenges

This congregation, as many in the ELCA, has experienced conflict between having traditional vs. contemporary worship. When a praise service was proposed by the Council, many differences of opinion were raised. A businessman I interviewed felt that the Lutheran church for years has been like “a box – closed in.” He expressed the need to be more open and involved in praise worship. Some who wanted the old fashioned way to continue, challenged this change, but the businessman warned them, “If you don’t change, you’ll be the way you are for a long time. Auto designs change every two years; computers change frequently; the church needs to be updated too.”

Another Latino member felt more comfortable in the traditional worship format that he grew up with and wondered if there would be some things lost in Lutheran traditions if services become too contemporary. “I actually like the traditional Lutheran service since it’s very familiar. I don’t have to concentrate like I do in the contemporary service.”

The differences appear to be between those who like order and those who like spontaneity. Many I talked to felt that in order to attract and keep young people and young families, there needs to be more contemporary use of music, visuals and stimuli. Those who like order felt that the traditional service provides a quiet, meditative environment for worship.

In phone interviews with several Winter Texans from Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota, all seemed to enjoy the worship style and practices at St. John. One woman said, “It’s so exuberant. There’s even a tambourine in the church pew. You never see that up here. They’re quick with praising and prayers.” She was the woman who said she comes after the Women’s Prayer Group to the brunch that is shared between Latina and Anglo women.

The Sunday service in English that I attended followed the traditional Lutheran liturgy. Pr. Sylvia appeared very comfortable with this worship style. Later, during the Hispanic service – which was full to capacity – I sat in the Fellowship Hall as various individuals came out of the service from time to time to talk with me – all arranged by Pr. Sylvia to increase the numbers of people I would interview.

When she started the children’s sermon in English, I moved into a back pew to observe. Pr. Sylvia used a book and a small lion and lamb statue to tell the story about how the Peaceable Kingdom that God is bringing will allow animals who have been enemies to peacefully lie down

together. A couple times when she asked the children a question, an adult sitting in a nearby pew responded. People laughed. One could tell that everyone was engaged in the story.

CONNECTIONS TO THE WIDER CHURCH

Pr. Sylvia has taken the initiative to connect St. John to the other Lutheran churches in the conference through conference meetings involving women and youth. She now serves as Dean of the conference after less than 2 years into her ministry.

As mentioned earlier, she has had conversations with the local Roman Catholic priest and opened up the church to a Reformation celebration with Catholic youth.

For an annual Thanksgiving service, St. John joins a Methodist church and St. John also hosts prayer services for Christian Unity with the Ecumenical Alliance. Last January there were 180 attending this service. Recently, she has attended an ecumenical conference in Austin focused on how to treat movies on the book of Revelation.

There have been adult studies of ELCA social statements and documents such as the study on homosexuality.

Women of the ELCA at St. John attend conference events and use resources from the wider church. A member mentioned that all these resources need to be translated into Spanish and are often “too broad.” However, she rewrites the curriculum for the Women’s group.

THE SPIRIT OF ST. JOHN LUTHERAN CHURCH

A New Testament theologian, Dr. Walter Wink, did a Bible study session at the ELCA churchwide offices on the letters that the apostle John wrote to the seven Asian churches that were experiencing persecution and needed to hear a word of hope. These letters, recorded in the book of Revelation, all have a similar order and style. Dr. Wink pointed out that in each letter the Holy Spirit tells John how to address the letters; e.g., in Rev. 2:1, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write...and in Rev. 2:8, “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write...” and so forth for each of the other five congregations. Wink asked, “What does this mean, to address the letter to the *angel* of the congregation?”

In my final summary dinner meeting with members of St. John, I recounted this Bible study experience with Dr. Wink and asked the same question as a framework for my tentative report to them.

Many members I interviewed – especially new members and Winter Texans – said that when they came into this church, they felt immediately comfortable and at home. Some of them even said that there is a warm and welcoming spirit in the congregation. An Anglo member told me that when she first came to the church, “I walked in and it was home...There’s a caring, loving environment. You can feel it – people and pastor and everyone working together.” One Hispanic member said very emphatically, “We are brothers and sisters across the cultures.” Remembering previous pastors, another member said that all of them were flexible and open to change. Perhaps these are signs that the congregational “angel” has been nurtured by the visions and positive energies of the leaders who have gone before and are now leading.

Selecting a pastor was mentioned as an important ingredient in developing this community spirit. One person said that the pastor's style of leadership is important and that there needs to be a good match. Another person said with conviction that you can see if the pastor is being guided by the Holy Spirit or not. Also important is how the message is presented. People commented that Pr. Sylvia works into her sermons what is happening today and doesn't just talk about the past. Many members recalled previous pastors and what they had contributed. For instance, Pr. Nielson was remembered as being good with youth and brought a lot of them into the church since that was his vision. The member added that "We can build on this."

What are the ways that a congregation develops a community spirit that nurtures members' faith and challenges them to move in new directions? I've heard people at St. John answer that question – even though it wasn't asked. Prayer and openness to God's leading was a refrain. I also heard about a willingness to move out of one's comfort zone, what is familiar, to be open to the new way God is leading the church into the world, for the sake of the Gospel. Perhaps this spirit of being a "Church in Action" is their vocational identity. May this spirit continue to flourish at St. John Lutheran Church.