



# Bethlehem Lutheran Church

Called to be with the Flathead Valley in challenges and joys, with the hope of Christ.  
Sacramental Worship | Growing in Faith | Embracing Inclusivity | Community Partnerships





## INTRODUCTION

by Pastor Scott

### Change happens.

Our world is different today than it was 100, 50, or even 5 years ago. The world will even be different next year. Bethlehem has always been a church that meets people – its members and neighbors alike – in the present moment of their lives with a word of hope from God. This word of hope celebrates the past and provides life for the day at hand. With God’s encouragement we look to the future with boldness of faith – because, while God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, in our world—change happens.

A Strategic Planning Effort seeks to dig into, define and illuminate that changing future. As Bethlehem desires to continue its mission of sharing the gospel through word and deed with the people of the Flathead Valley, a clear vision of the values, goals, and methods of implementation of those goals is necessary. A team of 12 people was assembled and began to meet in early 2021.

A passage of scripture that has been a guide to this team along the way is Acts 10 in which God works through the hearts of Peter, a Roman centurion named Cornelius, and others during a time of change. Peter’s faith provided certain rules, traditions, and routines for his life and the lives of his people, those who followed the God of Israel. These traditions were comfortable and provided a connection to the past through nostalgia. Cornelius and his family lived by their own sets of rules and routines, largely determined by the systems of government that ordained those days. God entered into the lives of both men, their families and neighbors, urging them to step outside their traditions, rules, and comfortable practices in order to be a beacon of hope to each other and thousands of others who would see and hear about their actions.

God is stepping into our lives of tradition and routine, in order that we might be a beacon of hope to each other and those in our neighborhood who will see the acts of God through the congregation of Bethlehem.

Through study of scripture, prayer, listening within the congregation and among community neighbors and partners, and lots of discussion, the Strategic Planning Team has discerned four values. We think these specifically capture the beating heart of Bethlehem, illuminate our faithfulness to God and our forebearers, and urge us forward to live the gospel in the years to come. These are values that are faithful to what Bethlehem has been for over 100 years, and they also call us to step out of our comfort zones to reach our neighbors with God’s message of grace.

This report names those four values and begins to suggest ways for Bethlehem to implement actions that will become foundational for this congregation’s ongoing mission. The direction of these suggested actions is intentionally outward which is not to say that the present membership of Bethlehem matters less, but to emphasize that God blesses us to be a blessing. Acting faithfully by the urging of God’s Spirit and holding these values before us in the years to come will compel us to trust and serve one another and gather our neighbors, whom God loves to do the same.

Change happens. And God is calling Bethlehem Lutheran Church into the joys and challenges of that change in our world. Let us step boldly beyond our traditions into the hope of God’s new day.

- Pastor Scott



## A BIG THANKS

by Marianne Gielow

### Strategic Planning Team Members:

- John Erfle
- Debbie Snyder
- Dan Paschke
- Jana Pursell
- Peggy Aagenes-Janzer
- Dale Saverud
- Kellie Nelson
- Larry Kaber
- Marianne Gielow
- Pastor Scott Thompson

### Served partial terms (still very valuable!):

- Brooke Schmidt
- Karl Brohn

Thank you to all of our team members! We met on a biweekly basis and eventually were able to define what we believe to be the four core values that encompass the primary goals of Bethlehem Lutheran Church. We met with various internal groups within the congregation, gathering their input about what they value as well as what their future hopes might be. We also went out into the community to some of our current partners, seeking input about their thoughts.

As the facilitator of this team, I would like to personally thank all the members for their hard work and the honest discussions that ensued. Our core values address our beliefs as a Christian community and our goals address what the needed next steps are for us to achieve those values. Guided by Pastor Scott as well as Peggy Hahn of LEAD (WaytoLead.org), we have produced the included strategic plan.

- Marianne

Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and  
horse, army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished,  
quenched like a wick:  
Do not remember the former  
things, or consider the things  
of old. I am about to do a new  
thing; now it springs forth, do  
you not perceive it? I will make  
a way in the wilderness and  
rivers in the desert. The wild  
animals will honor me, the  
jackals and the ostriches; for I  
give water in the wilderness,  
rivers in the desert, to give  
drink to my chosen people,  
the people whom I formed for  
myself so that they might  
declare my praise.

Isaiah 43:16-21 NRSV



Called to be a people of  
**Sacramental Worship**

Our Worship Goals



The Strategic Planning Team has listened to our congregation and our community. We have heard a high value of sacramental worship that is core to our Lutheran heritage. We have also heard a yearning for a place to wrestle with spiritual questions and the curiosity about new forms of sacramental worship.

Because Bethlehem is a congregation that embraces the Lutheran theology and tradition of grace, we value sacramental/liturgical worship that makes grace known to all people. This honors our highly committed members who attend regularly and support the church through time and finances. This also honors future outreach to youth, young adults, young families, and marginalized communities. Future efforts might include new music, new space, and new funding. As we reach out, it is important that we engage intentionally with each generational group. We hope to understand deeply as we learn more about their faith questions and their heart for worshiping God. We anticipate modified, contemporary, or alternative worship services shifting over time, as we expand beyond our traditional worship service.

Other comments include partnership with other churches, such as Northridge, Arlee, etc., as we learn together. Some people expressed a desire to learn more about other religions and denominations. For example, Jewish, Orthodox, etc. None of these ideas anticipate prioritizing one generational group over another, or one worship style over another. We look forward to working together, living out of the grace of God as we draw on our heritage to build a strong future.

1. Offer an additional and emerging sacramental worship opportunity with the intention of providing sacred space for both existing BLC people who want to engage differently, and neighbors, for whom traditional Lutheran practices may not be familiar.

**Initial Thinking/Action:**

- A. Commission a team to explore sacramental worship styles.
- B. Pilot emerging sacramental worship experiences.  
 Examples/Ideas
  - Dinner Church
  - Something similar to Hope Lutheran in Des Moines
- C. Explore worship music options.
- D. Launch a new, agile worshipping community that responds to the changes around us.



Called to be people who are

## Growing in Faith

The Strategic Planning Team has recognized a passion and priority for nurturing the faith in people of all ages. We know that different generations and cultures come to church with their own hope, grief, pain, and loss. We believe Bethlehem can make learning and practicing faith in Jesus a priority.

Some of the ways in which we can encourage members of our congregation, as well as members of our community, to grow in faith are as follows:

- Small Group Bible Studies - we are called to explore the scriptures with a perspective that is true to our Lutheran identity and the world we live in. We can hold classes on how to read the Bible or explore what the Bible says regarding caring relationships with people who have diverse sexual identities, such as LGBTQ, as well as diverse ethnicities, including our own white supremacy, and more. We can create a safe place to wrestle with our questions and to grow together.
- Financial Planning for Young Adults - we are called to steward our resources. We believe that following Jesus means learning how to manage all we have been given. We have learned that there is an opportunity to teach younger generations how to manage their finances in a way that sets them and their families up for success in the future. Bethlehem can hold classes teaching people money management skills and bring in guest speakers from the world of finance to speak about how to handle debt; simultaneously encouraging financial growth as we all grow deeper in our faith.
- Parenting Skills Classes - we are called to pass on the faith to the next generation. As baptizing community we understand children don't come with a manual. Many parents find parenting their children more challenging than they anticipated. We can offer Christian parenting classes to teach skills on raising children in a loving and caring home, that builds confidence for care givers with new habits and practices for prayer, decision-making, and more.
- Tutoring Classes for School-Aged Children - We are called to care for the needs of people of all ages. Many children struggle in school and a lot of parents are unsure of how to help. The majority of private tutoring programs in the valley are expensive. We can set up a tutoring program for kids who need extra instruction at little, or no cost, to the parents. Thus helping children stay on track in the subjects they struggle with.



2. Test a variety of ways of growing the faith with people of all ages.

### Initial Thinking/Action:

- A. Schedule Regular Bible Studies. Evaluate after each season, with a commitment to expanding our community.
- B. Test quarterly opportunities for people of all ages that focus on scripture, faith practices, and relationships (i.e. be aware of where people are at spiritually and socio-emotionally)
- C. Listen to young families about their spiritual questions and needs. Create a core leadership team to test new ideas in the fall of 2022.
- D. Listen to youth and engage them in worship leadership and small groups with peers.
- E. Pilot workshops focused on the needs of folks in the Flathead Valley. Begin with:
  - Financial planning workshops, digital and/or in person.
  - Parenting workshops that lead to a parent network. That invites parents to offer skill classes to each other, including conversations about passing on the faith.

- Encourage Learning Through Discussions About Other Faith Traditions - we are called to be in this together. We can open our hearts and minds to learn more about other faith traditions. By learning more about different faiths, represented by our neighbors, we can create new partnerships for ministry. Our lives will be blessed by understanding more about our neighbor's faith. We can invite members of different faith groups to come in and share the ways they believe and express their faith so we can grow. We can join them in their worship places to better understand the ways they live out their faith.



Called to be people committed to  
**Embracing Inclusivity**

The Strategic Planning Team understands that the congregation is choosing to embrace inclusivity as we welcome all people. We desire to identify ways to connect with all people, including people who identify as LGBTQ+.

We are called to be fully inclusive by the ways we show up on our website, in the local newspaper, and through word of mouth. We need to learn to welcome people who are diverse in every way. To do this we will listen to families and individuals impacted by different lifestyles, cultures, and ethnicities. We will take responsibility for our own education on diversity. We hope to serve as connectors for people representing all diversities and to be a strong partner with people in Flathead.

By sharing Christ's message to love each other, we desire to reach out to other ethnic groups and people of other faiths. We want them to feel welcome in our congregation and community. We want to partner with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services to assist in our outreach. In addition, we want to partner with local organizations and other ELCA congregations. It would be beneficial for us to be educated on religious beliefs such as indigenous peoples, Judaism, Islam, and others so we can more easily connect as partners. We would like to reconnect with small, struggling rural Lutheran churches to provide support and encouragement. We hope to better understand their unique challenges and needs.

We can partner with Neighbors in Need and other churches, coordinating our volunteer efforts to help neighbors and friends who need shelter.

Our Embracing Inclusivity Goals



3. Build relationships with our neighbors that allow for care and respect regarding diversity.

**Initial Thinking/Action:**

- A. Build relationships with a more diverse community in Flathead Valley.
- B. Learn about the challenges faced by those in our neighborhood who experience a sense of differentness or otherness.
  - LGBTQIA+ Community
  - Gender fluidity in individuals
  - Ethnic uniquenesses
  - Those with challenges related to health, mental health, mobility, etc.
- C. Do the work to be a safe place for all people in our community, as we learn to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.
- D. Welcome people of diversity into leadership at Bethlehem.



Called to be people who engage

## Community Partners

The Strategic Planning Team understands that the congregation has a history of caring for the Flathead area. We believe our past engagement can be amplified in the future.

Since 1895, the Holy Spirit has worked through the church at Bethlehem to bring the message of hope, love, and salvation to Kalispell and people in need around the world. In some of the most challenging times in recent history, the Spirit led Bethlehem to build a new place of worship, to plant new congregations in the valley, and - along with other Lutheran area churches - to birth Immanuel Lutheran Communities and the Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp.

Community partnerships continue to be a foremost value, contributing to the culture of Bethlehem. Members are encouraged to volunteer at community organizations. In 2021, \$123,000 was distributed to local partners including the Warming Shelter, Neighbors in Need, Samaritan House, Serious Jujy, Veterans Food Bank, Flathead Food Bank, Feeding the Flathead, Abby Shelter, Campus Ministry at U of M and MSU, Prison Ministry; regionally through the work of the Montana Synod of the ELCA; internationally through Operation Bootstrap and the Maasai Girls School in Tanzania. In addition, over 300 quilts and nearly 100 prayer shawls are prayerfully created and distributed annually to warm and remind those who receive them of God's love in Christ.

Each generation is called to steward God's bountiful gifts during their "watch". In faith, the generation preceding us had the vision to purchase all of the properties in the block where Bethlehem is located believing that, though unknown at the time, our Lord had a future purpose for the property. We believe that it is time to develop this resource to its fullest, to continue and expand Bethlehem's community partnerships. What if Bethlehem's property was used to fund the administrative cost of the congregation so that the majority of our gifts and tithes could be shared with the community and mission partners whose organizations do wonderful work? The ministry we are not capable of doing ourselves.

As we remember and celebrate the work of the Spirit through Bethlehem, let us go into the future boldly, letting the light of Christ shine to the glorify of our Father in heaven.



Our Community Partner Goals

4. Explore alternatives for developing Bethlehem's property in ways that would embody the grace of God in the Flathead Valley.

Alternatives might provide:

- Revenue for expanded mission opportunities with existing and new community partners
- The property may be developed to provide ministry in this place.

### Initial Thinking/Action:

- A. Establish a team to explore options for eventual presentation to the congregation.

Related:

- Expand food ministries in our neighborhood/ community
- Respond to the needs of new immigrants
- Increase congregational generosity for ministry partners

# SUMMARY

The Bethlehem Strategic Planning Team began their work during some of the most challenging times in the pandemic. This team of leaders were highly committed to studying scripture and to hearing God's voice as they listened. The listening to the congregation and the neighbors expanded the vision for Bethlehem's future. From the beginning, the team had an awareness that the church is changing. They deeply felt the grief of the teen suicides in Kalispell.

It was in that time that the team felt a re-commitment to the Flathead Valley. As time went by, people grew ready to go to work on concrete ministry plans. These goals are the directions these faithful leaders understand God is calling the church.

There is more work to do as the deeper exploration of each goal unfolds. This is the ministry of the whole congregation and you, the people of Bethlehem, are encouraged to join in the initiatives that most spark your faith imagination.

## Are there staffing needs to carry out this vision?

The current staff of Bethlehem Lutheran Church is committed to these new goals. There is an awareness that as each unfolds, additional gifts and more staff time will be required. Join us in imagining the opportunities ahead!



### Expanding Sacramental Worship

We imagine that a new worship style, for example if we experiment with Dinner Church, could include inviting new people into leadership. Different music styles, shared meal preparation, and a commitment to hospitality will create ways for people to serve as families or



### Growing in Faith

Building on our heritage of teaching the faith, we will draw on the wisdom of local leaders who may or may not be members of the congregation. We will continue to learn how to deepen faith in a changing world, using in person and on line learning platforms over time. Each new learning is an opportunity to engage people in leadership as we discern this path together.



### Embracing Diversity

One of our biggest learning curves is to more fully understand what it means to be people who welcome everyone. Diversity is not one-size-fits-all. Creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ people, especially children and youth, for example will mean becoming more sensitive to how we talk about God without adding a gender. We have a lot to learn as we open up our hearts and minds to understand the fullness of the body of Christ with the variety of people we will welcome.

This learning curve will also be true as we feel called to welcome people from different socioeconomic communities, different cultures, and ethnicities. The Strategic Planning Team recognizes that this learning will happen over time, not in a rush, as the members of Bethlehem learn more about the community.



### Engaging Community Partners

The Strategic Planning Team is excited to partner more intentionally with some of the partners we engaged in our process. There is an awareness that our ministry can be expanded by supporting the hopes and dreams of other organizations. These partners will be instrumental as we explore more about the use of our downtown property. The team feels that this is just the beginning of how we can be good neighbors.

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# SUMMARY

*(Staffing cont.)*

The staffing plans will emerge as we go deeper into each of these goals. Each of these goals will need a passionate team to build out the objectives. The team realizes that the goals are high-level visions that will be grounded by those who carry the goals forward.

Decisions will be made together as a congregation over time. The team recognizes the decline in the Lutheran Church and is committed to exploring ways to steward our traditions and heritage with the care it deserves, as we welcome new ways of thinking about church.

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## Do we want to estimate a financial component to this vision?

The Strategic Planning Team is not presenting a budget alongside these goals at this time. There is more to learn as we move from the pandemic into a new normal.

### **How can you help the plan move from vision to action?**

1. Sign up to be on a vision team.
2. Donate to one of these goals.
3. Share the story of Bethlehem Lutheran Church with people you meet in the Flat-head Valley.
4. Hold those who lead in prayer.
5. Participate as fully as possible in worship and Bible study.

“Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” - Mark 12:29-31



SACRAMENTAL WORSHIP + GROWING IN FAITH + EMBRACING INCLUSIVITY + COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Dear Bethlehem Lutheran Church,

The deep listening you have done has revealed values that are a pathway for the future. This is an interesting time to be a church, as the world moves faster than ever, into an unknown future. Everything is changing. Yet, some things are known and timeless.

- We worship God who is and always will be an unchanging God.
- We are a baptizing community that will tell the stories of Jesus.
- We are called to love all people, in the way of Jesus.
- We can partner with others to strengthen our ministry in the Flathead Valley.

In your listening you have heard the Holy Spirit, both anchoring you in our heritage and sending you into the whirlwind of change. People are not rushing to a church to join teams or even to ask their God questions on most days. Yet when they encounter a neighbor, friend, or parent who believes in a transcendent God, who is bigger than the pain and suffering of our world, they feel God's peace. People are attracted to God, not the church building. The Holy Spirit is doing a new thing and it is happening in us. We are the church as we live every day, in ordinary places, pointing to an extraordinary God.

This vision has power because of God working in and through you. This Strategic Planning Team has faithfully offered a powerful future. This can go in a file, to be revisited in years to come, or it can be a path so that everything else makes sense.

My prayer for you is that you live into this plan with everything you have in you. Bravely experiment with worship. Engage everyone in studying scripture, in prayer and in talking about God! Do the hard work so you can be the most welcoming place in the Valley. Build networks and friendships with organizations that share your values to maximize resources. Make this plan matter.

And may the peace that passes all understanding be yours in Christ Jesus as you love as you are loved.

Together in Christ,

Deacon Peggy Hahn  
Executive Director, LEAD



