

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH  
1997 – 2004  
Pastor 29, Mark Weber; Pastor 30, Michael Lawyer

Following on the heels of a successful 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in 1996, Pastor Phil and Sharon Schroeder retired to Florida and a Call Committee formed to select a new pastor. In the interim, retired pastor Howard Jacobsen, a quiet, kind and thoughtful shepherd, led the Sunday worship services.

In April 1997 Pastor Mark Weber, 48, accepted a call to Trinity. His wife, Sally, and teenage children Kelly, Chris, and John came with him. He was installed in May. He had barely settled in when he suffered a massive heart attack while playing tennis at Dillehay Park and died on September 1st. Everyone was stunned. The church family did its best to comfort the Webers and offer whatever support was needed. That support included allowing the family to live in the parsonage rent and utility free until it was needed and paying September salary. We gratefully accepted interim Pastor Howard Jacobsen's immediate return to lead Sunday worship services. In shock and disbelief a second Call Committee was formed to work with the Northern Illinois Synod to find a full-time pastor.

While the Call Committee worked, and the congregation began to move forward Pastor Myron Bartell, an energetic retired pastor from the area took over as interim in November of 1997. He had a quick wit, booming voice, and gift for storytelling that endeared him to the congregation. Pastor Bartell took an active role in working with the Church Council to offer wisdom and to help Trinity move forward. Even after a new pastor was found he remained a favorite supply pastor and friend of the congregation.

The mission and ministries of Trinity continued, even in tragedy. And by necessity we became a "congregation-led" rather than "pastoral-led" church. Besides the Church Council, Trinity had these very active committees: Memorial, Social Ministry, Stewardship, Youth, Worship, Property, Outreach, Ushering, Staff Support, and Education. We also had Vacation Bible School representatives who worked with the Church of the Brethren and Disciples United Methodist Church to present a combined VBS for community children. As we did then and continue to do every year, Trinity sent representatives to the Northern Illinois Synod Assembly. We also had Global Mission advocates, Lutheran Brotherhood (later Thrivent) liaisons, Crop Walk representatives, a Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center contact person, and Council of (community) Churches representatives. Sharon Wallace continued as Coordinator of Volunteers. ChristCare Group Ministries, a small group ministry program established in 1993, with up to seven groups meeting regularly in 1997, was led by lay members and coordinated by an Equippers team.

Active Adult and Children choirs were led by Donna Meyer, and accompanied by Lois Horst and Doris Kuntzelman. In his brief tenure, Pastor Weber suggested that a Cantor for each service would enhance the audio tapes and lead the congregation through the service – a practice that continues today. Trinity also offered two Sunday Afternoon concerts to the community, free of charge and supported by benefactors – another community ministry that continues to the present.

Youth ministry, a favorite of Pastor Weber's, was busy and productive, meeting frequently, taking numerous fun and faith-centered trips to Synod youth gatherings and camp events. They fulfilled a service project, and hosted three fundraisers, with an average meeting attendance of 22. Trinity invited the youth of St. Paul Lutheran in Oregon to join our ski trip, lock-in, and a trip to Great America amusement park.

Trinity Women of the ELCA (TWELCA) continued its strong and active presence at Trinity. There were three circles, the Dorcas, Naomi and Esther groups. A slate of officers, detailed financial report, and Christian Action report are a testament to their strength and vitality. Activities ranged from regular Bible studies to cleaning the parsonage, hosting Blanket Sunday, taking meals to new mothers and the bereaved, and providing food, money, and volunteers for a range of events. Many activities continue today, including but not limited to, creating School Kits, tying quilts, and supporting Nachusa Lutheran Home.

While Trinity was recovering from the death of Pastor Weber, the community of Mt. Morris was still recovering from the prolonged (1974-1980) strike at the printing plant, formerly known as Kable Printing Company, which resulted in lost jobs, a migration away from the town, and declining average income. Kable News Company (not related to Kable Printing Company, although they were both originally founded by the Kable brothers), was the largest employer in town.

In the late '90s, Mt. Morris was a hub for circulation services: Quebecor printing plant (formerly Kable Printing Company) was operating, though not at the peak capacity experienced in the '50s; Kable News Company offered worldwide circulation and fulfillment services; Watt Publishing, located in the old Sandstone building on the former college campus, published an array of agricultural and poultry magazines; and Alpha Omega Graphics served the print industry. The late '90s also saw incredible advancements in computer and information technology. Trinity struggled to keep up with technology, sometimes leasing, sometimes buying an array of office equipment and computers.

In 1998, its second year of profound transition, Trinity called Reverend Michael Lawyer. Pastor Lawyer had most recently served in Milledgeville, Illinois, after being ordained in 1986. He was educated and worked as a Physician Assistant in the medical field, before becoming a clergy. Then attended the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, earning a Master of Divinity. He and wife Debbie, and daughters Jennifer (13) and Jessica (11) remained in Milledgeville for a few months while he commuted, and Sally Weber's family had time to find a new home in Mt. Morris. In his 1998 Annual Report, Pastor Lawyer wrote that, "Coming to serve as your pastor has reinvigorated me and my call to ordained ministry." Indeed, he took off running and brought energy, enthusiasm, and many changes that grew our ministries and reinvigorated many in the congregation, especially the younger generations.

However, not all change was embraced. During his tenure of about five years (1998-2004), a few, leading "pillar" families began to chafe at some changes, at first passively, and eventually actively resisting, until division and distrust had taken root, leading to Pastor Lawyer's abrupt resignation in 2004. In hindsight, perhaps everyone was complicit -- by refusing to listen or communicate, by turning away from conflict, failing to speak up, and failing to work together. For his part, Pastor Lawyer was

outspoken and did not shy away from the truth, as likely to preach words of challenge and conviction, as comfort. This very direct style was different from leaders in recent memory.

Pastor Lawyer was installed by Northern Illinois Synod Bishop Ronald Hasley in July, 1998. The NI Synod elected Rev. Gary Wollersheim as its new Bishop later that year. Trinity experienced a notable “first” when council member Linda Borneman began a three-year term as the first female Council President.

In 1998, under Pastor Lawyer’s leadership, the confirmation and youth programs grew, and Trinity was blessed with twenty-six new adult members and nine children. There were service projects for Lutheran Social Services of Illinois (LSSI), Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Center (LOMC), Lifeline Food Pantry, and Pinecrest Community, a “tape ministry” bringing audio tapes of the worship service to shut-ins, ministry to the bereaved, newlyweds and new parents. Pastor Lawyer started a weekly Bible Study for adults on Sunday and Monday mornings. In November, we added a Saturday night service, as a test. It was a success, and although the format and style have changed, and participation has ebbed and flowed over the years, in 2020 there is still a dedicated and stalwart group that prefers the intimacy and simplicity of the Saturday evening service.

Although Trinity ended 1997 with a \$15,000 deficit, including outstanding pledges of \$10,000 for the Access Project, we ended 1998 with a \$5,865.17 surplus. In 1998, Trinity completed the financial part of its mission partnership with Christ Lutheran in Rockford, begun in 1996. Gifts totaled \$20,938.03.

The aging church building, completed in 1952, required major repairs in 1999, including repair to stained glass windows, a new sound system, and replacing the sanctuary carpet. Money from the undesignated Wishard Fund and the Capital Expenses & Repair Reserve Fund were used. But, at Trinity, time and money will always be found for service projects. That year the Social Ministry Committee began a program of purchasing Christmas gifts for needy elementary children in the Mt. Morris and Oregon school district, a program still in place in 2021, called the Pajama Project.

In 1999, a chime choir was started, using memorial funds to purchase the chimes. Trinity recognized Doris Kuntzelman for 29 years of faithful service as adult choir accompanist.

Worship continued to evolve, and at the urging of the ELCA, communion was served weekly at Saturday and Sunday services in 2000. This was quite a change from previous practice, and some resisted, believing that the frequency meant communion was not “special.” This change took several years to become comfortable, leaving a wave of nostalgia for the old days and perhaps some resentment. Trinity continued to work cooperatively with other Mt. Morris churches to offer a community Good Friday service and Cross Walk, as well as a community Thanksgiving service, hosted in turns, by the churches.

Pastor Lawyer and Deb were accomplished musicians, which richly blessed Trinity. With the departure of the current choir director in 2000, Debbie Lawyer stepped in to direct the vocal and chime choirs. Pastor Lawyer took a strong lead in managing the musical selections and direction of the congregation. This was another change from the previous clergy who were not as musically gifted.

In 2001, the resistance to change became more vocal and visible. Distrust over council decisions was fed by the council’s lack of open communication and transparency, despite good intentions.

Improvements were questioned, as evidenced by a special congregational meeting in November about revising the constitutional by-laws for council nominations. There was discussion for and against the proposed change to have a nominating committee put forth (only) one nomination for each council vacancy. This would have eliminated the appearance of a popularity vote and made it easier to find volunteers willing to serve. But, the proposal was ultimately defeated due to a lack of favorable majority: yes=45, no=45, which reflected the growing division in the congregation.

A highly qualified and experienced Youth/Education/Family Ministries Coordinator, Pastor Lisa Fike, was hired in 2001. She was joined by husband Mel, and children Carol and Bethany. An after school program for community kids began, averaging 35 weekly. And, thanks to a memorial gift, a puppet ministry started.

The year 2001 saw strife within and outside Trinity. A War on Terrorism, sparked by the Sept. 11, 2001 ("9/11") tragedy weighed heavily on the nation, which was also in a recession. Locally, there was a teacher's strike.

Division within the congregation grew at the close of 2001, while the 2002 budget was in development and discussion. Pastor Lawyer did not receive a raise in 2001. Concerns about a salary increase in 2002, and other budget items were expressed. Phone calls were made by a few members urging a vote against the pay raise. However, a pay raise was approved at the Annual Meeting in 2002, with acceptance of the 2002 budget, voted by secret ballot. Discussion points: Just because we disagree does not mean we have lost our focus on Christ. It is not bad to voice concerns over something we feel is important. Guidelines for pastoral pay and experience are from the Synod. We have more funds than most congregations, which can be used as reserves.

Recognizing that we needed help with our conflict, in 2002 the Synod presented a seminar at Trinity about dealing with conflict within the congregation. But, resistance and grumbling continued, even over things like having the youth share their experiences about a TeenServe work camp in Wisconsin, instead of hearing a traditional sermon from the pastor. Congregation council president Steve Pearson wrote in his annual report to, "... thank the members of the Congregational Council who have spent a great deal of time working to heal the hurt, frustration and division in our church family. Please continue to pray for healing in our congregation!"

Good works were still accomplished. Among many ministries in 2002, Trinity supported the first house, built in Polo, by a newly formed local chapter of Habitat for Humanity. In 2002, average worship attendance on Saturday evenings was 41, and 150 on Sunday mornings (one service).

In 2003 the Finance Committee began "laddering" the investments of Trinity's various endowments to earn more favorable interest rates, while also providing periodic liquidity. A congregational questionnaire suggested spending more endowment funds on mission work. (It was a sore spot with some, that Trinity had a largely unused Endowment Fund.) However, endowment distribution was governed by Trinity's constitution, and some Endowment investments were already used by the Church's ELCA Mission Fund to support mission work, although this was not as visible.

The Education/Youth/Family Ministry coordinator, Pastor Lisa Fike, reported a busy and exciting 2003. Highlights included a few fundraisers such as a Souper Bowl for Lutheran World Relief, a youth lock-in led by a Luther College team, a new group for “tweeners” (not quite teens), the Trinity Players presented “The Other Carpenter,” a group of eight attended a TeenServe work camp in June (location not stated in Annual Report), followed by a group attending Leadership Lab, and All Saints Day and Christmas parties. The After School Program grew to 44 registered kids.

In a sign of the times, we agreed to buy terrorism insurance in 2003 for \$43.18 per year. A task force worked on a policy to make Trinity a safe haven. The Finance Committee committed to learning more about the new Revelation computer management and finance software.

In May 2003, Council authorized removing the first two rows of pews in the sanctuary to provide more space for worship, musicians and related activities, and to sell the removed pews. Plans were not communicated well by council to the congregation, and many were offended by the suggestion to sell the pews. Dissenting petitions were received by the council. There was heated discussion and strong feelings expressed at a June congregational meeting. Pastor chided members not to care more for the building than the people and ministry. The original motion was revised and ultimately passed by the council, and the pews were not sold. But, anger, hurt feelings and distrust remained.

The annual summer church picnic, a fall Rally Day to kick-off Sunday school, afternoon concerts, serving meals at the Rockford Rescue Mission, the Men’s spaghetti supper, and many other activities filled Trinity’s calendar in 2003. Church repairs and upgrades were also needed. A new phone system was installed, new office equipment purchased, and the elevator door and outside doors replaced. Preparing to tap into the Air Conditioning Fund optimistically started several years ago (and fed whenever summer temperatures rose), we again investigated how to air-condition the large sanctuary. Many repairs, some significant, were needed at the parsonage, where the Lawyer family lived. They had reported the problems and made some small repairs themselves, but we neglected to respond during the last few years. Trinity closed 2003 by purchasing a new boiler for the church building for \$3,900.

2004 was another year of upheaval within and outside Trinity. In February, the beloved David L. Rahn Elementary School burned to the ground. Through the grace of God and quick action of all teachers and staff, everyone was evacuated and there were no injuries. But, the fire was devastating – total loss of the building and a tremendous loss to the town of Mt. Morris. What followed was a period of anxiety, recovery, and eventual decisions made by the School Board not to rebuild, but have elementary children permanently attend Jefferson Elementary School in Oregon. The days and months leading up to that decision were fraught with disagreements, reminiscent of the contentious consolidation of Oregon and Mt. Morris into one school district in 1994.

Within Trinity, the husband of Education/Youth/Family Ministry Coordinator, Rev. Lisa Fike, traveled to Switzerland for experimental treatment for a rare disease. Sadly, it was not successful, and the congregation encouraged Lisa to spend as much time as possible with Mel, and her family, in his final weeks and days. He died in May.

In early 2004 Trinity accepted the resignation of Pastor Lawyer. During his exit interview May 13 with Assistant to the Bishop, Rev. Jeffrey Clements, he cited these frustrations: “Resistance to change and insistence that things are just fine,” and a “Silent majority, which does not speak up,” as well as the petition opposed to removing the pews and a “phone-a-thon campaign opposed to the 2002 salary/budget proposal.” Derogatory signs on the church doors were the “straw that broke the camel’s back,” drawing his family into the dispute.

Pastor Lawyer came to Trinity to innovate, and during his term started the Saturday evening and contemporary worship services. He rejuvenated the Youth program, with great credit to Pastor Lisa Fike, and felt that the summer youth work camps, Rahn Elementary After School Program, the chime choir, Thursday morning Bible Study, and Time and Talent Fair, in particular, benefitted the congregation. He recognized that Trinity had “gifted people, who must be encouraged to share their talents.” And, encouraged everyone to “be united for Christ.” Believing that his talents were not what Trinity needed, Pastor Lawyer left for a new call in Orion, Illinois, after a potluck farewell dinner on May 15. Church secretary, Jane Koesler, also tendered her resignation in May.

Recognizing the challenges facing Trinity, the Northern Illinois Synod appointed Pastor Charles E. Steinke as interim pastor in July. Pastor Steinke had served thirty years as a parish pastor, and most recently six years on the bishop’s staff of the NI Synod. He served Trinity part-time, commuting from Rockford, where he lived with his wife of more than 40 years, Betty Louise.

Pastor Steinke stated clearly from the beginning that his main role at Trinity was to help prepare the congregation for the calling of a permanent pastor, and in so doing, to attempt to deal with some of the past issues in order to move ahead.

In the 2004 Interim Pastor’s Report, Pastor Steinke continued, “... *I believe, with the Holy Spirit guiding us, there has been some progress. Good communication will continue to be necessary in the future. Communication means many things: Respect for another person’s opinion, listening to others (and) not dismissing what they say or their ideas, and importantly, when we have a difference with others to follow the example of Matthew 18 and talk with them directly. Love for each other and forgiveness are always essential.*

*Learning how to manage change always presents a challenge. As in all of life, changes will come whether we resist them, encourage them and/or welcome them. Change is no different in the life of the church. Tradition and always doing things the same way can be carried to the extreme. There are ‘windows of opportunity’ that need to be embraced while there is still time. Sometimes to take advantage of those windows changes need to occur. As in all aspects of church life, I would pray that you would have an openness for change and consider what needs to happen for the mission and ministry of the church to be accomplished...”*

At a congregational meeting in June 2004, Barb Diehl was hired as administrative secretary, we approved capital expenses for a new fire detection system, and sought input on selling the parsonage, as it had become a burden to maintain. A Call Committee was formed, beginning the lengthy process of finding a new full-time minister.

Tech-wise, in 2004, Trinity installed a remote TV feed into the nursery so that the worship services could be broadcast there, for people who needed to step out of the sanctuary. Diane Palmer volunteered to be Trinity's webmistress and created a web page, [www.lutheransonline.com/telcmm](http://www.lutheransonline.com/telcmm), which later evolved into the current website, [www.trinitymmil.net](http://www.trinitymmil.net).

Six youth and three adults attended a TeenServe work camp in Flanagan, Illinois, in July. Vacation Bible School was hosted by Trinity, and the Lutheran Outdoor Ministries Camp choir performed in July. Trinity approved support for missionary Pastors Twila Schock and Bill Swanson in Wittenberg, Germany, and also supported the House of Hope in Dixon. Bring a Friend Sunday and Rally Day were led by Pastor Lisa in September.

Trinity Men sponsored their popular spaghetti supper fundraiser in February and pancake supper in November. A Father and Son banquet in November reported a slim turnout, but as expected, an excellent Swiss steak meal. Men's breakfasts were held each month, September through April, on second Saturdays. A meal prepared by Ron Bjorklund, Bill Horst, and John Condit was followed by a short program and fellowship.

The Wellness Committee, founded by Crete LeFevre in 1998, continued to offer free monthly blood pressure checks after the worship service, yet another welcome service that still exists today. Likewise, the Prayer Chain, which shared prayer requests via a telephone "tree" in 2004 now communicates primarily via email. The Social Ministry Committee worked diligently to live the church's mission to "Make Christ Known." They hosted the annual Crop Walk at Trinity, continued Home Communion and worship service audiotape delivery to shut-ins, served a meal every month at the Rockford Rescue Mission, and purchased warm clothing for 20 children from Jefferson Elementary School in Oregon at Christmas. As usual, the Property Committee was busy in 2004, reporting repairs such as a new floor in the second floor Men's room (stopping a leak), repair of the second floor Ladies room, installing a fire detection system, and a new roof.

Pastor Steinke held an informational meeting on the Church and homosexuality in October, since the ELCA had been in study and conversation on this topic and would present recommendations at the National Assembly in 2005. In November, the Call Committee submitted a congregational profile to the Synod, and Pastor Steinke held "Let's Talk it Out" conversations with the congregation.

The "Let's Talk it Out" sessions were an opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns and opinions, using "I" statements. In a published recap, Pastor Steinke noted that "We have an obvious lack of communication," but expressed hope and wrote that "we can turn this around." It was everyone's hope as we closed 2004.

NOTE: This is one member's perspective of Trinity's years, gathered primarily from select information in the Annual Reports for this period. It is not meant to be a complete or comprehensive historical document. For more information, please read the Annual Reports, found in the church office or archives. Many thanks to Ellen Finrock, Arlene Sangmeister, and Rob Urish for their review and input. Any opinions, errors, or omissions are solely my own. Respectfully submitted, Sandra Stengel.