

History moment #2: Finding a geographical home
January 23, 2011

From their first service on October 30, 1960, the new fellowship had been meeting in homes, alternating among the Warkentins, the Neufelds, the Ratzlaffs, the Naces. But from the very beginning, they felt the need for a permanent home: in the notes of a meeting from October of 1960, “a permanent meeting place will be a big boost for our work.” And from another letter, making the claim that this location was a prime spot for growth and prominence: “Minneapolis-St. Paul is the geographical center for the entire General Conference—being at the juncture of the flow of church worker north to Canada and south to the US.”

The small group decided on their ideal location: The St Paul-Minneapolis border in the Lake Street-Marshall Avenue area near the Mississippi River. Carl Schroeder and Jim Neufeld were in charge of finding a place.

A small clapboard structure owned by the Church of God became available at 38th Avenue and 38th Street in Minneapolis. A delegation went to look at it: open space on the first floor, restrooms and potential Sunday school space in the basement. It was a small 26 by 48 foot structure, 1248 square feet. The asking price of \$27,000 was countered with an initial offer of \$15,000 on November 9; this was outbid for \$22,000 by a Jehovah Witness Kingdom Hall. Another location at 330 North Prior Avenue, the Merriam Park Church of Christ, was briefly considered. And so the search continued.

An ad was placed in the Minneapolis Star Newspaper on February 4, 1961: “Wanted, To purchase a church building (100-200 seat) in South Minneapolis near St. Paul Border. Call Jim Neufeld.” On the same day the Star carried an article titled “Church Opened by Mennonites.” A fundraising weekend in Mountain Lake netted the fledgling church \$1627 towards a building fund.

By April of 1961, with no location in sight, Pastor Frank Epp’s questions to church members reflect the widening of their search: “Do we favor an inner city location (ie, south Minneapolis, near the Mississippi River and near Franklin or Lake) or do we consider some of the suburbs (somewhere near Highway 100 between the river and Edina)? Do we favor buying a church or building a church? If buying, do we favor a church building, or a house that would lend itself to worship services and other church activities? How do we move ahead in this area?”

On June 4, 1961, 24 people joined as members at the charter services, including John and Berniece Esau, the new pastor and his wife. The following week they began meeting in rented space in the basement of the Nicollet Avenue YMCA at 4816 Nicollet Avenue. A letter from this time says, “Now that the group has a meeting place that will accommodate 100 or more, it seems the group is ready to go out and invite others in...”

Through the following fall and winter, leads on a permanent location seemed to dry up. Notes indicated that the tide of sentiment was turning towards finding a lot to build a new church building. Peter Ediger, who was working with the conference on urban issues, came to lead a discernment session.

And then in April of 1962—word came that the Immanuel Danish Lutheran congregation was moving from its location in the Seward neighborhood of south Minneapolis to Eden Prairie. The location matched the original intent perfectly. Their building was located in a neighborhood of aging homes, most built in the post civil war housing boom, some for housing workers of the Milwaukee Railroad. It was on the edge of true “inner city”. Kitty corner to the church was a Swedish Lutheran congregation, and on the opposite end of the block was the Seward school. The neighborhood was mostly blue collar. Interstate 94 had slashed through the neighborhood a few blocks to the north in 1960. As part of urban renewal, the neighborhood was in the process of a revitalization project that would eventually raze 35% of the housing, including 3 blocks for the construction of a new school and park.

The building was brick, had simple stained glass, bathrooms and nursery space, a kitchen, and a space for a pastor’s study, as well as a fellowship hall that could be divided for Sunday school space. And it had an adjacent parsonage!

On April 29, the congregation unanimously approved moving forward with a purchase agreement—for what felt like an astronomical amount, \$40,000. Negotiations were a bit tense, as a Unitarian congregation was also interested in the building. Over the next two months, additional funding was found from the Northern District Home Missions, and Church Extension Service approved a loan of \$24,000. Another delegation to Mountain Lake netted an additional \$504 in donations to the building fund. The congregation was ready to take its leap of Faith.

September 9, 1962 the congregation held its first services in the new building, and had a dedication service November 11. Victor Dirks, the church moderator, wrote these words about the choice of this location: "It is a central location for the entire Twin Cities, readily accessible to all parts of the larger metropolitan community. It is close to the educational and professional institutions which are the gateway to the city for so many rural Mennonite young people, whose need this church is obligated to serve. It is situated realistically with regard to the problems of urban America, neither captive of the suburbs nor refugee from the inner city. If the Mennonite Church is to address itself to the problems of its time and its own country, this is where it must be done."

That was the happy home of Faith Mennonite church—until 28 years later, the church bursting at the seams; weekly attendance of 120-140 meant that folding chairs had to be set up to supplement the pew space. Not everyone fit into the fellowship hall for potlucks. Many of the Sunday school classes were being held across the street at Ebenezer Lutheran church. So negotiations began with Ebenezer, whose dwindling congregation was happy to pass their building on to a young vibrant church. The price tag again was another stretch—could we support a mortgage of \$100,000 this time? And could we support the maintenance of a huge building with more space than we really needed? Once again, the congregation decided to take a leap of Faith.

On Sunday, January 14, 1990 Faith church literally moved across the street. The old church key was handed to its new owners, the Vietnamese Alliance church. Then the congregation processed across the street, singing "We shall go out with joy"...into their new building, greeted by the elderly members of Ebenezer. Leading the way was Hilda Warkentin, founding member of faith. Everyone carried something. The ushers carried the pulpit. Sunday school classes carried banners. Deacons carried communion ware and the baptismal bowl. Softball team coaches carried sporting equipment. Everyone carried hymnals. When the congregation sang "606" in the new space, they knew they were at home.