



Enter the gates of the LORD with thanksgiving and the LORD'S courts with praise

**Final Project, Mission Profile of First English Evangelical Lutheran Church, Austin Texas
Gretchen Olson Kopp* - Spring, 2019**

“In the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares our Lord Jesus Christ warns us against expecting a perfect church in this world. In this life we are constantly in the state of becoming, striving to overcome the old Adam and to grow in the newness of life. The functioning of a congregation cannot be expected to be more perfect than human nature. It is, nevertheless, expected that we conduct the Lord’s business as efficiently as humanly possible, and in all our efforts we have the assurance of divine guidance... The organization of FELC of Austin is somewhat different from the traditional plan. These changes in method and organization were arrived at through experimentation... One point of departure has been the conviction that the Church is One; that it is the family of the redeemed. Our relationship to God through our Savior offers all the same privileges and places on all the same obligations. Distinctions cannot be made. Church membership has no grades nor degrees.” – the Rev. Fred Kern, first pastor of FELC, FELC Memento Booklet, 1939

This *de facto* vision statement glimpses how God has gathered, unifies, and guides First English Lutheran Church in living Jesus’ way with a spirit of experimental becoming -- nurturing joyful and loving relationships through sacrament and sacrifice, standing in each new decade with whomever is at the edges, launching leaders in the faith, and living the ache that is the way of the cross, all the while trusting the promise of resurrection.

God Gathered at the Edges. FELC was formed in 1936 as a mission start in the small Texas synod of the NYC-based United Lutheran Church in America (1939 Booklet, 29-30). Austin’s two other Lutheran congregations were ethnically-based (Swedish and German). In the midst of the Depression, twenty-six people surveyed the city, found there were many unaffiliated Lutherans and petitioned the ULCA to let them start the first exclusively English

language congregation in Austin, near the University of Texas campus (1941 Booklet). God transformed from the edges; in their first three years, over 100 of their 300+ new members were non-Lutheran and in many cases “not even confessed Christians.” (1939 Booklet, 31)

God Unifying: “the Church is One.” Just as the merger of (eventually) five synods to form the ULCA was a glimmer of Jesus’ high priestly prayer for unity (John 17:21), the Spirit’s unifying movement has permeated FELC’s “becoming” as well (“Lutherans in North America chart”). Congregational practices of the time required church members to additionally join their men’s, women’s and youth organizations. FELC’s charter members were moved to experiment with an inclusive approach of “natural divisions” wherein all congregation members were automatically part of the men’s, women’s, youth/young adult or children’s divisions that each met monthly (1939 Booklet, 22-25). Through this initial structure, and a Unified Service (integrating Sunday School after worship and before the benediction), God has sustained a remarkably healthy culture of unity and conflict management over time. In its 83 years, only five pastors (Fred W. Kern, Lewis P. Speaker, Merle G. Franke, Robert J. Karli, Michael C. Coffey) have been called to serve FELC — an average of 16 years each.

God Building Joyful & Loving Relationship around Sacrament & for Sacrifice.

“We conceive of church membership in a dual way...the sacramental phase of the Christian’s church life (when the Christian receives the spiritual gifts from God)...which leads to the sacrificial phase of Christian life -- being not just a hearer of the word but a doer. And the whole point of...meeting in [our] natural divisions during the month is to promote and give account of the sacrificial life of the Christian” (1939 Booklet, 22-24)

FELC's deep and creative worship and music life deserves its own missional history (but, that's for another time). The spare worship space remains nearly unchanged since 1936. The Spirit has formed and renewed joyful, loving relationships by gathering all around the means of grace and through signature fellowship events -- from May Fete in the 30s-40s to picnics & softball leagues of the 50s-70s to the Chicken BBQ of the 80s to date and the Oktoberfest of the 00s to date. These events aren't tangential; they're part of the missional fabric of FELC, gathering around food and laughter and always including the firefighters from the station across the street (Parish interviews).

God Drawing to the Edges in Each New Age. From that strong base of unity, sacramental renewal and connected relationship, God of the edges repeatedly draws FELC into a sacrificial life at the edges in each new age. Their origin story testifies to it in the 30s and 40s.

In the 60s, a cadre of FELC men felt called to provide weekly services at the Austin State Hospital, the oldest hospital in Texas for the care and treatment of the mentally ill. Their service (eventually in rotation with other congregations) continued for over 35 years. As the Vietnam War and national tensions raged and Austin became a center of "hippie-dom", FELC (prompted by God's nudging Pastor Merle Franke) began leaving its sanctuary open 24/7, becoming a haven of restoration and reconciliation for many on the margins. In the 70s as women entered the workforce, several of FELC's matriarchs (hearkening to "Pray the Devil

Back”) were troubled by the dearth of quality child care in Austin. God opened FELC’s eyes to its underutilized parish hall and inspired more than a year of volunteer leadership to launch a well-regarded child development center that continues to this day. In the 80s in response to the HIV crisis and their changing context, the Spirit, through Pastor Robert Karli, led FELC to become the first Reconciling in Christ congregation in the synod and the third in Texas. In the ‘00s, as the homeless and street youth population grew around the University, God drew FELC together with 10 other University-area congregations with dwindling membership to form Micah 6 of Austin -- a collaborative ministry that consolidated volunteers and improved their collective care for their most vulnerable neighbors. In 2015, compelled by the shooting at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, God troubled FELC’s Pastor Michael Coffey and the Rev. Dr. Mark Washington, pastor of Vision of Hope AME church, yoking the two congregations in intentional, ongoing interracial fellowship through pulpit swaps, shared worship and fellowship. One can only wonder what edge the experimental, becoming Spirit will draw FELC into next.

God Forming Faith Leaders Here. Akin to Jesus’ discipling ministry, God has through FELC raised up a number of future clergy and used it as a site for 46+ LSTC (The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago) interns, calling and forming leaders that have fanned out to

serve Christ's mission through the church. It has also become the congregational home to a number of students at the Austin Presbyterian Seminary down the street.

God Walking with FELC in Suffering and Promising Resurrection. While FELC has all manner of suffering akin to other congregations, one distinct source grows from its very call. In the 60s as mobility and density increased, FELC transitioned from a neighborhood church to an urban church. As the Lutheran church nearest the University and proximate to an active Air Force base, the Rev. Franke first named this compelling & painful call:

“FELC is no longer a fledgling. It is a strong body, come to maturity by the grace of God and the efforts of many. It has a job to do. Recognizing that our church is strategically located in a tightly compressed population area is to recognize that we have a particular and peculiar role in spiritual and human affairs, a role considerably different from other Lutheran churches in Austin: to serve the permanent and the transient alike.” (1966, 30th Anniversary Booklet)

To this day, the Spirit consistently draws a steady trickle of visitors into FELC. A continuing spirit around that is well-expressed in its 1941 Anniversary Booklet, *“15-20 non-member attend each Sunday. We purpose to let them be strangers only once.”* Some stay and become deeply integrated servants in the congregation. Indeed, the intensity of the relationships God births and nurtures through FELC is remarkable. And it creates a rhythm of receiving, nurturing and letting go -- leaving a deep love and a painful ache in both those who long remain part of the worshipping community and the many transients who once called it home. Gerry Kern, son of FELC's 1st minister, reflects on a moment from 1943 that captures the experience of parting, lived out anew for decades since, *“One of the things that*

I'll never forget, at the last service that my dad conducted before he left, I can remember about three or four other laymen in the narthex as we were leaving, just crying openly. I'll never erase that." It's the kind of ache I believe Jesus and his family, friends & followers knew as the way of the cross separated them, at least for a time. Then, as at FELC, the community holds the ache, trusting in their collective unity in Christ and their shared resurrection with all who've dwelled for a time and been called to serve elsewhere.

First English is not a large, downtown or suburban church with multiple services and many children. And it is not a perfect church; it is a gathering of broken human creatures. Yet, through this glass dimly, it appears God has repeatedly used them at the margins to restore, reconcile, love, serve, and heal, all while calling and forming a stream of faith leaders to serve the church across the country. In First English we see Justo Gonzalez' observation born out, "Christianity, like most living organisms, grows and relates to its environment at the edges, while the edges nurture the center and keep it alive. (Gonzalez, 529)"

"I experienced something at First English that I feel is not experienced very often anywhere in the world. This was just a unique experience." - Gerry Kern

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Treat yourself to these links:

<http://www.felcaustin.org/wp-content/uploads/FELC-Dedication-Memento-booklet-1939.pdf>

<http://www.felcaustin.org/wp-content/uploads/FELC-5th-Anniversary-booklet.pdf>

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“Pray the Devil Back to Hell”, Abigail Disney (Producer), 2008

COVER PHOTO

Photos of the construction of the building of First English Lutheran Church, FELC Dedication Memento Booklet, 1939, 13

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