

Mission Moment

Seven Congregations + Seven Stops + Seven Stories = An Innovative Way to Engage with the Church and Our Faith: Telling the Old Story in a New Way

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Recently, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and her staff introduced the ELCA's future vision and what "Future Church: A Movement" means for us. Mikka McCracken, the ELCA's Executive Director for Innovation describes innovation as creating something **new and useful**. She makes clear, "Innovation is not an end goal, but a means and also a process where each person's vocational gifts, the abundance of God, the lived experience, can more fully come together to be the body of Christ." She reminds us that we have a great example in our roots. Just like Martin Luther innovated new ways to engage people with the church through translating the bible into the people's language and sharing more widely

through the use of the printing press, so too can we innovate to **propel the gospel into relevancy in new and useful ways**. That is our call as Lutherans.

As I was listening to the ELCA vision for the future, our synod's "**Advent Adventure**" came to mind. It is a fun and exciting example of innovating during this time of the pandemic that makes certain, as Bishop Eaton shared, "the gospel message has free course in the world!"

Imagined by the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin East Dane Conference, seven of our synod's ELCA churches collaborated to create a new way to engage with the church and our faith through a driving tour with light displays and recorded readings. Pastors and laity served as storytellers and musicians and led hymns while inviting us to sing along.

The Advent Adventure was designed to be a self-guided driving tour to be enjoyed at your own pace throughout the season or in one night. Participants were invited to experience the story of waiting, hope, expectation and ultimately, God's presence in the birth of Jesus Christ through a biblical story experience like no other.



McFarland Lutheran, McFarland, WI



Hope Lutheran Church, McFarland, WI

Rev. Andy Twiton, pastor of Trinity Lutheran shared the genesis of this innovative idea from the conference text study group.

“We wondered, “How do we make Advent and Christmas special this year? We can’t give people what they are used to, but we can give them something special. They could get out of their house, do it in a self-guided way and do it in a safe way.”

Each church shared a little bit about themselves and gave a flavor of their music and ministry. A suggested route created by Pastor Twiton using a best route app followed the narrative in scripture and was provided in a downloadable booklet available from the synod’s website.

This writer and husband decided to sit back in our car seats and enjoy the birth story through the three-hour tour. At each stop, we heard a familiar carol, a reading from the bible and joined in a prayer for the world. We followed the recommended order of the tour, so our first stop was McFarland Lutheran Church (Pastor Tim Dean and Pastor Kelli Schmit) where the story of waiting began with the virgin Mary learning from the angel Gabriel that she was the favored one to bear the Christ child. We sang “What Child is This” and our adventure into the miraculous birth began.

As we arrived at each church, we could either log onto the YouTube link: <https://bit.ly/eastsideadventadventure>, or dial in by phone. They worked equally well.

In addition to storytelling, our next stop at Hope Lutheran in McFarland asked us to tune our radio to 89.3 FM to watch and listen to an award-winning light show timed to Christmas music. According to Pastor Beth Schultz Byrnes, “This project actually dovetailed another effort undertaken by one of our members on our renewal team. Troy Freemeyer and a couple of his friends here entered into the ‘Light Up the Grove Holiday Lights’ Chamber of Commerce light show competition while at the same time setting us up for the Advent Adventure.”

In addition to providing a meaningful, engaging experience for visitors, Hope Lutheran also garnered this year’s award from the Chamber of Commerce by capturing the most “Likes” on Facebook, propelling the gospel further into the community through social media.

We felt the next stop at New Life Church (Pastor Heather Hayward) was timed perfectly as we sang Silent Night at sundown while perched hilltop across from the lit diorama of the nativity. Here, we prayed for peace before leaving for the next church down the road.



New Life Church, Madison, WI



Messiah Lutheran Church, Madison, WI

Nestled under their illuminated steeple, one could not ignore the connection between the birth story and the responsibility our churches embrace to share it. It is our great commission to help more people know the way of Jesus and discover community, justice and love. Messiah Lutheran Church (Pastors Jeff Vanden Heuvel and Mark Petersen) brought to the Advent Adventure community, an inspiring message, a familiar carol, Joy to the World, Psalm 96:10-13 and a prayer for creation.



Trinity Lutheran Church, Madison, WI

Trinity Lutheran Church located in the heart of Madison gave us a description of their mission and ministry that felt the most invitational. Pastor Andy Twiton shared they are a Reconciling in Christ congregation, welcoming of all and providing a safe space for all people to explore and live out a relationship with God through Jesus. Their light display emphasized their longing for peace on earth that is promised through the Christ child. The backdrop is a mural explains Pastor Twiton that tells the story of their church's love for the arts.



Members of Trinity, Katherine Curtis and her family, played a part in the story, reminding us that children can learn much about the love of Jesus through experiential storytelling and should be invited at every opportunity. Seeing the gospel through the awe and delight of a child also brought new life to the old story!



St. Stephen's Lutheran, Monona, WI

St. Stephen's invited us into their beautifully decorated sanctuary to sing O Come All Ye Faithful. What a comfort and delight to be ushered into the hope-filled message of advent proclaimed by Pastor Elisa Brandt through the familiar blue colors of the season.

One of the surprises of the adventure was how varied each stop was from the one before it.

Mary and Rolfe Nervig, members of St. Stephens chose a specific day to participate and shared,

"We found the Advent Adventure of the Madison east side congregations was a wonderful way to engage in our Advent journey; there was variety and creativity in all of these displays. We chose to go on the winter equinox, and it was a meaningful way to mark that longest night of darkness with the light of the Christ child. And the fact that this adventure represented a number of congregations helped us feel more connected to each of the churches which meant even more this year!"

The Adventure culminated at one of our congregations in central Madison (Pastor Lisa Nelson) with the gifts of the magi. We sang The First Noel and prayed for the lonely and isolated, an especially fitting prayer for this part of the Madison community. This church under development understood the importance of inviting the neighborhood and focused energy on a banner that explained to the passerby how one could participate.



St. Mark's Lutheran, Madison, Wisconsin

Pastor Twiton and Pastor Nelson shared that the conference appreciated the partnership with the synod staff as well. "The synod website was the perfect place to house the information and the Adventure guide since this engaged seven of our churches." Pastor Nelson thanked the synod office for the regular advertising in the synod's e-news. "Every time **What Matters** went out, we could see a bump in our hits to the Adventure Guide. People were curious!" reported Pastor Twiton.

Of note, this conference has two pastors whose congregations are participating in the synod's **Faithful Innovations** initiative led by our Director for Evangelical Mission, the Rev. Walter Baires, whose position is supported through your offerings that get sent on to the ELCA and come back to us in his support of congregations. This team is also collaborating on a Lenten series. Per Pastor Nelson, "The Advent Adventure did require some of us and our laity to take on more work, so one has to consider what you are able to take on for the sake of the project, but the Lenten collaboration will actually help divide the work for us which will be welcomed during the busy Lenten season."

To see the guide and listen to the recordings:

[South-Central Synod of Wisconsin | The Advent Adventure \(scsw-elca.org\)](https://www.scsw-elca.org)

<https://bit.ly/eastsideadventadventure>