



Insights on Developing Congregational Senior Housing

March 2009

Churches Leading Senior Housing Development to Expand Ministries, Outreach and Community Building

By Kay Harvey

Parishioners at First Lutheran Church in Sandpoint, Idaho, often lingered on the open land outside their place of worship to marvel at the mountain view.

Many of them saw something more. They envisioned housing and care for the community's older people as part of their church campus, too.

We know about congregate housing. Now a newer concept -- congregational housing -- is taking shape to share this church's 6.1 acres of land.



Pastor Dave Olson with his "bulldozer" at the Luther Park of Sand Point groundbreaking.

The Rev. Dave Olson, the church's pastor, says the project has been a long time coming. "It was just a dream that had percolated in people's minds for decades," he remembers. "The fear was it was simply beyond our capacity to do something even modest."

As land prices escalated in this emerging retirement community of about 20,000 residents, pressure to sell the church's unoccupied land began to escalate, too. But when a potential buyer made an offer, church members said "no." They wanted to hold onto their dream.

Even then, Olson says, a big question loomed: Could it happen?

He set on a mission to find out. Personal connections, research and a bit of good fortune, he says, led him to Ecumen's web site. Ecumen is a leading non-profit senior housing, services and development company based in the Twin Cities. It is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America (ELCA). Impressed by Ecumen's experience in developing senior housing communities, the 800-member congregation partnered with Ecumen to explore possibilities. With support, enthusiasm and guidance from Ecumen's staff, the congregation's fears turned to optimism. "Ecumen is why this possibility is becoming a reality," Olson says.



First Lutheran Church congregation's vision is now a reality.

There were some challenges along the way. When traditional financing sources for the building project wouldn't work because of some restrictive statutes in Idaho, the congregation brought in the Chicago-based Mission Investment Fund of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as a third partner in the project. With the help of other resources within the church, Olson says, "what we found is we had the resources to do it."

Now parishioners have seen a \$15 million dream come true. The new senior residence with its mountain-lodge architecture, condo-like design and views of the Selkirk and Cabinet mountains, opened in December 2008. There's a buzz about this new senior living community called Luther Park, says Olson, better known to his parishioners as "Pastor Dave." Within 60 days of the start of construction, individuals put down deposits to pre-lease all 60 of the building's apartments.

"It's just gone like wildfire because it's such an attractive location. The community is excited because we've created a place where people actually want to live, as opposed to one where people feel if they *have* to go there, they will."

The project's scope grew as preliminary market studies and predevelopment planning provided confidence the congregation lacked. Ecumen brought careful planning to the Luther Park vision, Olson says. Catered assisted-living services are more financially feasible and involve less restrictive government controls than a nursing-home model, which has led to financial losses for some who invested in that. Catered living is an Ecumen offering that includes independent living and assisted living. A debt service will help ensure the congregation's ability to meet financial obligations and establish a benevolent fund to assist residents in paying rent as their assets diminish. Without Ecumen's help, Olson says, the congregation wouldn't have made such economically smart decisions.

"We wouldn't have built such a large community," he says. "We'd have thought small and safe, which is not always viable. Ecumen opened that door for us. There are no other words than adequate and competent management. Ecumen increased our trust level."

Church member Alice Nelson was first in line to sign up for one of Luther Park's two-bedroom apartments. At age 78, recently widowed and experiencing diminishing eyesight, Nelson says she was ready to leave her home of 52 years behind. "I know I'm going to be well taken care of," she says. "I have friends living there, too. It'll be a ball."

Nelson is one of about 10 members of First Lutheran Church among those who put deposits on 60 apartments in the new building adjoining the church. Convenient access makes it easy for residents to participate in church activities, such as Bible studies and a quilting circle, as well as worship services.

He's excited about intergenerational activities bringing together residents and children enrolled in the church's weekday preschool, too. It's that kind of "mixing, he says, "that increases quality of life."

Olson sees First Lutheran Church's partnership with Ecumen and the ELCA Mission Investment Fund as a model of opportunity for other congregations interested in building senior housing. "The learning for us has been the possibilities out there to meet this incredibly significant need in our communities with the

elderly population growing,” he says. “Any congregation could do this if there’s a significant need for services.”

Less than 250 miles away in central Washington, Pastor Dave Haven wonders what that could mean for his congregation. Like the Sandpoint parish, Celebration Lutheran Church in East Wenatchee sits in a scenic, growing area that’s attractive to older people. Its seven-acre plot of land could accommodate another sizable building. Nearby schools could fuel intergenerational relationships with seniors, and there’s a shopping area just down the road.

Though in the “very, very early stages” of exploring possibilities, Haven says, he has presented some information about Ecumen to his church council. He glimpses the future as the huge baby boomer generation starts turning 62 in 2008. “There are a number of retired folks moving in,” he says. He sees how senior housing “could be a way of serving this community.”

He’s posing the questions that weigh on his mind: “What do we do 10 to 15 years from now?” he asks. “What is our church campus going to be like? And how do we start this visioning project?”

Kay Harvey writes for Eldr Magazine and reports on aging, demographics, gender and psychology for MinnPost.com. She previously was an editor and features reporter with the Saint Paul Pioneer Press.