

LCEF Vision Path Experience Likes Redeemer

The following appeared in literature distributed nationally by the Lutheran Church Extension Fund (LCEF) promoting their newest tool: The VisionPast Experience.

Moving stalled ministry into gear in Englewood, Fla.

Any relationship – whether it’s between a husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and student – needs healthy communication in order to grow. Likewise, the same is true of a congregation, says the Rev. James Kress, as members of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Englewood, Fla., www.redeemerfl.com discovered this summer with the help of LCEF’s Vision Path.

Five years after a leadership change created a major ministry stall, Redeemer is moving forward – with the enthusiastic participation of young, working parents as well as retirees and vacationing “snow birds.” The Vision Path experience is helping members communicate, focus on ministry and determine a clear direction to best serve their community and the Lord. “Without Vision Path, we’d probably still be stuck in a meeting,” Kress said of the relatively new tool he credits with revitalizing ministry that had become stagnant. With Vision Path and God’s help, the pastor said, “we are confident we will produce good fruit for His Kingdom.”

Excitement ‘almost palpable’

In 2007, Redeemer Lutheran continued to benefit from an earlier population boom in Englewood, located on the Sunshine’s State’s gulf side, south of Sarasota. The growing congregation was looking to the future, including the potential of expanding ministry through its child care and development center.

But plans were put on hold – until this summer when the church council wanted to revisit them but was unsure how to proceed. That’s when Daniel Reichard, LCEF vice president for the LCMS Florida-Georgia District, encouraged Redeemer to contact LCEF. “He told us about a new tool to assist congregations in discovering what ministry, outside Word and Sacrament, God was guiding them to do,” Kress said. “He said it would help us get the ball rolling.”

In August, Max Biesenthal, senior vice president, LCEF Ministry Support, guided Redeemer through the half-day Vision Path event. Among the discussion questions: What is the greatest point of connection between our church and our community? What is the greatest opportunity facing our ministry?

“It started slow, but by the last hour and a half, there was so much dialogue going on [among members] that Max was just nodding his head and allowing members to talk about how best to extend God’s Kingdom,” Kress said.

Biesenthal says the congregation’s energy and excitement became “almost palpable. It was blazingly obvious that the Spirit was moving in the hearts of those in attendance to move in a particular direction.” Biesenthal concluded, “At the end of the event, they were ready to get going.”

Improving communication, unity

Through Vision Path, Redeemer has identified seven “organic” ministry paths, including expanding ministry to meet the needs of young families and children, to strengthen relationships within the church and to enhance outreach and spiritual care to the elderly. Most of those paths already were in place but were detoured, the pastor said.

The congregation also formed a Vision Path Development team, 11 members, ages 29 to 89, including working moms as well as retirees. “Everyone is not of the same mind [about Redeemer’s future], but they all want to come together to see what is best for the congregation’s ministry – not what is best for their particular group,” Kress said.

Today, the congregation is ranking the seven ministry paths through a survey sent to all who worship at Redeemer – even snow birds from the north who make the church their winter ministry home. “We can’t accomplish everything at once. We have to set priorities,” Kress said of the different paths.

Along with improving communication, the pastor sees congregants enjoying greater unity. “Though we always will have challenges in ministry, the Vision Path experience opened up our minds to the idea that we can walk together to spread the Gospel,” Kress said.