

The Future Direction of Trinity Lutheran Church, Rolling Meadows

By Reverend John Hildner

May 21, 2026

On July 12th, we will be asking this congregation to make a difficult decision. This decision will challenge us, but it is a way of focusing on how we understand God is calling us.

Our ultimate purpose as a congregation is to:

1. Honor God
2. Serve God, by serving others and
3. Make Disciples

Keep these purposes in mind. Jesus loves us and wants what is best for us but also for the world. Despite this, Jesus has no qualms with asking us to sacrifice, and also has a promise that out of selfless sacrifice, God will give us new life!

Even though I expect the congregation may be divided, following the vote, my prayer is that it would come together and support the outcome of the vote. This is what it means to be a democratic community. However the thing that makes this a Christian community is that before we vote, we

1. Pray
 2. Consider how this will effect others
 3. Vote in a way that reflects what we think is God's will and not our own.
- (Matthew 26:39)

Please read my analysis of each of the options separately at first. After reading it, please pray about it. After you have read and prayed about each separately, then begin to compare them and compare them to the purposes above.

Please continue to join us as we pray congregationally, but continue to pray on your own as well.

The three options we will be voting on are stated below:

1. Make no substantial changes and continue to function much as we do now.
2. Transform this church to be a ministry that will focus on a population involved with pets, that will serve that population and try to engage it with faith and the encouragement to become disciples of Jesus as they take over the leadership and membership of Trinity.
3. To intentionally conclude the organization of Trinity, and encourage its members to move together with another congregation and to utilize the assets of Trinity to provide a legacy of ministry that can use those resources to serve others indefinitely into the future.

Analysis of Option 1: Make no substantial changes:

The first option would seem to be the easiest. It would not make substantial changes to the way we function now. But I think it is both the least faithful and will cause eventual undue detriment to some or many of Trinity's members. The demographics of our church signal that we are an aging congregation without any youth or younger generations to move into leadership.

What this means is that as people become less able, due to health concerns, and as people are no longer able to participate in the life of the church as fully due to loss, health impediments, families that want their loved ones to be closer to them, etc., our active leadership will dwindle. This on top of the fact that we have been working with a deficit budget for many years, while only being able to hire a one third time pastor, is not a promising life for the church. It would require that those who are left are increasing their offerings to match those who are no longer able to remain active in this ministry. It will also likely mean that the pastor's presence will cease to be with the congregation.

At some point, between decreasing human resources, failing finances and burn out, the Church will fail.

That means for some who have worshipped all their lives at Trinity, when they need the care of the church at times of sickness and death there might not be anyone to provide that and there might not be a church from which to hold their

funerals. It will also likely mean that the work of the church will largely be passed on to fewer and fewer people having to do more and more tasks. I have seen this, and many people just leave the church because they are overwhelmed at what it takes to keep the organization going.

As more and more efforts are being utilized to pay the utilities, do maintenance, consider all the ways to address rising costs, often with less money, the church makes less and less impact on the community. They often become so inward facing, that they have no power to attract anyone else.

I have also watched that as many have sacrificed so much to keep the sinking ship from sinking as fast, they burn out, and decide that they will never invest in a church again. And for those who might try to find a new church, it is an equally daunting job to try to find a church. There is a lot of wariness and without others to go with, entering a church and trying to figure out if it has something that can minister to me is too difficult a task and people often give up after making just one or two visits to a couple churches.

Another concern is that I've seen churches that have dwindled to five people, and those people are often so stressed and burnt out, that friends often become contentious with one another and those friendships never mend.

I would not want to see Trinity end like this. I also think it is not faithful to keep something alive for sentimental reasons if it is unable to serve God and God's people as we have been called to do.

Analysis of Option 2: Create a Transformative Pet Ministry.

First, let me suggest that it is not the goal to develop a Pet Ministry! The goal is to focus on a defined population, we have identified as pet lovers (demographics tell us this is a growing population). We focus on them to engage them through a common interest (pets) in order to call them into faith and discipleship by taking over the leadership creating a sustainable ministry under the organization presently known as Trinity Lutheran.

This is based on a model of a few churches that have transformed and revitalized their church because they have great passion for a group of people or a cause, and

they have a willingness to risk everything because they feel it is faithful to God's call. Without these elements: a) passion, b) willingness to risk/sacrifice everything, and c) a sense of God's call to do this, it is doomed to failure.

However, even if it is faithful, the chances of it succeeding to revitalize a church are minimal. One in ten would probably be a high percentage of those that succeed. Most of those ministries are more directly connected to an obvious and present need in their community. Where it has been done, the ministry are with things like creating low income housing, feeding the poor, serving the homeless, ministry with the incarcerated or their families. I have never heard of a "Pet Ministry" that has been transformative; but if that is what God is calling us to do, then we should vote to do this and put our everything in it.

The hope would be that by meeting people, and spending enough time with people who have a common interest in pets, we can also spend time with them to talk about issues that may be bigger in life, especially issues of faith. Not everyone will engage with us in these conversations. Some will be turned off by it. Some will already be connected with a religious affiliation and community. Some will not be able to make the connection. But let me throw out some scenarios where the possibility of ministry might avail themselves.

- A person finds they spend their time with their pets because they have a difficult time connecting with other humans. The pets provide them companionship. Is this a person who might be starving for a community that can accept them for who they are and engage them even more fully than a pet, who cannot converse with them? Might they need a God who loves them the way they are, and calls them to love and be loved, not only by an animal. Genesis 2 talks about this and says though the man (Adam) was with all these animals who he was able to name, this was not sufficient. True joy came when community with another human (one who "was bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh", in other words had the same characteristics of being human) came into his life.
- People are constantly wanting to make impact on the community they live in and find ways to make meaningful interaction, especially in serving

others. Say Trinity became a training place where service dogs were not only trained, but which worked to help supply places like Northwest Community Hospital, local nursing homes & Memory Care Centers, and other services that help the aged to regularly have those service dogs in their facilities. What if we helped supply hospices, and services with people with disabilities and those who are in recovering from trauma, etc., with animals that helped them in their situations? What if we trained people who are putting their lives back together how to train service animals or attend to people with their service animals? This is the kind of thing that can make the news, intrigue people and help give them meaning. It shares the mission to serve, and gives us entry into places where there is need to share not only a pet, but a prayer and hope and love.

- Sometimes people cling to animals because they are more trustworthy than people. People who have been hurt by others might no longer trust that there are good humans and goodness in the world. What if by connecting with the one thing that they do trust in becomes a link to find hope in people again, and more importantly to find hope in God by showing unconditional love to them.
- Some people work all the time. They don't want to leave their beloved animal for an hour or two on a weekend. Maybe this provides them an option to both engage with a house of faithfulness and be able to express their love for God without taking time away from their pet?

There is still a lot of work to be done. No needs analysis has been even attempted, where we ask people in the pet field what they see as the biggest needs. No one has engaged with pet owners to see if people with pets could make a connection of caring for these creatures of God as a way of expressing love of God and a desire to join a community that is invested in both.

This option, is will be, by far, the most difficult option of all three. It will demand our all! Most of us will have to make a significant commitment to making this work. We will spend most of the resource we have. We will have to transform the building to accommodate the needs that become evident. We will have increased

costs for insurance, renovations, purchasing equipment, hiring experts who can advise and train us, finding resources to help many who will also have financial needs, and it probably holds the most unknown challenges of any of the options. Besides spending 4-5 days a week to be present at events, make rounds to the community with which we have to engage, do pick ups, etc., I would expect that we will also be pushing hard for members to give more financially to support this. If we are called, this money and time will come easy. If it does not come easy, I would question how “called” we are to do this ministry.

We should know in two years if this option is able to transform Trinity. If it is where we are called, our sacrifice will come easily, but we will also see our work transforming people and engaging them to be involved in the roles we are doing. However, the reason I say we will know in two years, is because in two years almost all our assets should have been spent, and unless we are bringing in significantly more new money, we will be broke within that time. Not only that, our small group of volunteers should be exhausted in two years, and if there are not new people to help with the work or take it over, I would wonder if we could last at that pace.

The goal will be to have found people to take our places and assume the leadership and work that needs to be done, and resources that will start filling in the financial gaps. As I said at the beginning of the discussion of this option, a 10% chance is about all this offers to transform this congregation and revitalize this ministry. However, it offers us a chance to be relevant, and as some congregations who have been passionate about giving everything to serve Christ, sometimes that revitalizes the ministry and welcomes other impassioned and dedicated individuals who want to make a difference for and with Christ.

Analysis of Option 3: Move in mass to merge with another congregation and create a way to help serve others in a faithful and consequential manner for an undetermined time in the future.

This option does two things: It takes care of the Trinity people/community, while serving others in need in a far more impactful way than we are presently doing. Let me parse this out.

It takes care of this Trinity Community: If we go in mass to another congregation, first there is a pastor and a church community that will be able to care for our members. By joining another community we make it stronger. If it is another community that might be trending downwards, our presence might be able to help reverse that trend. Also if we move in mass together, it is easier to integrate in the community we have migrated to. Literally we will have our own people. But as we gather, like a seed extending its radical (the brand new root) into the soil, it builds stability and connects with the sustaining ground. We will have a community to nourish us, but as time goes on, we will meet and engage with others from the congregation with whom we merged making us a “richer” community. With the combination of the two communities we become stronger, possibly allowing a church to move from a part time pastor to a full time one, or providing more programs and care to the community, or evangelize or grow in faith.

A decision we would be faced with is what kind of community we might want to join into. There are some with already strong ministries that we can just pop into their already vibrant programs, but we might have less impact on them. A smaller congregations might give us opportunities to make a bigger impact and build things together, using all our resources right away. However a smaller, less vibrant congregation may end up facing much of the same dilemma Trinity is going through now in the next decade or two.

The other nice thing is that we can bring our good ideas, our passions and our successful ministries to another church as well. We might be able to start a pet ministry there, without having to worry about survival in the process. I’m sure other churches would benefit from being more visible by having a craft fair or puzzle race or a Tea. We can bring not only ourselves, but our passions, good ideas and joy as well!

This doesn’t mean people can’t find a community by themselves, but moving in mass makes things easier. It takes a lot out of individuals to attend a church for a first and second time, to feel out of place, and to wonder what is going on here and if I will fit in. And if someone has to do this two or three times, they might

think it is easier not to attend church at all. But if we go together, it is easier to learn about a congregation and there is the comfort of having others I already know I feel comfortable around.

The second thing this option allows is make a faithful impact on the community. As identified, the land itself might be worth a lot of money that if handled in certain manners, it might be able to provide ten times what Trinity provides annually to serve the mission of Christ and serve other people. Right now about \$7000 is given annually from our gifts and offerings. What if that might be \$70,000 annually, allowing the principle to remain, while the interest funds in some kind impactful ministry in perpetuity.

The above is one option of how our resources can be invested in God's service faithfully. However that is not the only way our assets might be used to serve God. What if the congregation we are now a part of wanted to use the land and maybe even the building to develop a new ministry to a Spanish speaking population, or create some kind of use for the building that might make disciples and honor God in some other way that meets the needs of the community, like providing free office space to an organization like Lutheran Social Services, so it can spend more of it's money ministering to people?

The second part of the option, allows the gifts of all those faithful people who have ever been a part of Trinity, to invest in God's purpose and Mission, to make disciples, and to serve God's people.

It would be sad to see Trinity come to an end, but we need to remember that all things on earth are finite. The very first churches in the Christian era are all gone, but the Church is not. Those churches served and developed new churches where Christ's name was proclaimed and faith was nurtured and God was honored and people were served faithfully, which were eventually passed on to us. We can continue to pass on the faith, like those churches that are no longer there, but we continue to read about the Corinthian or Galatian or Ephesian Church.

Ecclesiastes 3:2 reminds us "There is a time to be born and a time to die." and as Jesus reminds us in Luke 9:24, "For those who want to save their life will lose it,

and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” and in John 12:24, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.” and as the Prayer accredited to St Francis says, “it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

There will be sadness and grief in this option, but it also offers hope and continues to care for the people who have faithfully worshipped at Trinity as well as the rest of the world, and I believe can offer Joy to the World.

Conclusion

PRAY! Talk to others. Talk to people who think differently than you do. Pray for everyone in this congregation, and thank God for the many blessings we have benefitted from and as God how we can best pass on those gifts.