



## Prayer guides Columbus church's journey to new Outreach Center

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The sound of sewing machines fills a corner of the downstairs of what has become known simply as The Outreach Center of First United Methodist Church in Columbus, Nebraska.

It is Tuesday morning, the traditional gathering time of women who put their gifts of sewing to use in a ministry that extends far beyond the congregation.



Bev Weil examines fabric to be pinned together so it can be sewn during an Aug. 9 gathering of the Methodist Quilters at The Outreach Center, a ministry of First United Methodist Church in Columbus, Nebraska. *Photo by Todd Seifert*

Lois Athey, who the women consider to be their “fearless leader,” works at one long table with Jan Carskadon to measure fabric as Bev Weil works at another table pinning together material to be sewn into one of the Methodist Quilters group’s latest projects. In the adjoining room, four other women – some members of Columbus First UMC and others who are part of a Lutheran congregation in town – are operating sewing machines and enjoying each other’s company.

Each participant has her own space – a welcome change that came with the move of The Outreach Center from a strip mall positioned behind the McDonald’s restaurant in town at the highly visible intersection of 33rd Avenue and U.S. Highway 30. Now, The Outreach Center is in the former evangelical free church at 3602 16th St.

“We love this,” Athey said. “We have lots of room. And we can use all of this space.”

The Methodist Quilters’ experience mirrors that of other groups who used the former Outreach Center space in the strip mall. Though grateful to have a place to gather, the group had grown frustrated with having to set out their crafting materials and then having either to put it away in cramped quarters or take them home because of having to share the facility with the youth group, a food program for schoolchildren and other activities.

Now, the 15-year-old group has all the table space it can use. And it has dedicated cabinets for its materials and equipment to make bibs for Veterans Affairs hospitals, blankets for newborn babies, quilts for Epworth Village and Camp Fontanelle, and gowns for children in Third World countries, among other projects.

These are the kinds of education- and mission-oriented purposes for which the congregation intended to use the space when it stepped out in faith to purchase and renovate the building.

## **‘The Right Way’**

The Rev. Cindi Stewart, now in her third year of ministry at Columbus First UMC, said the new Outreach Center fits well with the strategic plan the congregation has been crafting and shaping for more than a year.

“The people here really saw a vision for outreach,” she said.

Already ingrained in the local church’s culture, outreach became an even bigger priority as programs with which the church is involved blossomed in the nearly 5,000-square-foot strip mall space.

One example is “A Place at the Table,” a food-distribution ministry aimed at school-age children who have little or nothing to eat on the weekends, when school is not in session. The effort, started by the church’s Missions Committee about five years ago, at

first served fewer than 200 elementary-age kids.

Tom Lutjens, who volunteers with “A Place at the Table,” said the food ministry now serves more than 300 children of all ages. The move to the more than 21,000-square-foot building means there is a vastly larger area for staging the bagging of food in preparation for delivery to families in need.

“We have always had plenty of volunteers,” Lutjens said. “Now we have room to do more. The biggest benefit for us is there is so much more storage space. We get a lot of food at various times, so having a place to store it and then put it to use is a big advantage.”

Such a ministry fits into the church’s strategic plan.

“We started with prayer, and God provided,” Stewart said.

The pastor said a task force worked to determine what to do with The Outreach Center and its various ministries because of a pending deadline to either renew or cancel the lease at the strip mall. When the non-profit Rainbow Center moved from the former Evangelical Free Church building, it provided First UMC an opportunity to move away from renting a facility to purchasing its new Outreach Center location for a relatively low cost of \$396,000.

“We started with a task force and then moved to a study committee to make sure we had considered the possibilities,” Stewart said. “Eventually, a building committee completed its work to lead to the purchase of the facility. Clearly, we still have a lot of work to do, but I think we did this the right way.”

The building opened in 1961, meaning it is structurally sound but in need of renovations and upgrades. Two kitchens are being refurbished. Carpet has been donated, and a small army of volunteers has done everything from fixing up bathrooms to changing light fixtures to painting walls. Stewart said the church had “easily, over 100 people who donated their time and talents.”

But the focus remained on ministry throughout the process.

“The most powerful thing about this process is that it is rooted in prayer,” she said. “That sounds simple. We’re church people, right? We push and say prayer is important, but how often do we really do it? This is truly one of the most spiritual processes I have ever seen.”



## Big plans

Now that the new center is open, the congregation is getting to work making it available for the community to use. The American Red Cross conducts its weekly blood drive in the multipurpose Community Room. Organizations already have approached the church about using space such as the spacious Aldersgate Room for large-gathering meetings.

And the youth group has carved out about half of the basement for its various activities.

"We had no doors, so literally, you could hear what every group was doing or discussing," Sarah Borgman, Christian Education director at Columbus First UMC, said of the former facility. "Now each group has its own space."

The youth area boasts a full kitchen, a game room, a music room and three classrooms – one each for the senior-high (grades 9-12), junior-high (grades 7 and 8) and middle-school (grades 5 and 6) participants. When youth activities restart in September, the approximately 60 kids who take part each week will have considerably more room for their fun activities and to learn more about their faith.

"Before, we couldn't hang anything on the walls," Borgman said. "Now, it's really ours. And each class can do something special in their area to make it theirs."

The Rev. Seong Lee started as the associate pastor at Columbus First UMC in July. His office was intentionally placed at The Outreach Center to provide an opportunity for ministry with people who use the facility during the week.

"We want this to be a place for the community to use as much as possible," Lee said.

“This building has a lot of big spaces, and it has a lot of possibilities.”

The community will continue to have chances to see what those possibilities may be. The church celebrated an open house for The Outreach Center on July 31. And a formal dedication ceremony is planned for 3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 25.

Leading up to that event, preparations are under way to start a contemporary-style worship service, called “Ignite,” to take place at The Outreach Center at 6 p.m. Sundays starting Sept. 25. And there are still light fixtures to replace and flooring to improve.

And everyone has a role to play in making the final preparations. Athey and the Methodist Quilters even have a role in the contemporary worship setting, merging two ministry tasks that typically don’t go together. The quilting group has been tasked with replacing a worn curtain that serves as a centerpiece for the backdrop in the stage area, where musicians likely will lead worship. Such a task fits in with efforts that already have taken place at the new Outreach Center.

“There is still a lot of work to be done,” Athey said of the work completed to this point. “But you have never seen such hard workers before. This has been wonderful.”

And with the pieces just about in place, the focus has shifted from fixing up a building to putting it to use for the community the church serves. While the new location, nestled in a residential area, may not be as visible as it was at the strip mall behind a popular fast-food restaurant, Stewart said the new home for The Outreach Center offers new opportunities.

“We can reach into our neighborhood to meet needs,” she said. “The benefit is now we are in the heart of the mission field.”

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