

McMinnville Cooperative Ministries
Trinity Lutheran Church & McMinnville United Methodist Church

Our History

Methodist Beginnings

The McMinnville United Methodist Church was founded in about 1854 by early settlers on the area. It began as an ecumenical Sunday School started by Methodist, Presbyterian, and American Baptist women for their children. A meeting house was built by about 1856. Once the group had grown sufficiently, preachers of the three traditions began to stop in McMinnville on their circuits.

In about 1869 or 1870 the Methodists had gained enough in numbers to build their own structure on the block that we still occupy at Second and Evans Streets. The congregation continued to grow and over the years the buildings were replaced until the current church on the corner of Second and Ford was completed in 1941. This was the fifth building and is the longest occupied in our history.

The congregation peaked in membership in the mid 1970s. By 1998 when Steve Ross became pastor of the congregation, the congregation owned 5 acres on the edge of town and had adopted a controversial plan to sell the downtown facilities and construct a new church on the suburban acreage. It was soon apparent, however, that there was not enough consensus to accomplish such a major project.

In fall of 1998, the congregation undertook to prepare two ministry and building plans, one to allow remaining in the downtown, the other to move to the suburban acreage. In March of 1999 the congregation voted virtually unanimously to remain downtown and develop a new facility in three phases. The ministry plan identified serving the whole community as a major emphasis (being the Spirit of McMinnville). Fund raising began, but fell short of funding the intended first phase (a new sanctuary/office/and "leaky edge" space for a coffee shop-bookstore type ministry space). The congregation responded to this shortfall of funding by re-phasing and building the second phase first (social hall/kitchen/meeting rooms). The new facilities, alongside the 1941 building, were occupied in 2002.

Lutheran Beginnings

In 2001 Trinity Lutheran Church sold the suburban church building it had occupied since the late 1950's because their congregation had outgrown it. The congregation had an option on property on the edge of town and planned to build a new facility there. Over the next five years that piece of property and six others failed to work out as a new home for the congregation. For a couple of years Trinity rented their own building back from the Seventh Day Adventist congregation that had bought it, but eventually they had to depart. At that point they rented space in downtown for Sunday worship, offices, and minimal education and meeting rooms. By 2004 Trinity was showing signs

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of stress due to its uncertain future and the burdens of having no home for ministry and worship. Worship attendance was stalled at about 160.

The Creation of McMinnville Cooperative Ministries

“God is an earthquake, not an uncle.” So says an ancient Jewish proverb. We can vouch for the wisdom of this insight. In simultaneous but separate congregational meetings on Sunday, May 7th, 2006 the McMinnville United Methodist Church and the Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) voted to enter into a permanent cooperative ministry agreement. According to the agreement the two congregations will be sharing the same space, all of their staff except for the ordained clergy, and practically all of their programs including Christian education, music, local missions, small group ministries, and pastoral care. Each of the two congregations will continue to relate fully to its denominational structures. We are not becoming “Luthadists” or “Metherans” as so many comment when they hear about our situation! We desire instead to fully express the depth of both Lutheran and Methodist Christian faith *in community together*.

Why this? Why us? A true telling of the reasons has to be the story of how it came to be. Our common ministry has been progressively revealed to us more than we have created it or managed it.

By 2004, the United Methodist congregation was feeling pressure. The new facility and other changes had resulted in increased activity and excitement, but the \$67,000 per year mortgage costs made it impossible to add the program staff needed for the new people who were arriving. In addition to the financial stress the incredible effort of so many to make massive changes was becoming frankly exhausting. Worship attendance was showing serious signs of being stalled at about 180 average attendance in worship.

For several years both the Methodist and Lutheran had been participants in an annual spring break mission trip to Mexico. The trip involved six or more McMinnville congregations in addition to TLC and MUMC. The trip includes people of high school age, college age, and adults. Through this incredible experience both clergy and lay people from the two congregations had become well acquainted with each other and with the hopes, dreams and challenges that each congregation faced. In March of 2004 conversations on the mission trip began to include a question. *Are there ministries besides this mission trip that we could do better together than we are doing apart?*

In September 2004 these conversations evolved into the creation of an ad hoc task force, ½ Lutherans and ½ United Methodists, including the two clergy. The task force met every two weeks for two hours to discuss that question and to explore possibilities. The very first words said at the first meeting were, “Well, let’s begin by taking Sunday worship and sharing facilities off the table.” (Remember the earthquake God?) The conversations included discussion of the strengths and challenges of each congregation and the vision and purpose each congregation held. As a result of these conversations we instituted a monthly cooperative youth program called *YES!* involving five local

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congregations and featuring a gathering of high school youth for food, program and worship.

No other specific cooperative programs had been initiated when in April 2005 both congregations were beginning to plan for summer worship leadership during clergy and musician vacations. As it turned out, planned vacation times made it possible for the musicians and clergy to cover for each other – none of the vacations overlapped! As the task force worked out details (how will one preacher and one music person get to two worship services in each of two churches 6 blocks apart every Sunday?) someone said, “Wouldn’t it just be easier if we were all in one building?” Yes, it would.

Plans were proposed and approved by both church councils. Both churches would worship in the United Methodist buildings from June 19 through September 11, 2005. There would be a traditional Lutheran service at 8:00 AM in the sanctuary, a traditional United Methodist service at 9:00 in the sanctuary, and a combined celebration style service at 9:30 in the Great Room. The earthquake began to rumble.

It is hard to describe the spiritual energy that was evident on Sunday June 19, 2005. Throughout the summer, many people in both congregations began asking the question, “Why would we stop doing this?” Some key leaders in both congregations who had been skeptical or even opposed to the summer plan began to advocate for continuing in the relationship. In August, both church councils adopted plans to continue to worship together and share space through May 2006. That year was to be a time of discussion and discernment leading to a final decision regarding ongoing cooperative ministry. Leaders of both congregations envisioned a well designed, calm and thoughtful process leading to congregational votes. (Remember the earthquake God?)

Throughout the program year 2005-2006 all three worship experiences remained spiritually powerful and nourishing. On Easter 2006 more than 500 people participated in the three worship services. Over 20 new households had become regular participants in the cooperative ministry by that time, many of them identifying the cooperative ministry as a major positive for them. (By this will all know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.)

Our well-designed, calm, and thoughtful process never really emerged. Some people became strident opponents to the whole idea. More than a few became so polarized they refused to talk with those with whom they did not agree. Secret meetings occurred. There was a petition calling for the ouster of the Lutheran pastor, whose diabetes flared up to the point where a month-long medical leave was required. Those most convinced that the cooperative ministry was truly God’s will suffered periods of serious doubt. Many in both congregation suffered deep grief over strained relationships.

In March and April 2006 a series of Integration Dinners were held following worship. These were designed to explain why cooperative ministry was being proposed and to receive feedback about its pluses and minuses. The meetings were well attended,

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but few who opposed cooperative ministry chose to participate. Finally, on May 7, 2006, simultaneous congregational meetings were held. The United Methodist All-Church Conference lasted about 20 minutes. The vote was 88 to 15 in favor of the cooperative ministry agreement. The Lutheran Congregational Meeting lasted about 90 minutes. The vote was 69-46 in favor of the agreement. There was a potato bar dinner at 5:30. Those of both congregations who had supported the cooperative ministry celebrated with tears and cheers. Many of the Lutherans who opposed the agreement departed and never looked back. God is an earthquake, not an uncle.

Healing and reconciliation remained elusive for those who have taken passionate positions against one another. Through May 2007 the two congregations continued with wonderful worship, deepened relationships between their members, and began looking toward the future. The focus began to shift from establishing cooperative ministry to doing ministry worthy of the resources that God has provided us together.

By autumn 2006 the *Yes!* monthly youth program had been developed into the *YES! Logos* program. The program included both middle school and high school versions, met every Wednesday evening for 2 ½ hours, and included dinner, Bible study, recreation, and worship. More than forty adults were volunteers in the program at start up.

The Cooperative Ministries adopted a local public elementary school with a high poverty rate. The program provided snacks for all the Kindergarten and 1st grade classes, scholarships for the after school program, and SMART volunteers.

Together the congregations created a holiday season fair trade retail outlet to raise funds for mission and as a presence to the un-churched community.

Each year since 2006 the congregations have participated in the building of a Habitat for Humanity house.

In July 2007 the Cooperative Ministries hired a new full time staff person to work in spiritual formation and small groups. In fall of 2007 a new small group program kicked off with seventy people in new small groups. By Christmas of 2007 worship attendance is beginning to increase from the low that occurred upon the departure of those who had opposed the cooperative.

In April 2008, the two churches solidified their cooperative relationship by entering into joint ownership of the property and buildings at 544 NE Second Street in McMinnville, Oregon. The Lutheran congregation paid \$850,000 for half interest in a newly created non-profit corporation, McMinnville Cooperative Ministries, Inc., which belongs ½ to each of the congregations and owns the property on their behalf. The votes on this proposal were 62 -1 in the Lutheran Church and 81-18 in the United Methodist Church.

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Today, we realize that we can never be sure where God will lead us next, but wherever it is, it will be all at once exciting, challenging, painful, and frightening to follow. God is an earthquake, not an uncle.