

An Interview with Westwood Lutheran Church St. Louis Park, MN

www.westwood.church

By Julie Hestermann, CENetwork of the ELCA

Executive Pastor Jason Hunnik shared what Westwood Lutheran is up to in their congregation with Julie.



How many members do you have?

Westwood is a congregation of around 2500 and pre-pandemic worshipped about 600 people weekly.

Community Information

St. Louis Park is a first ring suburb just west of Minneapolis.

Describe the Grace and Vocation Initiative:

Grace and Vocation is an initiative that began out of a growing concern that daily life and faith were separate for many members of the congregation; even core members were unable to combine the two. The goal of the Grace and Vocation initiative was to connect faith and real life and as Pastor Jason said, “for people to be so embraced by the gospel that their lives would be lived out of that narrative.”



The Grace and Vocation Initiative began seven years ago when it became clear that a six-week worship series was not going to be enough to elicit the change that was desired. It took years to change people’s mindset. And now at the seven-year mark, they are able to move into the imagination stage of the initiative.

All ministries are involved in this initiative at Westwood because, in order for mindsets to alter, other changes had to occur. For instance, one key change that took place was the language that was used to discuss faith and vocation. Once that happened, attitudes also slowly began to transform. Authenticity is now higher in their members and imagination is starting to be utilized. Prior to the Grace and Vocation Initiative, the congregation was unable to imagine that anything needed to change or that things could be done differently. However, recently the congregation was able to envision how they could make a difference by starting a childcare center in a low-income housing unit.

What has been the response to what you are doing?

Pastor Jason stated that the response to the Grace and Vocation initiative has been amazing! The initiative allowed for many entry points.

- The senior members of the congregation seemed to really understand the goal of the initiative first and were energized by it. This spurred others to learn more about the initiative.
- The church council now has a clearer vision for how to lead the congregation.
- The church staff is functioning better.
- Congregation members feel empowered.

What has been the most positive outcome of this initiative? What was the most unexpected outcome?

The most positive outcome of the Grace and Vocation initiative is the vibrancy and engagement of the congregation.

The most unexpected outcome was the realization of just how deep and wide the gap was between vocation and faith in the congregation. The amount of time it took for the language of vocation and faith to become ingrained in the church members was also unexpected.

What would you change about this initiative and what are your next steps?

If Westwood could change anything about this initiative, it would be to have started it sooner. Another detail they feel they could have done differently would have been to do an evaluation of the congregation about vocation and faith before starting the initiative. Westwood is currently doing an evaluation, but they feel an initial evaluation would have been helpful to have a full picture of how transformative the Grace and Vocation initiative has been.

The next steps for Westwood are to keep going with this initiative with no end in sight. They are looking at the world in a new way through the gospels.

What advice would you give someone hoping to start something similar in their congregation?

Pastor Jason's advice was to "Go all in! An initiative like this takes more than one staff person spearheading it. It also takes much more than a six-week worship series. It takes theology, leadership, systems thinking and everyone being on board."

For more information about the Grace and Vocation initiative at Westwood Lutheran go to:

<https://f0604e86-106e-45e1-96d7->

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