

**The Dual-Site Congregation of Bloomington Living Hope—  
A Bridge to the Future**

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In 1996, the new Bloomington Ferry Bridge opened across the Minnesota River as part of Highway 169 in the southwestern part of the Twin Cities metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup> It was, in many ways, a bridge to the future. It created limitless opportunities for growth and development for a section of Minnesota. But, finally, it was the spiritual opportunities created by this bridge for hundreds of souls that would prove to have the greatest impact. In addition, through one church's efforts, this bridge would open minds in the Wisconsin Synod to new ways of outreach ministry and missions in financially troubled times.

To be precise, the bridge was not exactly new; it was a newly built improvement to the old Bloomington Ferry Bridge. The improvements were a long time in coming. The old bridge was a two-lane bottleneck that brought all but the lightest traffic to a major slowdown.<sup>2</sup> Plus, since it was built so low, the old bridge would become submerged underwater every time the rain was heavy enough to make the river rise.<sup>3</sup> The shiny new bridge put a stop to that—four lanes standing high above the water. Finally, a quick, reliable way existed to get from Shakopee, Savage and surrounding cities to Bloomington and the Twin Cities themselves.

Naturally, this meant a lot more than just smoother traffic. The new bridge allowed cities like Shakopee and Savage to become more convenient bedroom communities to the Twin Cities. The bridge allowed these cities to boom. As was clear a few years later, “the new bridge has sparked rapid residential and commercial development in and around Shakopee.”<sup>4</sup> It was into

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<sup>1</sup> McAuliffe, Bill and Brown, Curt, “New bridge, but old flood headaches at Shakopee” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*; (May 4, 2001), internet; available at [www.startribune.com/stories/462/646545.html](http://www.startribune.com/stories/462/646545.html); accessed 04 December 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

this growing community that Bloomington Lutheran Church decided to expand its ministry around the time of the bridge's opening.

### **The seed is planted**

To fully understand and appreciate Bloomington's outreach to Shakopee and Savage in the late 1990's, it helps to look back to the mid-1970's at Bloomington's previous mission work in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.<sup>5</sup> Eden Prairie was also at that time a fast-growing suburb of Minneapolis near Bloomington. Pastor Mark Liesener of Bloomington began reaching out to Eden Prairie shortly after he arrived at Bloomington in 1974.

His outreach led to the founding of Christ Lutheran Church of Eden Prairie in 1976. Initially, Pastor Liesener was able to maintain his work at both churches with the help of vicars assigned to Bloomington. The idea of a dual-site congregation had not really sprouted yet at this point; the two congregations remained separate, other than sharing the same pastor.

Even this tie was severed in 1978 with the assignment of W. Paul Brinkman out of the seminary to serve as pastor at Christ. Without Pastor Liesener even knowing it was going to happen, the torch of this mission congregation was passed to another shepherd.<sup>6</sup> The arrival of Pastor Brinkman signaled the continuation of Christ as a traditional daughter church: the pastor, church government and congregation of Christ were completely independent of its mother church, Bloomington.

That all changed about a year later. When Pastor Liesener was looking for some help on a project, he contacted Pastor Brinkman. Brinkman himself had been feeling rather isolated in Eden Prairie, so he was eager to work with Bloomington. So, the two came up with a plan: they

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<sup>5</sup> Information for this section came out of an interview with Pastor Mark Liesener in November of 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Pastor Liesener mentioned that he had no idea a graduate would be assigned to Eden Prairie until Pastor Brinkman called his house announcing he was the new pastor. "That was the way they did things in those days," said Liesener.

would share duties at both churches in a more cooperative effort. This would give both congregations a chance to see another pastor on a regular basis, and it would allow Eden Prairie's pastor and people to escape in a way the isolation of a young, upstart mission church.

This worked quite well for a time, but a few years later Pastor Brinkman took a call away from Eden Prairie. The pastor that replaced him did not see the benefits of retaining such a close relationship with the church in Bloomington, so the concept of sharing church duties across congregational lines was dropped for these two churches. But the idea of working closely with another church in this way would continue to grow. Bloomington Lutheran just needed to find another time and place where it could work.

### **Opportunity knocks**

Enter the newly renovated Bloomington Ferry Bridge. The pastoral staff at Bloomington Lutheran, which now included Pastor Scott Spaulding, believed already in 1996 that the area of Shakopee and Savage was the ideal place to branch out with the gospel ministry.<sup>7</sup> Pastor Spaulding took the role of the exploratory-outreach missionary as he did extensive evangelism on the communities that seemed so poised for population growth. As is always the case, God's Word did not return empty.<sup>8</sup> It soon became clear to Spaulding that the number of people responding to the gospel the Savage area, together with the members from Bloomington that would likely switch over to the newer church, would be sufficient to start a full-fledged mission church.

But was a new church really being started? In some ways the answer was yes; in others, no. The new church (now called Living Hope) was always intended to have a separate place of

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<sup>7</sup> From an interview with Pastor Scott Spaulding in November of 2005. We will hereafter refer to this as Spaulding Interview.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Isaiah 55:11

worship from Bloomington Lutheran. The improved bridge notwithstanding, no one expected the new young families moving into Savage and Shakopee to want to drive the fifteen minutes plus to the existing site in Bloomington to worship.<sup>9</sup> Neither, though, did they intend for Living Hope to be a stand-alone congregation in every respect. Instead, the new church would continue to be part of the old church. Living Hope and Bloomington Lutheran would share everything, from its pastoral staff and church council to its membership and monetary resources. Together, they would make up a single, dual-site congregation.

The idea itself is not as strange as it might sound. The situation at a dual-site congregation would in some ways be similar to a dual-parish, in which a single pastor serves more than one congregation. The difference, of course, is that much more is in common between the two sites. Evangelical “mega-churches” have been using this idea for some time, most notably the Chicago-area’s Willow Creek, whose satellite churches have been popping up around the nation.<sup>10</sup> For the average WELS member, though, this idea was still very different.

So why do it? Why prefer this dual-site idea to the concept of daughtering a church in the traditional way? First of all, Bloomington’s experience in the early days of Christ Lutheran in Eden Prairie had opened its eyes to the idea of shared ministry. But the idea of the two church sites sharing its time, talent and treasures was even more appealing. Too many stories have been told of struggling mission churches that can barely eke out the money for land and a building, only to have none left for ministry. Perhaps even more frightening than a lack of funds is a lack of human resources. Even with a devoted core nucleus, it is easy to see how many mission

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of a local-minded congregation at Living Hope turned out to be a reality. Pastor Spaulding refers to this tendency as parochialism or provincialism, and it has turned out to be a major factor at the Living Hope location. See page 10.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, one such Evangelical congregation in the Twin Cities, Wooddale, also expanded into the Savage-Shakopee area. The aptly named Bridgewood has done quite well for itself, according to Pastor Spaulding.

congregations would struggle. The small amount of people would make any volunteer effort difficult, with burnout possibly becoming a major factor. Plus, although the Holy Spirit alone produces converts through the gospel, a small mission congregation can struggle to get people into the door to hear that gospel if it is seen as a small, cult-like church. For these reasons, Bloomington went with the dual-site approach.

As this approach panned out in its early days at Living Hope, Pastor Spaulding realized he had a problem. It was the kind of problem that ministers of the gospel like to have: things were going too well. Bloomington itself was a large congregation, with 1,080 communicant members and 1,351 souls as of 1995.<sup>11</sup> With the added responsibilities of a growing group at Living Hope, there was simply too much work for a two-man pastoral staff to accomplish. Additionally, they wanted to take this dual-site plan all the way; they envisioned a goodly size church and school going up for Living Hope before the surrounding areas got too built up with urban sprawl.

To realize this dream would require much more money that Bloomington Lutheran had lying around at that time; they needed to ask for help. Needless to say, they were a little worried about whether anyone would take a chance on this idea. It could be a struggle getting people to *understand* this concept, let alone want to *fund* it. “People didn’t understand how this was going to work,” said Spaulding. Despite these concerns, they put the matter in God’s hands and went to the only place they could go, the WELS Board for Home Missions (hereafter BHM).

To the delight of Bloomington Lutheran, the BHM greeted this idea enthusiastically. BHM Administrator Harold Hagedorn believes that a dual-site congregation is an excellent way

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<sup>11</sup> From the “Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1995”

for outreach-minded congregations to expand into their surrounding areas.<sup>12</sup> He says that in today's world "people are busy," and a good supply of volunteers for a church are hard to find. In some cases, churches would be "much better off to have a combined entity." In fact, compared to the traditional way of daughtering a church, Pastor Hagedorn feels that a dual-site congregation is a "far better concept" that ends up costing the mission board much less.

How does it cost less? The parent congregation supplies a large part of the necessary funds itself. A traditional mission church or daughter congregation might need BHM subsidy for most of its day-to-day operation along with the pastor's salary. A dual-site congregation might only need subsidy for an additional pastor, and that subsidy would hopefully be reduced or eliminated rather quickly. The final tally would leave the BHM paying significantly less than it would have to with a more traditional setup.

These factors lead Pastor Hagedorn to feel that the dual-site congregation is the "best alternative available right now," especially in these difficult financial times. The benefits extend beyond the pocketbook, too. This setup allows the mission pastor to be part of a team instead of a "lone ranger." Such a team recalls Jesus sending out his disciples two by two<sup>13</sup> and the emphasis in some New Testament epistles on working together.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, the BHM subsidized the addition of a pastor to the Bloomington Lutheran staff.

Although they gave no money toward a building or land for Living Hope, the BHM did contribute to this cause in a substantial way: it opened the door to the help of the WELS Church Extension Fund (hereafter CEF). The CEF "exists primarily to make low-interest loans to newly established WELS congregations so that they can acquire ministry facilities, land sites, and

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<sup>12</sup> Information for this section came from an interview with Pastor Harold Hagedorn in November of 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Mark 6:7 and Luke 10:1

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 3 John 8

parsonages.”<sup>15</sup> Bloomington Lutheran, of course, was not a “newly established” congregation, but the BHM helped the CEF to see that this unique plan was worthwhile. Although this wasn’t technically a mission church situation, the CEF understood that this ambitious building project of a new church and school would further the ultimate goal of reaching out to souls with the gospel. The 2.8 million dollar loan that was approved for Living Hope<sup>16</sup> was, according to Pastor Hagedorn, the largest loan ever given by the CEF up to that time. Without the CEF, a higher-interest loan from another bank would have added significantly to the cost of the project. As it happened, the CEF and BHM both made it possible for Living Hope to move forward as a true satellite congregation of Bloomington.

### **Making a go of it**

Living Hope, like Rome before it, was not built in a day. Even with the additional funding from the BHM and the loan from CEF, building the church was a gradual process. It began by adding additional pastoral staff when Daniel J. Schmidt was assigned out of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1997. Pastor Schmidt primarily did his work at Bloomington Lutheran, giving Pastor Spaulding the ability to concentrate his efforts on Living Hope.

As he did so, Pastor Spaulding knew that the new members in Savage and Shakopee would have to worship somewhere until the new church could be built. The first services took place in a Knights of Columbus Hall, and they moved into an elementary school as the group

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<sup>15</sup> Balza, Nicole, “Partners,” *Forward in Christ* (November 2004): 15. Incidentally, this article includes a picture from the Living Hope construction that includes CEF vice president Joel Kock and Living Hope building committee chairman Denny Walters.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix 1, “Living Hope Project Costs,” an internal document from the Living Hope building committee.

began to grow.<sup>17</sup> These humble locations definitely paled in comparison to the new church and school facility that was being planned.

As mentioned previously, plans for the new building project were ambitious. The site chosen and purchased was 10 acres on the border of Savage and Shakopee. On this property was planned a 26,000 square foot facility to include six classrooms, a media room, offices, locker rooms, a commons area, and a large seventy-eight by 102 foot gymnasium.<sup>18</sup>

This list of rooms in the building is notable due to one glaring omission: a sanctuary. How can a church building function without such a basic thing as a sanctuary? Actually, Living Hope never planned on answering this question, because they were planning to have a sanctuary—of sorts. The sanctuary was planned as another use for the gymnasium: the so-called sanctinasion.

Some might cringe when imagining this concept. Floors sticky from spilt beverages, pieces of uneaten popcorn crunching underfoot, and worshipers sitting in fold-out bleachers are not concepts that lend themselves to edifying worship. The design for the sanctinasion anticipated these possible objections and made sure that the worship space would feel like a church, not a grade school gym. Hundreds of high quality chairs would be set up before each service for the comfort of the worshipers—no folding chairs here. The floor of the gymnasium, too, would not be made with distractingly bright colors or with cartoon mascots. The neutral colors would try to maintain a respectful atmosphere for worship. In every way, the attempt was made to make the best possible use of this space.

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<sup>17</sup> Walters, Denny, “Expansion in the Twin Cities,” *Mission Connection* (Fall 2003): 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* For more specific information on the Living Hope facility, see appendices 2 and 3, which contain a map of the site and blueprints for the interior, respectively. These drawings are taken from the original plans from the architects at Vanman Companies.

Using space well was, after all, the whole point of having a sanctinasion. Since Living Hope wanted to open its new facility with an operating school, having a gym was felt to be essential. Building a site that had both a large gymnasium and a suitable sanctuary, while retaining everything else the planners wanted, simply would have been impossible on the project's budget. So, to get the most out of the money and square footage used for this building, a sanctinasion was planned. This wasn't meant to be permanent, though; a formal sanctuary was planned as part of phase III of the long-range building plans of the congregation.<sup>19</sup>

Over the next few years, the plans in place were realized. The congregation continued to grow as the new church building was completed. After all was done, the new building was dedicated in October of 2002. The school operated on the site also opened that fall with 125 students in preschool through second grades.<sup>20</sup> The new site also had a pastor that had Living Hope as his primary area of responsibility—Pastor Michael Borgwardt, who had replaced Pastor Schmidt. It was an auspicious start on an adventuresome ministry plan for this progressive, dual-site congregation, which had now changed its name to reflect its changed setup: Bloomington Living Hope Lutheran Church.

### **The first few years**

Living Hope certainly had a hopeful start, but the staff and congregation had no reason to rest on their laurels. After all, an idea such as this had not been tried in Wisconsin Synod circles, and it was unclear how things would turn out. A firm trust in our gracious God was still necessary to preserve a congregation that now had a large loan to pay back and was out on a limb with its outreach strategy. Would God continue to bless this congregation as it moved forward?

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Thankfully, the answer to that question has, so far, been a resounding “yes.” The Savage and Shakopee areas have not dried up and become ghost towns; they have been growing rapidly as predicted. Scott County, home of Savage and Shakopee, was the fastest-growing county in Minnesota in 2003 and the fifth-fastest-growing county in the nation in 2002.<sup>21</sup> The Holy Spirit has graciously moved many new movers to join Living Hope; over one hundred members joined in the first year the new building was open.<sup>22</sup> These new members included many families with young children.<sup>23</sup> At all times, God finds ways to bless his people.

The pastoral staff has recognized both these blessings and the challenges that they create. One of the biggest problems is the “omnipresence issue” for the staff.<sup>24</sup> Everyone at both church buildings at times expect the pastors to be available always, which of course is impossible. Additionally, the two sites have completely different atmospheres and attitudes, according to Pastor Spaulding. Bloomington is more of a regional church, with members willing to drive a ways to get there, while Living Hope is much more of a local church. This causes some practical headaches on the planning level for the congregation, since every idea and plan must pass through the filter of what will be acceptable at each site. The different feel of each congregation also can lead to an attitude of what Pastor Spaulding calls parochialism or provincialism. In other words, many people at Living Hope do not understand why they should care about Bloomington, and vice versa. Living Hope has grown so fast that many members at both sites haven’t caught up mentally to the concept.

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<sup>21</sup> Werner, Larry, “Shakopee: City has been the Twin Cities’ Playground,” *Minneapolis Star Tribune*; (September 24, 2003), internet; available at [www.startribune.com/stories/332/4116373.html](http://www.startribune.com/stories/332/4116373.html); accessed 04 December 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Walters, 3.

<sup>23</sup> This fact was impressed on me when I guest preached at Living Hope in June of 2005. When the children’s sermon was announced, about 60 kids flooded to my feet.

<sup>24</sup> Spaulding Interview.

Money has also been a concern. Despite the initial subsidy from the BHM and the low-interest CEF loan, it still takes great amount of funds to run this two-church congregation. Salaries still need to be paid, loans need to be paid off, and new ministry needs to be done. The fact that the money coming in has not equaled the money needed has necessitated a capital campaign to pay off debts. One possible reason for this is the fact that newer Christians—many of which have joined the congregation—tend to take their time adjusting to the scriptural principles of stewardship. Perhaps the phrase that some have attributed to Martin Luther still holds true: “the last thing to be converted is the pocketbook.”

These first years have also been a time of transition for the congregation. Pastor Liesener retired, which led to the calling of Pastor Rod Pudell as his replacement. Then, Pastor Borgwardt accepted a call to the Chicago area in the middle of 2005. The calling process for his replacement continues to the time of this essay’s writing. Needless to say, being down one pastor has increased the staff’s time-and-place constraints.

Thankfully, though, the joys have outweighed the challenges so far. The elementary school has proven to be an especially smooth-running part of the Living Hope expansion. Since the building was dedicated, third- and fourth-grade classrooms have been added to the Living Hope site. Starting in fifth-grade, the students attending Living Hope move to Bloomington Lutheran School on Bloomington Ferry Road. This has worked very well and is similar to how public schools have their students progress from several elementary schools to one middle school. To further the togetherness of the two school sites, all sporting events are held at Living Hope. (The huge gymnasium doesn’t hurt, either.)

For Pastor Spaulding the main joys of this can be summarized in a very simple way: “It works!” He especially appreciates how the resources of both sites are so well utilized to

accomplish the ministry's goals. It has been great for him to see so many new people coming in the doors and to give so many other people a chance to participate in ministry. God keeps allowing Bloomington Living Hope to expand its points of ministry and touch even more people in the process. "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."<sup>25</sup>

### **A bridge to the future**

Where this congregation will go from here is in God's hands. There are no plans for the two locations to divide into separate congregations in the foreseeable future. Certainly more expansion will be necessary. Pastor Spaulding states that the elementary school is pushing its limits in enrollment, and some sort of classroom space will have to be added, although it is not known where or how this will happen. The previously mentioned pastoral vacancy is also something that is being addressed and will continue to be an issue until someone accepts the call.

However this congregation's history plays out, one thing is certain: the decision to become a dual-site congregation was a turning point for this segment of God's people. The concept has allowed their members to become more deeply involved in more diverse areas of ministry. It has shined the light of the gospel to people in different areas and stages of life that might not otherwise have been given the chance. And it has given the Christians there cause to rejoice at God's unending and undeserved love for sinners.

I believe that the dual-site congregation of Bloomington Living Hope is, in many ways, a bridge to the future. It has created great opportunities for the spiritual growth of people in the Savage and Shakopee area. But it has also influenced the lives of other congregations in the

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<sup>25</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:14

WELS. One such congregation is Salem of Stillwater, Minnesota.<sup>26</sup> Through the help of the Minnesota District Mission Board, Salem has reached out into the nearby community of Somerset, Wisconsin. They began holding services in the music room of a middle school<sup>27</sup> in Somerset in February of 2005.

In many ways, the situation for Salem is similar to Bloomington's. The two locations share the pastoral staff and church council. There is even a new bridge opening up near Somerset that many believe will increase the growth to this community. The Somerset expansion for Salem was consciously done to emulate Bloomington's work in Savage and Shakopee. Of course, there are a few differences. Salem has been holding an English and a Spanish service in Somerset. So far, no additional pastoral staff has been added and no plans for an elementary school are in the works. Plus, the name "Salem" is able to be used at both locations to avoid confusion. And, because the two sites are in two different states with two different area codes, the staff decided to give the church office a toll-free "800 number" so all its members could call the church free of charge. While not following Bloomington's model point-for-point, Salem has used it as a springboard to expand their ministry to a new community in new ways.

That, finally, is the lasting legacy for Bloomington Living Hope's expansion as far as the rest of the WELS is concerned. It is a bridge to the future. This concept will continue to help other people and congregations strive to find different ways to reach out to the lost around them. Sometimes, attitudes and preconceptions will have to be changed to accomplish the Lord's work in a changing world. At a time when the WELS is struggling financially, and virtually no synod

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<sup>26</sup> Information for these paragraphs came out of an interview with Pastor Marcus Birkholz of Salem in December of 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Pastor Birkholz noted that they get this room from 9AM to 1PM for \$30 per Sunday.

supported missions are being opened, the Bloomington Living Hope model brings hope. It gives us a bridge on which to travel, a place to look into the future of how God can bless his people.

Today, thankfully, that future is bright.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.<sup>28</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup> 1 Peter 1:3-4

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**LIVING HOPE PROJECT COSTS**  
**Thousand \$**

**Project Cost**

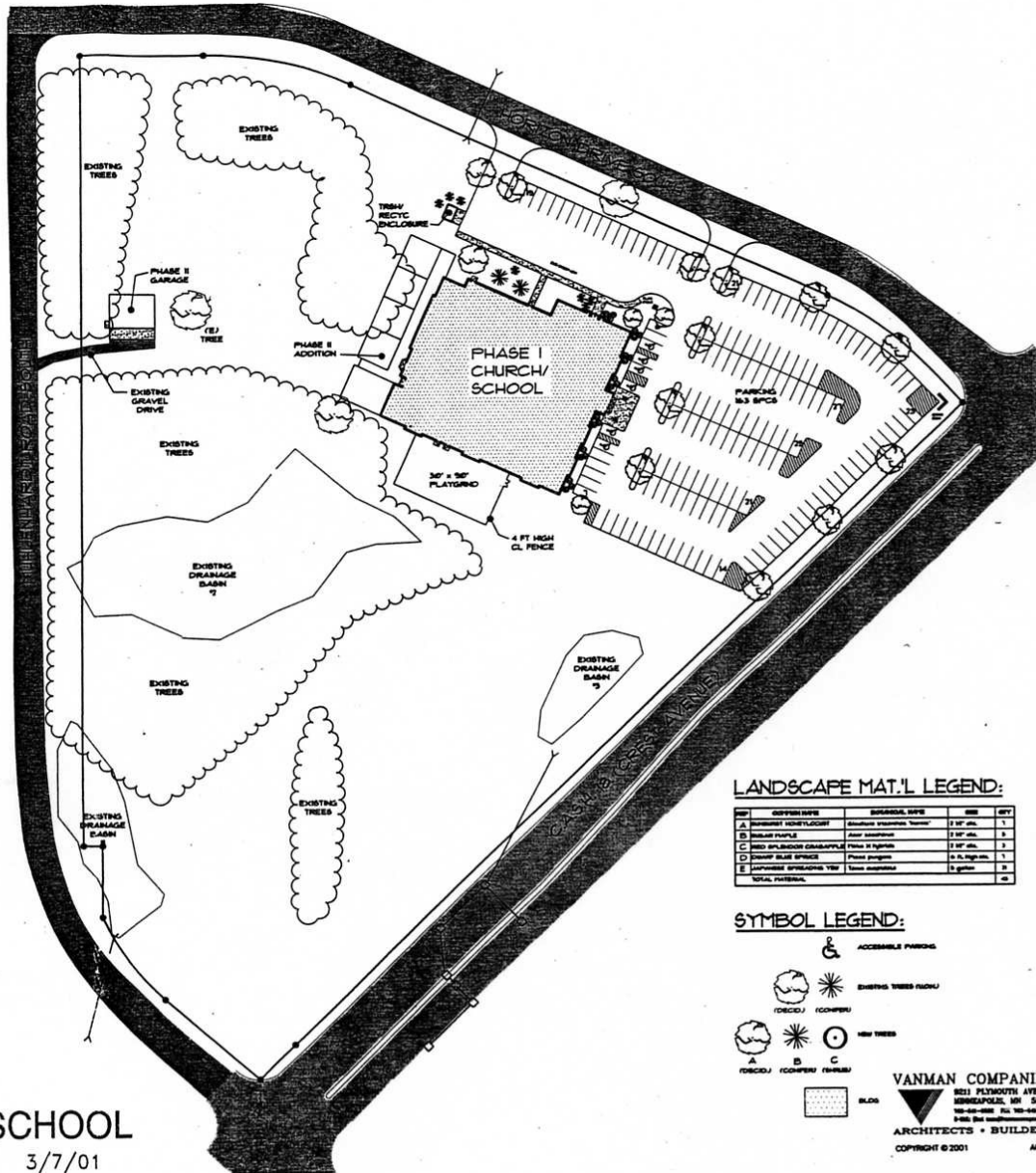
\$ 350	Land cost - <i>10 acres</i>
23	Loan origination fee
2,775	Vanman - <i>Building construction</i>
200	Furnishings
25	Landscape
25	Miscellaneous
<u>3,398</u>	Total Project Cost
(178)	Cash paid to CEF
(105)	CEF grant
(23)	Loan origination fee
(199)	Expenses paid direct
<u>(85)</u>	Paid on land loan
<u>\$ 2,808</u>	CEF Loan Balance

**CEF Loan**

\$ 2,800	Original approved amount
(377)	Down payment by project completion
<u>(105)</u>	CEF grant
2,318	
265	Land loan
200	Furnishings
<u>25</u>	Landscaping
<u>\$ 2,808</u>	Loan Balance 3/1/03

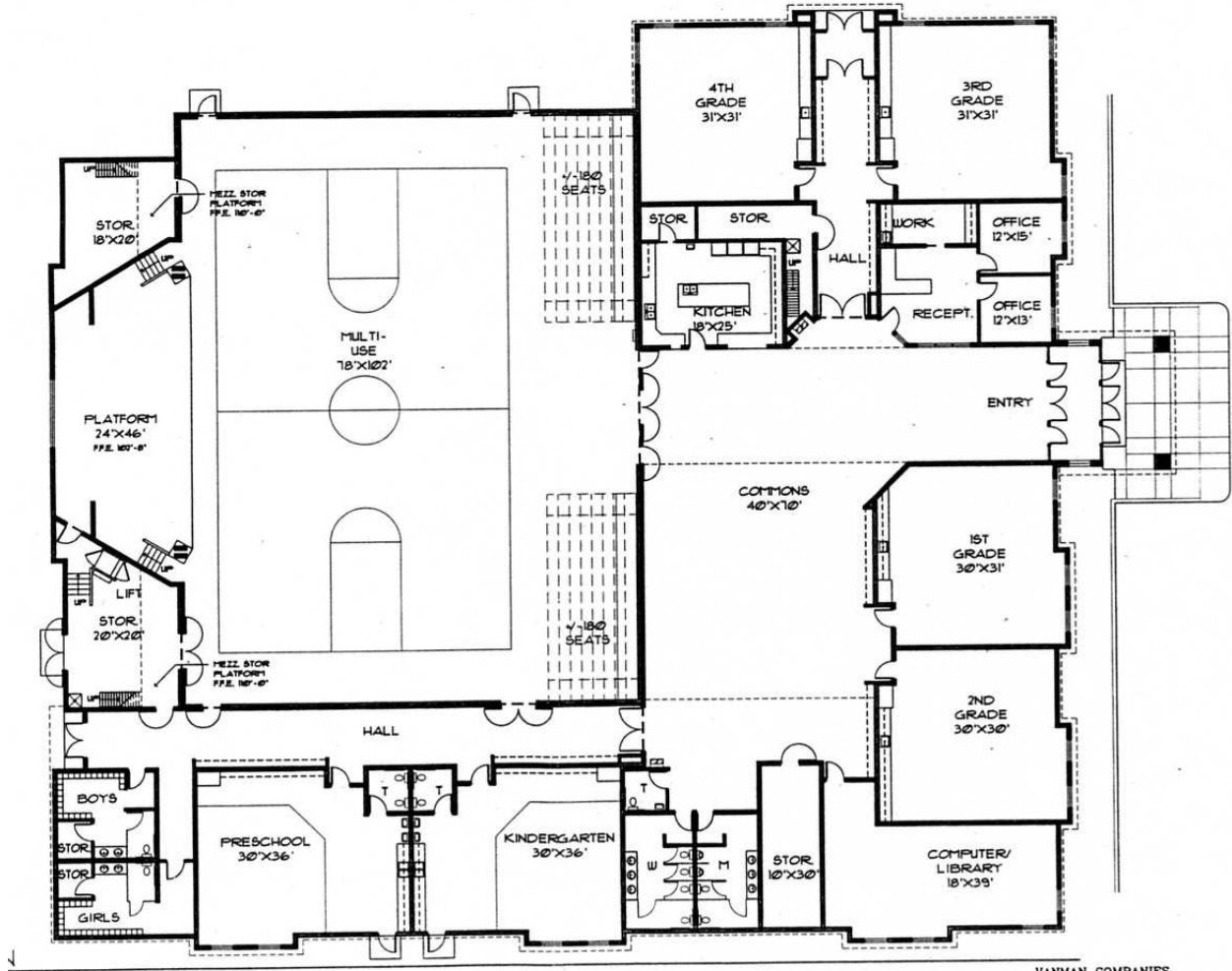
**Down Payments**

	<b><u>Building</u></b>	<b><u>Furnishings</u></b>	<b><u>Landscape</u></b>
\$ 160	\$ 100	60	
153	83	70	
<u>95</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>\$ 408</u>	<u>\$ 183</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>25</u>



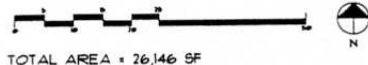
H AND SCHOOL  
 3/7/01

Appendix 3



LUTHERAN CHURCH AND SCHOOL

3/7/01



TOTAL AREA = 26,146 SF

**VANMAN COMPANIES**  
 851 FORTY-SEVEN AVENUE  
 WASHINGTON, DC 20007  
 ARCHITECTS • BUILDERS  
 COPYRIGHT © 2001 A0046